

Chapter 683 Beings lurking in the Deep

The three adventurers returned to the cavern where Ilea had fought the Devourers. A spacious tunnel led deeper into the mesh of underground caves and forgotten ruins.

Verena double checked the map she had gotten in the guild and confirmed that the tunnel should lead to the Shining Caves.

“Are you sure you want to go further?” Verena asked.

“*What do you mean?*” Ilea asked from within her heavy suit of living armor. Now with telepathy of all things.

“You wanted to get your evolution. The key is in the city,” Verena said.

“*Well yes. But we have a couple of days until my fight. And you two could use a few more levels too,*” she said.

“We’re down here already. Might as well go a bit deeper and have her not be a complete embarrassment in the Dome,” Pierce said.

“*Exactly. I don’t want to resort to my more dangerous skills when I fight other war machines,*” Ilea said.

“Well I don’t think any of them will pose even a remote threat,” Verena said.

“*You’re spoiling the fun. It will be a hard fought battle of giants,*” Ilea replied. “*And of course I will prevail... just barely. Or I could lose against an underdog opponent to pave their history.*”

“You’re joking but with your influence and power, something like that would be easy. You could replace the fucking Empress of Lys if you wanted to,” Pierce said.

“Don’t give her ideas,” Verena said.

“*She seems to be doing a decent enough job as it is,*” Ilea said. “*No need to create chaos and uncertainty for no good reason.*”

“Good,” Verena said.

“*I am a generous god,*” Ilea said to them both.

“And here I thought the Meadow was like you. Maybe it’s the other way around after all,” Pierce said.

“*It’s a symbiotic relationship. At some point we’ll morph into the ultimate being and bring the end of time,*” Ilea explained.

Verena groaned. “In a good mood, are we?”

“*Of course. I did just evolve,*” Ilea said.

The group continued for a few hours, walking through the dark cavern while they shared stories of past exploits. Ilea had the most impressive encounters over the past few years but the elders had quite a large array of more personal experiences to share. Each had taken part in hundreds of conflicts throughout the plains and beyond, as mercenary, mediator, avenger, or just monster hunter.

At first Pierce had complained about the slow pace and Ilea's insistence on staying in her armor but as time went on she too didn't seem too bothered anymore.

Ilea enjoyed the downtime for once, the past few days incredibly packed with dangerous fights and new revelations. Their encounter with Audur still felt like it had happened just yesterday. Her meeting and talk with the Navuun and Scipio still hadn't completely sunken in, the implications enough to involve all of humanity in her presumed little Elven adventure. Of course she had known that fighting the Taleen would've left a void, but adding a powerful artifact like the source into the mix created a whole new set of potential dangers. Plus near every powerful party or species she knew about could get involved.

Let's not think about that too hard. You can move and rip things apart with your mind now. It will help you on your journey, Ilea thought. She wondered how she'd fare against the monarch now. On the one hand he had gotten to level one thousand but on the other, he was a ranged mage. She was more concerned about his silent pole wielding murder guardian. *Could I injure that arrogant mage? Was he just playing around with someone he considered too far below him to use any of his better spells?*

Ilea didn't think herself too high and mighty, but even she had held back plenty of times against enemies she had considered weaker. It may be true that humans couldn't exactly be categorized anymore after level three or four hundred, let alone five, but the same would surely be true for Elves at twice her level.

Guess I'll figure it out when I get there, she thought. *For now I'll just get as many tools and allies on my side as I can. If everything goes to shit, we'll have plenty of ways to approach the potential problems, and if things go well, then that's that.*

She was content with her extensive planning for the future, happy to dump the monumental issues on the desks of Claire and Trian. They'd figure something out with the help of Catelyn and the Meadow. It just felt weird. Watching the Elders of one of the most feared and prominent human Orders walk beside her, telling of adventures past. By most humans, they'd be seen as unstoppable heroes, or terrifying monsters, and yet she knew they were barely worth a mention in the grand scheme of things. As was she for that matter. *Maybe not anymore, really. I think I could face that Ascended. Even if he was using a fraction of his power, he was no fighter.*

Audur would pose a threat but even before her upgrades, Ilea had managed to escape. As long as she stayed outside of the human plains, she wouldn't pose the worst of dangers. *Not for now that is. With how old she is, I'm sure she's happy to wait a few thousand years to get her revenge on the human that dared resist her. And by then I plan to either be dead or powerful enough to slap her around as if she was a mere outraged lizard.*

She smiled to herself. *I didn't even consider Aki or the Lich. Anything below four marks just seems irrelevant in the grand scheme of things, even knowing that a few level two hundred demons could wipe out an entire human city.*

