

## Chapter 658 Search

“You’re really focused on that dragon,” Ilea said. “And here I thought people didn’t even want to say the name.”

Pierce waved her away, crossing her legs as she sat on the chest. “Superstitious folk. We both know every creature out there has its limits. I’m still young and I’ll get me a dragon skull before I retire.”

Ilea smiled. *And I’ll get me one to ride. Probably have enough gold to bribe one already. If they’re anywhere near what the fairy tales make them out to be.*

She rather assumed the local ideas would turn out true, meaning dragons were creatures so destructive and mighty, people would rather avoid even mentioning them. In fear of summoning one.

“Any clue as to their level?” she asked.

“I’ve only seen three of them. Only one in battle... far north. The ground shook with each of its spells, fire so hot I could feel it from kilometers away. As if the very fabric of our realm was burning,” she mused, a broad grin on her face.

Ilea chuckled. “Doesn’t sound like you want to kill them.”

“Ah, you would understand if you had seen it,” Pierce retorted.

*I’ve seen fire.*

“What did it fight?” Ilea asked.

The woman shrugged. “I don’t know. Probably something that isn’t alive anymore.”

“You mentioned our realm. Have you been to others?” Ilea asked.

“No, but she has,” Pierce said and pointed to Verena.

The woman didn’t seem inclined to talk about it.

Ilea didn’t push. She had been to several herself after all.

“So what exactly do we do to help the Elves?” Pierce asked.

“I’m collecting these artifacts. There are more like it. And it’ll take a while,” Ilea said.

“I’m happy to join you for a few years, if I get to meet actual real Elves,” Pierce said.

Verena crossed her arms. “I want to know more about the Domains, and the relationship between them and the Hunters.”

Ilea elaborated for a few minutes, explaining what she knew of the societal structures of the Domains and its people.

The women listened intently, asking the occasional question. Both remained silent for a good two minutes after Ilea was done.

“Now I’m even more excited to meet these Hunters,” Pierce murmured. “Hmm, yes, yes, yes.”

“Don’t start with politics again,” Verena said.

“I won’t. I promised, didn’t I?” Pierce answered. “But these Domains... are so much more diverse than I thought. And with their Oracles... ah I want to meet one of those... women being in power. As it should be. Did you meet one, Ilea? Are you one??”

“No, and no,” Ilea answered, summoning a meal, already sitting in her ashen armchair. “What did you mean with the politics comment?”

Verena shook her head.

“I ended two wars, just wasn’t pretty,” Pierce said. “Involved parties blamed some things on me, which made everyone happy.”

“You murdered a lot of people,” Verena said.

Pierce sighed. “Are you arguing they didn’t deserve it? Or that you would’ve done anything different?”

Verena remained silent.

“Getting involved at all was the issue,” Pierce said. “With the stories I heard, you made the same mistake a few times already,” she added, looking at Ilea.

“It’s messy,” Ilea said.

The woman grunted. “Lys is doing better now, same with Asila. But no intervention can change the core root of the issue,” Pierce said.

“Do you know the Destroyer?” Ilea asked, reminded of the man. Their names were suspiciously similar too.

“The pirate? Yes. We were... involved, a few decades back. A little dull though, sailing so much. I needed more space,” Pierce said. “He didn’t take it well. Maybe that’s why the name finally stuck.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Ilea said, looking at Verena.

The woman just shrugged.

“You met him then. So you know of the Lily too... well it makes sense with your power and wealth,” Pierce said. “Helena is the only one keeping all these idiots from slaughtering each other. More than they already are.”

Verena huffed.

“Ironic, yes. With her business,” Pierce said. “But sometimes a good killing is the only thing preventing more killing. Why I enjoy the wilds so much more, don’t you agree, Ilea?”

Ilea smiled. “I suppose that’s one thing we have in common.”

Pierce stood up, clapping her hands together. “What are we waiting for then, we have more strange artifacts to collect! Can you teleport us out of this place? You brought the man to your house with you, didn’t you?”

