

Chapter 675 League of common humans

“I... I am, it’s talking to me inside my head,” Owl said, taking a few careful steps despite her ability to float, looking around with her glowing eyes, arms a little stiff and to her side.

“You’re the most human monster I’ve ever seen,” Ilea said. “Look, that’s Aki.”

“I... yes. Some kind of metal... machine being? I think I... need to sit down,” she said, an ashen chair forming next to her.

“Hope you have a good time here. I’m not sure what species you were before but humans would probably freak out if they saw you, not that there are many who could pose a threat to you,” Ilea said.

“Ilea, welcome back. Do you have a minute?” Iana asked, side eyeing the Lich. “Nice to meet you.”

“Oh... you look normal,” Owl said and smiled.

“She’s secretly a dragon,” Ilea said.

“No I’m not,” Iana said and rolled her eyes, leading her away.

“That’s exactly what a dragon would say,” Ilea mused.

“Don’t scare her like that. You know how much damage a four mark creature can do if it goes on a rampage,” Iana said when they had walked away a few dozen meters, the woman gesturing to the teleportation platform in front of her.

“She’s called Owl you know,” Ilea said. “And she’s not just a four mark creature. She’s... well I’m sure she’ll figure out what she wants to be.”

“Hopefully not what is commonly known about Liches,” Iana said in a casual tone. “This is it,” she added, looking at the gate.

“It? The finished prototype?” Ilea asked.

“No, the finished gate. There were over two hundred prototypes. This is the finished one. It’s incredibly mana efficient, or well... it will be for most humans. The stronger you are, the more mana will be required to teleport you. It’s a security measure too. So if say Neiphato would try to use it, the gate would simply reject him. We can add mana signatures to the network to allow for teleportation or use special authorization keys similar to the ones the taleen had but couple them with signatures to make sure your key for example only works if you are the one standing on the gate,” she explained.

“And low level people just get a key?” Ilea asked.

“Well depends. I think the best option would be to distribute keys to trusted individuals who then could activate the gate for other people of certain level classes. Some random guards in Riverwatch could authorize adventurers up to level one hundred to teleport to Morhill for example, but anything above that level, they can’t authorize. I suppose the intricacies would have to be checked with each country, city, guard, and organization. It’s just to show how much customization is possible. I’ll leave it to Claire and her teams to figure out the specifics there,” she said.

“That’s wonderful,” Ilea said, crouching down to inspect the tiny runes all over the gate. “This can’t just be copied?”

“No, not if they don’t have a Meadow too. And worst case, they get the technology but can’t connect to our network. It’s an upgrade to the Taleen ones in every regard,” she said with pride.

Christopher joined them too at that point, yawning as he glanced over to the purple glowing thing talking to Goliath. “New resident?”

“Owl, not sure if she’ll stay,” Ilea said.

“I see,” the man said and smiled when he glanced at Iana.

“Sleep well?” she asked.

“I did. Go on,” he answered, stepping next to her.

“That tree really is a scary thing,” Ilea said.

“*I’m entirely harmless. Just a plant,*” the tree said.

Ilea just nodded absentmindedly. “What about production? And cost? I mean we should have a fuckton of gold at our disposal but this stuff looks incredibly intricate and the materials don’t seem common either,” she said, touching the cool surface of the interlinked metal plates, some reflecting the light in slightly different colors.

“Goliath offered us a large part of his stock, and he traded what he could with the other smiths in Hallowfort. It should already be enough for about thirty gates, and while some of the metals are rare, few have a use in most human countries. I’ll talk to Claire for a coordinated buy up, to make sure they don’t realize someone is buying up all these materials,” Iana said.

“And here I thought you were a scientist, not a businesswoman,” Ilea mused.