The Void Lord evolution had talked about her becoming the shield of man, and the more she thought about it, the more it seemed inevitable. Already she didn't know of a single human that could match her in a fight. The Founders of the Lily were an option, sure, but she hadn't met them. *And even if they're above five hundred, how many would there be? One? Two? Ten? I'd still be among the most powerful humans around.*

Ilea found she didn't really mind. What bothered her was the fact that a high level being could simply show up and kill thousands on a whim. Humans as a whole were just not strong enough to

deal with the dangers that lurked in the lands beyond the plains, let alone in other realms. By now she could appear in Ravenhall and Riverwatch in less than a minute. Any creature that dared attack these places would have to deal with her, and she was more than willing to intervene. *And yet the world seems to keep on growing. I hope I can keep up, and I hope the Sentinels can too.*

“Still alive in there?” Pierce asked after the lull in their conversation.

“*Ye. Just contemplating my divinity,*” Ilea answered.

“I see. There is no meaning to anything. Just enjoy yourself until you die to some horror deep within the northern lands,” Pierce said.

“*A compelling philosophy. But unlike you, I have friends,*” Ilea answered.

“Give it a few decades,” Pierce said.

Ilea couldn't quite tell if she was joking with that or not but she decided not to engage that tangent either way. *She's just mad I'm friends with a tree. And that I have mind powers now.*

Her Manipulation sadly wasn't quite enough to make her armaments float but she could improve her mobility by quite a bit. With the boosts to her body enhancement and space magic abilities, the skill would surely be quite fearsome. *Can't wait to pop some Faen eyes,* she thought with a mischievous grin.

“Stop,” she said to the others and appeared on top of her armor. Light shined in the distance, stalactites visible with what seemed like a body of glowing water spreading out below. They were still over a kilometer away.

“Shining caves,” Pierce said. “Why stop here?”

“I can feel mind magic ahead. It's subtle but there's no monster close by, which means it's quite the range,” Ilea explained.

“You want to risk it? We can also go back,” Verena said.

“Would explain why people either didn't come back or not exactly the same as they were before,” Pierce said.

Ilea considered. “Hmm... I mean I doubt there's anything out there that could invade my mind in an instant. My resistance is pretty high, and I've trained with an Enavurin. But there's no need to be arrogant either,” she said and formed two ashen clones. *Get me out of range if I lose it.*

“You two should probably get some distance too, just in case I turn against you,” Ilea added, connecting her ash to the copies that now stood a few meters away.

The Elders teleported a few hundred meters back.

“Shout if you have a sudden urge to kill everything!” Pierce informed her.

Helpful, Ilea thought and walked forward. She couldn't feel an instant push nor was there overwhelming power. No, the magic here was way more subtle. Beyond even what Eve could do. *Might actually be close to what the Enavurin showed me back in the Descent.*

“Hello? Anybody home?” she sent in the general direction of the magic's origin. At this distance she couldn't discern how powerful or far away the source actually was but if it could communicate, it would be close enough.

“A being capable of telepathy...,” came the answer, almost like a whisper. The words were spoken in Elos Standard but Ilea could tell the pronunciation wasn’t exactly right.

“Yes. And I’d appreciate it if you could stop trying to get into my head,” Ilea said, still feeling the tendrils of magic trying to get past her defenses.

“You have entered my domain. And those who enter, are susceptible to my presence,” the being said in a calm tone, as if it was explaining the circumstances to a child.

“I’m clearly not just food. And it might be dangerous to antagonize me like that,” Ilea answered.

“Your threats are confusing. If you possess such great power, why do you not remain in your domain?” it asked.

It sounds genuinely confused, Ilea thought, a little taken aback. *“I don’t have a domain. I travel around the world. I’m sure you’ve come across beings like that.”*

“Yes, but rarely ones receptive to the mind. If you truly are such a being, then there is nothing here for you. Leave or become nourishment,” it whispered, as if it was a choice between whole and low fat milk at the grocery store.

“Well, your threats don’t make much sense to me either,” Ilea replied and walked away. A few steps were enough to get her out of the creature’s mind magic range. The invasive spells stopped immediately.

“Find anything?!” Pierce shouted.

“I’m fine, there’s a mind magic being in there but nothing quite as ridiculous as an Enavurin,” Ilea sent. She appeared above her armor and glanced at the Elders coming her way. She dismissed the ashen copies. “It’s weird. I think it just attacks everything that comes into its domain, but I don’t think it’s moving around.”

“It attacked you?” Pierce asked.

“Yes. Become nourishment or leave,” she said. “Not exactly the broadest spectrum of options.”

“It’s clearly intelligent,” Verena said. “I’ve not heard of a stationary mind magic creature like that however. Do you know how far away it is? How large is its domain?”

“It’s pretty extensive. The range isn’t exactly on the Enavurin’s level but it’s impressive. I’d have to get closer to find the source even, which is something that hasn’t ever happened before,” she said.

