

## Chapter 690 Puzzle masters

Ilea found herself relegated to an anti teleportation magic item. She moved on top of her armor and summoned a bottle of ale. She patted the massive helmet with a smile, glad it now had a visor to look through. *One that can be closed, so I can still use it in a purely defensive manner.*

The flame thrower extension was really just a gimmick, but the jet boot addition made her curious. Her weight was downright ridiculous, especially when she added her heat generation to the mix. *And charging it with Tempered Seal will take a shit ton of mana and time. Ah well... it'll be interesting to find out how high I can manage to jump.*

Beams of lightning and burning axes slashed into the Warden, its main focus still the largest target in the vicinity, Bralin. His machine that was, now showing dozens of cuts below the regenerating layer of stone.

The dwarf didn't seem to be bothered by any of it. He easily adjusted to the structural issues caused by the damage. He switched his stance a few times in the span of the next minutes, still as defensive as he had been at the start. Many of the glowing runes lay exposed now as he changed to a smaller weapon. A one handed axe that still reached a ridiculous size but it allowed him to use a shield in his other hand.

The enchanted steel managed to reflect a few blows of the soul magic infused sword, the defensive tool however soon taking heavy damage too.

Ilea smiled, seeing the magic around their enemy dissipate. More spells hit its form but she knew the fight was over. They had won.

Verena landed on the falling war machine and struck down with her axes, a wild grin on her face. Pierce drooped down with her machine, a long and dulled sigh audible from within.

"We did it," Bralin exclaimed, his weapons vanishing as he made his large machine vanish. He returned to the same war machine he had used in the town before he created a stone foundation on the ground, perfectly even. The dwarf proceeded to summon what seemed like an entire workshop.

His massive machine first, with supportive structures that seemed measured specifically for the large beast. There were crates full of tools, industrial grinders, a furnace he assembled with a set of summoned chunks and his earth magic. He checked the large machine and took note of all the cuts and dents. "Extensive...", he murmured, put on a music box, and got to work.

Ilea sipped on her ale, enjoying the strange scene. *And I can just heal my armor. Arcane healing really does seem like a shortcut to power and a life of leisure.*

Pierce joined the dwarf, one of her machine's arms held in the other. She didn't say a word and simply stood next to the portable smithy platform.

"I'll do yours after," he said without glancing her way. "Mind heating this thing up, Lilith? It takes at least half an hour otherwise."

"Just like with Goliath," she murmured and sent heat into the forge compartments.

"A little less than that. You're melting the forge," the dwarf said. He looked at her for a long while and sighed, shaking his head. "I understand your envy," he added.

“What’s that supposed to mean, dwarf?” Pierce asked.

Verena had sat down on the destroyed Warden and ate a bowl of noodles while meditating.

“*Should we check out the cube while they’re doing the repairs?*” Ilea sent to the two shades that had moved a little closer.

“It will be heavily enchanted against foreign entities trying to enter,” one of them said as they approached, wary of the downed machines.

“Do you know how to deal with that? I’m pretty good at destroying enchantments but I don’t think we want to cause everything to self destruct,” Ilea mused.

“Our research is incomplete. Already we can sense more than was mentioned,” one of them said.

Bralin finished pouring the silver alloy into one of the largest cuts in his armor before he glanced over. “I can have a look too. Seen my fair share of enchanted vaults and such. The maker of this thing was a dwarf too.”

“We’ll wait,” Ilea said and started floating around the massive cube with the Shades in tow. *There’s so much shit going on here*, she thought, simply looking at the walls with her dominion. There were plenty of anti space magic enchantments present too. None she couldn’t bypass with some time but considering the obvious paranoia, she refrained for now. There could be detection spells inside too, and the Shades were here to recover knowledge, not destroy the whole cavern.

Based on the nets of explosion runes that felt reminiscent of Claire’s thrown stones, she didn’t think such a result particularly unlikely.

Bralin finished his repairs and got Pierce’s machine to work as well.

“You don’t look quite as impressive,” Ilea said when she landed.

The dark blue war machine looked her way. “Scars of battle. Unlike your perfect living armor, mine has survived real combat.”

“Aha,” Ilea mused. “So, Bralin, what do you think of the defenses?”

The dwarf had been studying the entrance for five minutes. He shook his head. “Something is weaved into this thing that I don’t understand. It’s not just conventional enchantments, though there is enough of that too. After all this time the power should’ve lessened but it feels like this thing was set up just yesterday.”

“Soul magic,” Verena said. “Do you not feel it?”

Ilea walked a little closer. “There’s far too much different shit going on here,” she said. “But yeah, I suppose there’s some soul magic involved too. Fits with the Wardens I suppose. So what speaks against me just going past the space magic runes?”

“I don’t think that would work,” Bralin said. “Well it would work, but while you might survive the aftermath, whatever is left inside won’t.”

“So you’re telling me this is a vault I can’t actually crack?” she asked, crossing her arms.

Pierce giggled within her armor.

“It seems that way,” the dwarf surmised. “You’re a talented space and ash mage, but if you didn’t hide some high level soul magic in there, I don’t think this will work out.”