“I’ve learned more than enchanting from old Balduur,” Iana said. “But if it’s alright with you, we’ll start coordinating with Claire. Production itself will fall to Goliath and the Meadow. It’ll be about ten thousand times more efficient than anything we can get done in Ravenhall. Plus we have other projects to look into anyway. I’d love to figure out more about Aki’s current form, and maybe study the rubble you brought as well. I doubt we’ll get anything out of either in the near future, so let me know if you have anything pressing for us to work on.”

“Do what you think is best. I’ll get in touch if I need something done,” Ilea said. “Otherwise go for it. The faster we have a secure teleportation network running, the better. Oh and make sure Trian and the Sentinels get involved early too. The north will be a great opportunity for them to learn and train.”

“Of course,” Iana said with a smile. “We’ll get to work then.”

“After you get some sleep,” Christopher said. “You promised.”

The enchantress rolled her eyes. “I can wait another day,” she said.

“Oh speaking of other projects, I forgot to drop all this stuff on you,” Ilea said and summoned the crate with Taleen prototypes from the Praetorian facility. “Found these but the gate was more important anyway.”

“Interesting, we’ll have a look as well,” Iana said as Christopher pushed her away.

“Sleep before I invoke the name of the all seeing tree,” he said and gave Ilea a thankful nod.

She smiled back, crossing her arms as she watched the two return to their underground home in the ancient tree village.

“Rather surreal, is it not?” a voice came into her mind. *“To think two humans so ordinary would find peace and purpose in such a strange and chaotic place.”*

“Hereven, how’ve you been?” Ilea asked, glancing towards the approaching Mind Weaver.

“Wonderful truly. It is... a paradox. Though I know my freedom is guaranteed, I spend my days here, observing and communicating with the beings that live both in Hallowfort and below. The same perhaps as my time in Audur’s domain, and yet the... feeling, is entirely different. I will have to think on this more,” it explained.

“Glad to hear you’re having a good time,” she said. “Knowing you’re free to go can change your mindset quite a bit. As would the contrary.”

“Such appears to be the case. A new visitor I see. A being powerful enough to challenge most and yet it seems... so very... harmless. I shall make contact,” it said and started hovering towards Owl. *“It was a pleasure to see your ashen form, Lilith. The wings do suit you.”*

“Thanks,” Ilea said, considering if the demon had just attempted to flirt with her. *Owl won’t catch a break quite yet,* she thought, turning away.

“Ilea, there is a space mage at the edge of my perception. He claims to know you,” the Meadow spoke.

“What’s his name?” she asked.

“I will ask. It’s Albert,” it said.

“Yeah, I met him yesterday, or earlier today actually. Impressive that he’s already here based on the little info I gave him,” she said and quickly explained the circumstances of their meeting and some of the backgrounds. She hesitated but decided to tell the Meadow about the suns too. If anybody did not have a use for such a device, it was the Meadow.

“What a useful device to take over the realm,” it said immediately after.

“Exactly, so I hope you can keep it a secret. If we manage to get it out, I’ll probably just hand it off to you. For safekeeping,” she said.

“Your trust in otherworldly beings beyond your simple brain’s understanding is baffling,” the Meadow spoke. *“I shall invite him in, I doubt his presence here will be an issue. The gates will be revealed soon enough and based on your information he would not dare alienate our faction.”*

“I only have one small brain to think too, and it’s really just one big muscle,” Ilea said. *“It makes sense to me to trust something with about fifty,”* she said.

A condescending laugh went through the domain, one that only Ilea could hear. At least she understood how the space magic behind it worked, the realization causing a smile to sprout on her face. She looked over to another space anomaly, one of Meadow’s spells, and locked eyes with Scipio, her smile turning into a grin. “Hello there.”

The man stumbled back, falling on his ass while looking at... well everything around him, his gaze moving past Ilea and towards Owl. “A... Lich...,”

“She’s probably harmless,” Ilea said as his eyes locked on Hereven.

“Mind Weaver...,” he murmured, shaking his head lightly before he forced his mouth closed, standing up and dusting off his pants. He walked a few steps forward before his gaze froze on the gate. “You...,”

“Yes. Not me though,” Ilea said. “We’ll distribute it soon enough. Fair conditions for all.”