“So you go in and kill it?” Pierce asked. “Do you think we can survive the magic?”

“You can certainly try. How high is your mental resistance?” she asked.

“Not as high as yours. It was one of the first general skills I got to the third tier, but I didn’t have many opportunities to train it. It’s pretty rare,” Pierce answered.

“Not in my experience. But maybe I’ve just been lucky,” Ilea said.

“Unlucky you mean,” Verena said.

“If you’re offering to help us, I’d love a bit of resistance training,” Pierce said.

“Unknown high level being... an arcane healer and space mage nearby. An acceptable risk,” Verena said.

“Sure, I’ll just work on my armaments and new abilities,” Ilea answered and vanished into her armor once again.

The two women entered the mind magic spell’s area and glanced around. “There’s no magic h-” Pierce started. “Oh... wow, that’s some advanced level mind magic. I don’t think I would’ve noticed that without your mention.”

“So you would’ve died here,” Verena said.

“No,” Pierce answered. “I don’t exactly need my mind. Neither do you, as far as I remember.”

“You’re giving secrets to whatever creature is listening,” Verena said.

The lightning mage shook her head. “Verena, she has a name you know. Just because she’s an absolute monster doesn’t mean you should call her a creature,” she said and glanced back at the massive armor. “She’s still... in a few ways, human. Maybe one or two. Her hair at the very least.”

Verena ignored the remark and sat down, beginning to meditate as her brows twitched from time to time.

Pierce instead walked from one side to the tunnel to the other, her eyes focused onto the distant light. An occasional burst of lightning flashed through her mind.

Ilea couldn’t quite make out what the spell did but the elder’s focus seemed to return whenever the spell hit. *A perpetual wake up signal, I suppose. Verena is getting calmer with each passing minute instead. Her defenses are getting stronger.*

She moved her massive arms around, keeping a piece of her perception on the Elders as she tried to repeat the few dancing steps she had learned from Claire. An ashen partner would’ve been helpful but the tunnel didn’t quite allow for two war machines of her size to coexist in a dancing manner.

The ground rumbled with each of her steps. Ilea felt her balance waver when she couldn’t quite turn her momentum in the right direction. Her hand turned, an invisible force pushing her shoulder forward as she slammed down with her left heel. She moved into a spin to finish the set of steps, her titan form spreading its arms in a graceful gesture.

Pierce had stopped her walking and instead glared at Ilea.

“To increase the difficulty. You’re not doing a good job. It’s getting in your head,” Ilea informed her and resumed her self imposed dancing lesson.

The manipulation is incredible. If I can even influence something this heavy...

Ilea tried not to rely on her space magic too much, her steps slowly improving in the span of the next few hours. She incorporated her gates to create an endless ballroom for herself and the wispy ashen form she had added after getting the idea, the two of them dancing through the gates with graceful booming steps. *I wonder if Felicia would enjoy this kind of ball as well.* An occasional use of Primordial Shift let her test the limits and weight differences between her various forms.

It would take time to get used to everything, which made her decide to postpone any skill enhancements at least for the time being. Each of her spells would additionally take quite a hit if reset to the beginning of the third tier. *Probably should focus on my two main classes first, even though these skills are just so much fucking fun.* Seeing the twitching eyebrows of Pierce with every single one of her heavy steps just pushed her joy to higher levels. Dancing had never felt quite this freeing. *I’m sorry Claire. It turns out my heart is filled with spite.*

What kept her going was the fact that Pierce would do the same to her if their roles had been reversed. *Though I'd actually be grateful for the resistance training help.*

For now they could take some time to train, but Ilea soon started to think about their options. She would go back to the Pit in a few days' time, that much was sure. But simply leaving this mind magic monster down here felt wrong. It seemed mostly just a stationary predator that preyed on everything that walked into its domain but already it had killed dozens of dwarves from the settlement far above.

Then again if they knew about it, I could just mark off the area of its influence. It would continue to consume other monsters but that's not exactly any different than what everybody else is doing.

She decided to check out the caverns on the next day, to see if she could at least recover any bodies or gear, and to have another chat with the creature so rudely trying to get into her mind. *Maybe I can convince it to leave this place at least. Bring it somewhere north where the Meadow could prevent awakened beings from stumbling into its realm. Or maybe I could suggest a plant based diet. Wait, does it eat the flesh of beings or their minds themselves? This opens up so many more questions. Ah, let's be honest, it's probably not going to be more diplomatic than it was today.*

The thunderous dance continued, debris falling from the ceiling as a web of cracks spread out wherever the massive being moved. Ilea couldn't help but smile at the welcome pause from near constant battle. The only thing she missed was music. Not that there were instruments in Elos capable of competition against the one woman construction site of reinforced and living steel.

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