Ilea tapped her cheek. “High level soul mage you say...”

“You really want to bring her here?” Verena asked.

“If she wants to?” Ilea said. “And not just her...” she mused and set her last available transfer marker. The one previously occupied by the Krahen Isles. *Hmm, cooldown will take a few hours.* “Hey Bralin, you wanted to meet Goliath, right?”

“Yes,” he said and looked up. “Why?”

“I think I’ll just take all of you. In case there are more soul wardens. We’ll return in about five hours. Care to join us?” she said, looking at the Shades and Bralin.

“We would be honored,” the Shades said, knowing nothing about the destination.

“The trust of true believers,” Pierce said and gave them a mechanical thumbs up. “Hey, think Goliath can give me some cool upgrades to this suit?”

“If you ask nicely?” Ilea said. She knew the smith didn’t exactly enjoy *mundane* work. *His art is beyond the understanding of mere monkeys like us*, she thought and activated her third tier Transfer.

“How far are we going exactly?” Bralin asked. “Is this even sa-”

The fabric shifted and the group appeared in the familiar lair of the Meadow itself.

“-fe?” Bralin finished his question and looked around.

“Great. Another group of mortals,” the Meadow greeted.

Ilea smiled and initiated contact instead of answering. “Indeed, old tree.”

A whistling wind moved through the black grass in the vicinity. “*The child speaks. Humans Do grow up quickly. Congratulations are in order I suppose?*”

She laughed and bowed. “*Indeed, maker of all, oh great Meadow. Speaking of which, I get your pain with the god thing now. I really do.*”

“Do you now? Well, I suppose even you could impress some dim witted creatures of this realm. You have attained quite a powerful evolution it seems. I can feel something... quite familiar,” the Meadow spoke.

Bralin went to his armored knees. “This is...”

“War machines,” Goliath said, a hand held out to the kneeling dwarf.

Bralin’s visor was up as he stared at the Dark One with wide eyes. Ilea saw tears rolling down his face. “I must’ve died,” he muttered. “Are you the maker?”

“No, that’s the Meadow over there,” Ilea said and pointed. “Also you’re still alive, so don’t do anything stupid.”

“The p... pantheon of Elos...” the dwarf said, his voice shaking slightly.

Ilea noted the slight twinkle in his eyes. “*You know what you’re doing, old man. Don’t add to my misery.*”

The dwarf smiled and took the hand offered to him. "My apologies, Lilith. I couldn't resist. And you must be Goliath, the flame touched. I can feel your aura."

"Are you not healing everyone here against his life drain?" Ilea asked the Meadow.

"Nobody here requires such. Have you lost an elf?" the tree asked.

"He's fighting somewhere on his own. Got a little salty after he fought me. Not that it'll be any better now that I got my third evolution," she said. "Here, I'll show you some cool stuff. Would be nice to have your opinion."

"Ah, Ilea. I'm so proud of you. Come then, and tell me about the things you learned in school!" spoke the ancient eldritch tree monster.

"Goliath, what do I have to sacrifice to get an upgrade to my armor?" Pierce asked, tapping her chest.

The smith juts sighed and waved them over, Bralin following like an excited puppy.

"I'll go talk to Owl," Verena said and waved to the being currently floating around Aki's executioner form.

"How long until you're not the most powerful here anymore?" Ilea asked with a glance to the high leveled creatures. She transferred over to the crystal tree, the mana density likely too much for everyone besides the four mark lich and Aki, maybe even them.

"You've already brought the Fae, have you not?" Meadow answered.

"Right," Ilea mused and formed her three new elements. "An evolution that in fact mentioned both you and the Fae, including a few others."

Roots formed from thin air, flowing towards the small sphere of ice before they stopped.

Ilea smiled. "Missing your friend?"

"Not at all," the Meadow lied.

At least she thought it lied. Then again the tree said it sometimes didn't talk to the Elemental for hundreds of years if not longer. "Need a hug?" she asked and hugged the tree without waiting for an answer.

"You know," the tree said when she let go and stepped back. "I do appreciate your human concern for me. Perhaps like a human would the concern of their pet. But while the people here can be trusted, rumors already exist of our... involvement."

"Us?" Ilea asked with a shocked expression. "But you're into higher beings. I already fail the one thousand brain requirement."

"I merely thirst for knowledge, and the awakening of life to said knowledge. Know that this circumstance won't help your wish to remain mortal," the tree explained.

"I'm already functionally immortal, Meadow. Look at this," she said and moved a piece of rock with her space manipulation.

She smiled when the tree didn't respond immediately. *Just a teeny tiny bit delayed. Thought I wouldn't notice hmm? But I did.*

"A gift. Not from me," it said finally. "Be grateful. Few have ever possessed this skill."

*“You do though, right?” she asked.*

*“Yes. In fact I do. But compared to you it required centuries of study. Just be careful with it when other space magic or realm connecting teleportation is currently active nearby. Someone with the capability but no underlying knowledge could cause... devastating complications,”* it said, without its sarcastic tone for once.