“It’s...,” he started before he shook his head, resting his arms on his knees.

“*Kneel before your god,*” the Meadow spoke.

Ilea rolled her eyes and glanced towards the Meadow. “No need to scare the man even more.”

He didn’t seem fazed by the remarks, looking up with a defeated expression. “It’s like you. Of course it is. To think something would shock me to this extent. You win, Nes.”

“Why does she win?” Ilea asked, eyebrows quirking up.

He steadied himself and walked towards the Meadow. “She knew this would happen. You and your feminine intuition. Unlisted stats...,” he murmured. “You’ll get your training, that’s for sure.”

Ilea didn’t react, leaving the space mage to his own devices as she joined her group again. Pierce and Feyrair were fighting in a dome again, Verena sitting on a rock nearby, watching the various beings interact.

“Ready to head out again?” Ilea asked.

“Of course. I’m glad we sought you out,” Verena said. “These past few days have been the most interesting and eventful since... since forever.”

“It’s not always that exciting. Sometimes I just kill the same things for months at a time,” Ilea said, glancing at Feyrair and Pierce. “They seem to understand each other.”

“Both not particularly well tuned, yes,” Verena said with a light smile. “And yeah, it’s just normal, when you’re at this level. Killing monsters.”

Ilea clapped her hands together, creating a loud sound. *Oh*, she thought, looking down at her hands. “Been a while since I tried that,” she murmured and glanced at the two people looking at her. “We’re leaving again. Wanna come?”

The dome vanished after they affirmed.

“You’re an efficient treasure collector,” Pierce said.

“Easy when you have a locator,” Ilea said. “And the speed of sound.”

“And teleportation gates,” Verena added.

“Yeah, that too,” Ilea said, the locator still pointing south even from here.

The Meadow saw them off a moment later, the group appearing in the air south of Hallowfort’s location, Ilea’s wings spreading out as she caught the elf and berserker, Pierce already ahead with her crackling lightning.

They flew for hours, Ilea occasionally checking the locator but generally seeing very little change. *Seems like the rest of the keys aren’t located in the north at all*, she thought, sure they would come

up on the Naraza mountain chain in another hour or two of flying. She slowed down and came to a stop when the arrow turned to the west with a sudden motion.

“Got our next one,” she said with a smile.

“At this rate you’ll have all of them before you get your third Class to the next evolution,” Feyrair said, cracking his neck before he stretched and hissed a few times.

“Seems like high level monsters are more rare than hidden taleen artifacts,” Ilea said, a little annoyed about the fact that it might actually happen like he suggested.

They continued on towards the location, flying over mountains and crevices that looked the same as those hundreds of kilometers before. She was glad nobody had figured out to make a locator for these keys so far because without one it seemed entirely impossible to find them.

Some random ass dungeons and tombs in the middle of absolutely fucking nowhere, she mused, the arrow pointing towards a deep crack in the land leading towards a mountain, nothing about either remarkable in any way. She lead the group down and into the crevice, the locator informing her that the key was about eight kilometers ahead and down somewhere below. *Hopefully some more four marks to fight.*

“Tracks here,” Verena said, crouched and getting up. “Heavy boots and large. Dwarven war machines.”

“Probably a kingdom nearby,” Pierce said.

“You two have visited them?” Ilea asked, following the guidance of her artifact.

“A few cities, but they don’t let in anyone. You need some of them to vouch for you and even then it’s difficult,” Verena said.

“A bother is what it is. If you want to see them, just sneak inside,” Pierce said.

Verena shook her head. “Can’t do that with the ones I’ve visited. They really like building unconquerable fortresses deep underground. All enchanted too, and old. Some of these cities have been standing longer than any human settlements.”

Did they survive the changes in the north? Ilea wondered.