“Hmm, might be able to use something a little better. My long range ability is limited too,” Ilea said.

“The Taleen gates,” Verena said in a thoughtful manner.

“Of course,” Pierce said. “Ilea, do you actually plan for people to be able to use these gates?”

“You don’t sound like you approve,” she answered.

“No, I’d welcome it. Me personally. I’m just curious,” Pierce answered.

Ilea looked at her for a moment. “It’s not my decision alone to make. We’re working on adapting the technology, instead of using the existing gates. The locations I teleported to so far were far too dangerous for most people, even adventurers. And we can’t control them freely.”

“Connecting cities and countries will already have an unprecedented impact,” Pierce said. “On everything,” she added, whistling a joyous tune. “Any idea when they’re ready?”

“No,” Ilea answered. She assumed it wouldn’t take that long but Pierce didn’t have to know that. She stood up from her chair and spread out her mantle. “So, let’s find out if they have a working gate here.”

The trio continued the exploration of the small Taleen dungeon, its design rather vertical, similar to the Centurion facility, though admittedly far less extensive. There was no throne room, nor any production lines. No Praetorians showed up either, only a few more Centurions providing little resistance against her magic. *Should I take a few spares for Aki?* she wondered, deciding to put a few into her necklace. Just in case.

Luckily the machines only took up a single unit per piece, Ilea taking three.

“These normally explode, don’t they?” Verena asked, looking at the unmoving machine resting in front of a closed entrance.

Ilea activated a rune near the stone door, having recognized the writing above. “Not if you disable them fast enough,” she said, the entrance sliding open.

“They’re not exactly the pinnacle of the Taleen, but defeating one is no small feat either,” Pierce said.

Ilea didn’t comment on it. She would’ve agreed a few years back but Centurions weren’t worth a mention to her. She wondered how she would fare against an Executioner at this point, with her main Classes evolved. They were dangerous foes but her advancements were substantial. *I don’t have to worry. But the army that came for us back in Iz...*

She dismissed the thought, walking into the large hall as she inspected the Taleen gate. Ilea checked the control panel and inserted the second modified key, selecting the destination map right after.

“We can theoretically go to any of those places?” Pierce asked. “Where are we now?”

Ilea pointed to a vague area in the floating map. “Somewhere here. This should be close to Dawntree,” she added, pointing at another section.

Pierce whistled, Verena remaining quiet.

“Maybe I underestimated their importance,” Pierce said. “That’s more than twenty times the area humanity claims as its territory,” she added and laughed.

“Doesn’t mean they controlled it all,” Verena said.

“Bold of you to assume humanity controls the plains,” Ilea said in a dry tone.

“Fair enough,” the woman answered.

“Teleportation might help us with that. Easier to transport goods. Stone for walls, people to work fields,” Pierce said.

“Adventurers to fight monsters,” Ilea added.

“Your Sentinels,” Verena said.

“And your Shadows,” Pierce added with a smirk.

“They’re not mine, nor is Ravenhall. Please stop suggesting I’m some kind of shadow queen. It’s the exact opposite of what I want to be,” she said.

Pierce giggled. “No fun. Don’t state the obvious, Ilea. It’s boring.”

“I’m sorry that me presenting the map of the entire Taleen teleportation network didn’t amuse the Highness,” Ilea answered.

“Ah don’t get me wrong. You have my attention, for decades that is. And I know you don’t mind too much, or you would’ve already killed me,” Pierce said.

“I don’t kill people for a harmless joke,” Ilea answered.

Pierce puffed. “Respectable.” She sounded serious.

“Where do we go?” Verena asked.