*“I appreciate the warning. Something like what happened in Erendar?” she asked.*

*“No. That was the controlled result based on all my capabilities. Your involvement could doom an entire continent,”* it said.

Ilea suddenly felt the weight of the floating stone a little more consciously. *“I’ll try not to interfere with anything major. What about this then?”* she said and formed the fires of creation.

A giggle went through the vicinity. *“Humanity keeps surprising me. Or dare I say life itself. To think a body born so bound to flesh could truly accept the flames of creation. Coupled with your element manipulation... well, I suppose if anybody could’ve succeeded, it would’ve been you.”*

*“Give yourself some credit,”* she said, flicking the stone towards it. *“Some healing and earth magic was involved too. And while the Fae is a powerful space mage, it’s not the Fae I trained with. It was you.”*

*“Humility. From Lilith herself. Your growth seems not entirely limited to magic after all,”* it said as another flow of wind moved through the vicinity.

A space magic trick Ilea had seen many times before. She raised her hand and tried to replicate it. She failed.

*“I will teach you,”* the Meadow spoke.

*“And I will learn,”* Ilea answered. *“Got more too,”* she said and activated Primordial Shift. Space itself writhed around her, flesh and flames moving in lazy patterns, in and out of existence itself. She could feel something pulling and pushing on her, roots trying to grasp and chunks of stone vanishing when they appeared to reach her. *“Are you testing?”* she said and deactivated the spell.

*“Ilea. I believe you did it,”* the Meadow spoke. *“You learned a spell no being I know of, nor I, could ever use.”*

She twirled and bowed. *“I’m amazing. I know.”*

*“If you understood but a fraction of what just happened, your human brain would eat itself. I fail... to grasp its entirety. It is... disproving several long standing theories. I would like to study it more, if you ever have time to show it to me,”* the tree said.

Ilea raised her brows. *“Really? That crazy? Sure, happy to help with the first thing of use I can do for you. Other than physically moving you around that is.”*

*“Appreciated,”* the Meadow said.

She showed off her gates too but other than the lifted restrictions, nothing about them was different in a major way.

*“I encourage you to train your new manipulation spells. They should be the key to more options in the future, both simply for your spells and for your evolutions. Though I do not claim to know a*

*being such as you. With this, Primordial Shift, you have shown me, anything could be possible,”* it told her.

*“I’ll try to work on it. Could do that with you as well,”* she said.

*“I’m here, and you always have at least zero dot three percent of my attention, you know that,”* it said in a loving voice.

*“You’re such a great friend, Meadow,”* Ilea answered.

*“Ah, many years it has been since I’ve seen the work of Eranur herself,”* Goliath exclaimed from his smithing area, the massive form of Bralin’s high quality war machine towering over the nearby forges.

*“I’ll be back for more training then,”* Ilea said and cracked her neck. *“Will probably borrow some of the residents for an afternoon. Enchantment puzzle. I’d take you but well...”*

*“I have been looking into options, but so far no satisfying conclusion has presented itself,”* the tree said. *“A long range scrying spell would likely be the best but it’s proving a difficult puzzle.”*

*“Only divination mage I know is Cless. Just ask Claire for some resources once she’s here,”* she said.

*“The required gates will soon be ready. Iana informs me that the contracts between Hallowfort and Ravenhall are still in the make. Once that is done, they will move on to the next stage,”* it said.

*“Call me when the meeting happens. I want to see that,”* Ilea said with a smile. The Council of Ravenhall meeting the Meadow and seeing the north was one thing, but Catelyn in Popi’s store, now that will surely be near palpable happiness.

*“You will likely be required anyway. I doubt the tensions and prejudice between so many different species won’t cause any issues, even with a central link like yourself,”* the Meadow said.

*“I’ll make sure they don’t murder each other,”* she answered. *“But with all the possibilities, I doubt our allied factions would do something stupid. Everyone else will be the issue, but as long as the security on the gates is in our control,”* she said.

*“It’s amusing... how incredible a simple teleportation gate is to a species with your available level of magic,”* the Meadow spoke. It sounded excited more than condescending.

Ilea squinted her eyes, imagining the tree to be the all knowing controller of a four x game. *How far ahead in the tech tree are you. “Wait... you’re literally the tech tree.”*

*“Indeed,”* the Meadow answered.

*“Don’t act like you understand my thought process,”* she answered.

*“But I do,”* it said.

Ilea nodded slowly. *“Sure. Sure you do, Meadow. Why don’t I go talk to someone more reasonable than an ancient space tree. Like a lich.”*

*“Or a dwarven death machine controlled by by a talking dagger,”* the Meadow said.

*Much more reasonable. Yes.*

*“Oh, one last thing,”* she said and teleported to Bralin. *“Can I borrow your music box thing for a while?”*

The dwarf summoned it without looking at her, nodding as he watched a liquid sphere of metal float between Goliath's hands.

"Thanks," Ilea said and moved it towards herself, vanishing right after. "Can you make something like this but with more than one piece of music on it?"

*"An intriguing toy. I will have a thousand looks,"* the Meadow said.

"Thanks," Ilea said and dumped the Void Lord corpse. *"Might interest you too, no idea."*