She could see the tracks now too, large imprints, most even bigger than those Terok would leave behind in his suit. *Then again, didn’t he mention he built his for scavenging? I’d think they’d go more bulky with something meant to just fight monsters. Taleen went thin too though, hmm.*

Her thoughts were interrupted when they came around a bend, only a small part of the cliffs above reached by sunlight. Her enhanced eyes allowed her to see the distant entrance anyway. A currently closed stone gate with carved in decorative runes, perhaps even functional. To each side were steel enforced bunker like extensions built into the high reaching stone walls. Jagged edges, bloodied spikes, and runes adorned the structures, likely meant as a warning to any creature willing to get too close.

She could just about make out a thin opening on each side that would allow someone to see through but her sight wasn’t enough at this distance to make out if anyone was actually inside.

“Guess we can just go and see if they let us in,” she said.

“If there is anyone still here. Could just be another ruin,” Verena said.

Pierce giggled to herself. “Hmm... yes. They do tend to dig out things they should’ve left far below ground.”

“Demons of the ancient world,” Ilea mused.

“I don’t think you’ll find demons very often in these parts,” Pierce said. “That Hereven fellow doesn’t count.”

Fey hissed in agreement.

Ilea continued onward, soon close enough to see the pairs of eyes waiting within the bunkers. One set actually closed, the person apparently asleep.

He jolted awake a moment later, another bearded person appearing and pointing towards the walking group.

“HALT!” a voice bellowed through the crevice.

Ilea did as he asked. “We’re friendly!” she shouted back. “Here to visit and trade!”

“ONLY WAR MACHINES AND DIVERS! THERE’S NO TRADE FOR YOU HERE! LEAVE ASH BEING!” the voice resumed.

Hmm.

“LEAVE OR SUFFER THE CONSEQUENCES!” came the warning.

Fey hissed, bursting into flame.

Pierce glanced at him and smirked.

“Wait, let’s leave for now,” Ilea said and turned around, tapping Fey’s chest.

“You would ignore such a foolish threat?” he asked with another hiss.

“They warned us. We’d be intruding their home,” she said, giving the Elders a long glance.

Pierce laughed, Verena at least avoiding eye contact.

“War machines and divers?” Ilea asked as they walked away. “Let’s get up and keep an eye on that entrance for a while. We haven’t taken a break in a while.”

“I’ve seen a few dwarves use suits of armor powered by their own mana or other sources they can include,” Verena said. “I believe they call those war machines.”

“There’s one in Hallowfort I know. Could go ask him if he knows the dwarves here,” Ilea said.

“Or you just use your space magic to go in and get the key,” Feyrair suggested.

“That’s the last option. Let’s exhaust the others first,” Ilea answered. She wouldn’t shy away from stealing the key if the dwarves proved entirely too stubborn but already they had given a warning first. *More reasonable than most things I’ve met recently.*

They sat down near a fairly hidden spot at the top of the crevice, occasionally hit by a few bolts of arcane lightning but otherwise undisturbed. Ilea could see the entrance and was somewhat sure the dwarves couldn’t see them from within their bunkers, likely more focused on the inside of the crevice with few things coming from above, especially during the day.

“Isn’t this just cute? Us common adventurers camping out here in the northern lands,” Pierce said with a happy sigh.

Verena groaned.

“Common, sure,” Ilea said, looking up as another storm came through. Lightning struck, hitting Pierce and flashing through her.

She moaned, laughing when nobody reacted.

Ilea glanced over the side of the cliff, hearing noises from below. About half an hour had passed since their denial at the entrance. She saw a single absolutely massive being made of steel, its pauldrons alone nearly as large as her entire torso, dust covered steel dented and showing more than a few scratches. It moved favoring its right leg, steadily advancing.

As it passed through below, she could reach the being with her healing through her dominion, finding its anatomy similar to Terok’s. A *warmachine*, she thought, her friend’s suit considerably leaner than this absolute bulk of steel. She took another look and smiled.