“Good question,” Ilea said. *Krahen is too far. Maybe half way? Would probably bring us into Elven territory. Likely within a dungeon that is.*

She could see the many destinations in Iz. The plains were sparsely dotted, as was what she thought of as the northern territory. The desert south of Ravenhall had plenty of locations too, coupled with a few locations east and either below the sea or on other landmasses. The west seemed far less densely packed with destinations, most of them bordering what she thought to be the Navali forest. *No wonder nobody knows about the Elven plight. The machines are teleported into their very lands.*

Though similar to humanity, she had learned that Elves didn’t exactly control the lands they claimed as their own. Either they didn’t want to or there were creatures too dangerous to deal with prowling the wilderness. Based on what Ben had told her, she assumed it was a mix of both. High leveled Elves would likely have no interest hunting down every single monster that could be a threat to their young.

“Help me compare,” she said and activated the map on her locator. The arrow pointed back towards the direction they had come from.

The Elders joined in without a comment, the three comparing the maps to see if any more locations were accessible from this gate compared to the one Iana and Christopher had used as a base for the map.

“This section,” Verena said after a while, pointing to the area near Karth.

Ilea had come to the same conclusion, twice.

“Does that mean...,” Pierce said.

“New gates are being built,” Verena said. “And added to the existing network?”

“Not just built,” Ilea said and pointed to a few specific dots. “Destroyed too. Or disconnected for some reason. Most of them close to Elven territory.”

She wondered if the differences just meant the Isle of Garath had other destinations available. *But why would they be restricted from that specific gate and accessible from here?*

It seemed far more likely to her that they were indeed new destinations.

“A lot of new ones in the north too, and in the Isanna desert,” Pierce said.

“They did say each year is getting worse,” Ilea said. *Even if they had a few thousand level five hundred hunters. They’re not fighting against a static enemy. If these are really all new locations... it may be an impossible task.*

She imagined Niivalyr and his group in the southern Praetorian facility, the dots connecting to it so very small on the maps floating next to her. There were dozens of new locations. Hopefully not all Praetorian factories, but it mattered little.

“Are the machines making more of themselves?” Pierce mused, more to herself than the others.

*Maybe if I get another key, I’ll be able to find out more,* Ilea thought, smiling to herself.

“All the gaps. I assume Elven lands,” Verena said, pointing to the locations in the west. “No new gates are being added here,” she said, pointing to an area far northwest of Karth. Closer to the Krahen Isles even than the human plains.

“Nothing there at all,” Pierce said. “Doesn’t look like there are advance positions either. The gates just stop and continue again beyond.”

Ilea looked at the sizable area, not finding a single dot. It hadn’t seemed suspicious before because of the close proximity to other similar areas likely to be within Elven territories. But now with the changes they had managed to discern, it did seem a little weird.

“Maybe they’re hiding something there?” Pierce suggested with a smile. “No Elves likely to be there.”

“Or they’re destroying all new gates,” Verena suggested.

“As good as any location really,” Ilea mused, selecting the gate closest to the open area. “Last chance to stay behind. I have no idea what waits for us on the other side. Executioners are level eight hundred, can run on air and have void magic blades, if you need an example of what may be there.”

“You’re joking, right?” Pierce said. “You’d have to render me unconscious or dead to prevent me from staying on this platform. Though I may not be incredibly opposed to the former, depending on your creativity.”

“My interest remains,” Verena said. “But if you insist, I will return.”

“I don’t mind you two. But we’re intruding in a teleportation network that isn’t ours. And I just might not be able to protect you, if we’re detected or stopped,” Ilea said.

“I appreciate the sentiment, but I don’t remember asking you for protection,” Pierce said. “If it comes to it, let me die with my pride intact.”

Ilea smiled wryly, knowing she would’ve likely said something similar if the positions had been reversed. Though she didn’t think herself prideful enough to refuse protection. She took the key and activated the gate. *Let’s see if there’s an Executioner waiting.*

The gate brimmed with magical energy, shifting space to bring them to the desired destination.

***'ding' 'You have entered the Izculen dungeon'***

Ilea looked around, finding most of the surrounding walls overgrown with vegetation, grass and flowers pushing through the cracks on the stone floor, roots breaking through the brittle construction all around. The gate itself must've been of better make, or enchanted to endure the passing of time and strains of nature.

She noted an absence of the familiar green light she associated with the Taleen, instead finding rays of cool white light pushing through large cracks in the ceiling and past the thin seams of the closed stone door ahead.

"Crystals," Pierce said in a whisper. "This seems familiar."

*Same as in Hallowfort*, Ilea noted, feeling the increased mana density compared to the previous dungeon. They were certainly in the north. It just usually wasn't quite this green.

*Maybe it's like the Penumra dungeon?* she wondered, checking to see if she could find any living creatures within her dominion.

There were plenty. Insects, a few birds, even a squirrel like being that rushed away a moment later. The remains of the architecture looked decidedly taleen, though more brittle than most other dungeons Ilea had visited before.

She could hear the sounds of flowing water push in through the cracks, Ilea transferring through door ahead and onto a bridge leading towards an open space. Her eyes opened wide as she took in the surrounding environment.

Verena and Pierce followed. "Wonderful," the latter exclaimed, her voice full of wonder.

They had found themselves in an underground dungeon, a vague cylinder like open space leading down into the earth. Roots and plants clung to the circular wall surrounding the deep descent, thousands of trees growing from stone outcrops or the walls themselves, impossible angles showing the strength and deep reach of their roots.

Crystal growths lined the ceiling and large parts of the walls, their light reflecting in the hundreds of waterfalls flowing out from cracks and tunnels, glittering mists forming where the water fell into the depths below.

Ilea wondered if the Ascended had constructed this place, however seeing signs of Taleen architecture push through the ivy in various sections, angular stone broken and bested by trees and water, hundreds or thousands of years of nature pushing back against the imposed control of civilization. She turned her head to see two blue Wyverns take flight, their auras having frozen a small stream, icicles breaking off as the warm flow from above slowly broke the magical influence.

The sounds of shattering ice were lost in the myriad of sounds, flowing water mixing with the calls of a dozen creatures, large and small.

Pierce had a broad smile on her face and sat down at the edge of the brittle stone bridge that cropped out a few meters into the open space, the abrupt end suggesting a violent destruction. The other end was barely visible on the other side of the expansive cavern, a stream of water flowing out from the open entrance, quietly flowing out over the outcrop.

Verena didn't seem quite as serene, quickly getting over the first impression as she scanned the many openings for creatures.

Ilea leaned against the railing and looked for creatures as well. Everything looked natural here, nothing obvious suggesting that an Ascended or similar being had molded this space but she couldn't help feeling slightly uneasy. Something about it seemed decidedly... dangerous. She blinked, seeing a deer stared down at her from a ledge a hundred meters above, the creature bowing down to eat some grass. A sparrow landed on a tree nearby, feeding its young with worms it had gathered.

"Are we still in the north?" Verena asked in a disbelieving tone.

Ilea wondered the same. The diversity here didn't seem right. Especially the many mundane looking animals. "We're far west too. Maybe the storms and mists don't reach this far?"

"Won't know until we go up to the surface," Pierce said.

"Almost feels too perfect," Ilea said, checking her mind for any intrusion but not finding anything both obvious or subtle. She couldn't discern an illusion either, the environment feeling as natural and serene as the forests around Riverwatch. The Wyverns reminded of the actual location, as did the ruins and deep reaching descent, but Ilea couldn't help feeling safe. And that in itself made something deep within her uneasy. The north simply shouldn't be like this.

"There are a lot of places we haven't been to. Maybe this is just the one where everything worked out throughout the years?" Pierce suggested.

"You're too idealistic," Verena said. "I suggest we tread lightly." She looked down into the misty depths. "And don't kill anything."

"Again?" Pierce groaned.

"This place is serene, in a territory we have to assume is the very opposite. It won't cost us much, but if something keeps it that way, we don't have to challenge it before we know what it is," Verena said.

"Or if there even is anything," Pierce said, looking down now too.