

## Chapter 659 Suspicions

“I agree,” Ilea said. “Not sure what my instinct is telling me exactly, but there’s something about this place.”

“We do not belong,” Verena whispered.

“We don’t belong anywhere in the north,” Pierce said. “Stop acting like pansies. You two are the last women I’d expect that from.”

“You don’t sound particularly experienced right there,” Ilea pointed out, summoning the locator. It pointed down and to the other side of the cavern. And it was active. *There is a key nearby. What are the fucking chances?*

“None of us here have the abilities to sneak up on a perceptive creature. What we can do is escape should we find ourselves outclassed. We shouldn’t waste time on pointless endeavors and focus on our strengths, Ilea. So let’s go find the next artifact. We can just teleport to the next location and see if something’s close,” said Pierce.

“No need. There’s one here. In this dungeon,” she said.

“Of course there is,” Pierce said, giggling to herself. “Lilith, finder of treasures, fighter of perfectly opportune monsters. Are you sure you’re not a true deity playing at being a mortal? Pulling the strings of fate with your very own magic?”

“Deities are just powerful beings with enough followers that believe they are in fact, gods,” Ilea said.

“You’re not helping your case,” Verena said with a light smirk.

“You two are just envious of my incredible deductive capabilities,” Ilea said, having chosen the destination pretty much randomly.

“Verena suggested the location,” Pierce reminded her. “But I’m envious alright. Let me profit from your godly powers, oh mystical Lilith, slayer of demons, freer of slaves, Mother of Sentinels.”

Ilea huffed out some air, the last bit amusing her at least somewhat. *Birthing out little ash adventurers.*

She didn’t quite see her ash copies as her children but maybe she simply wasn’t eccentric enough. With her reputation, she should at the very least get some weird ass pet. *Ah wait, I already have Violence. So maybe I’m already there.*

Ilea spread her wings and jumped off, enjoying the cool breeze within the cavern. It felt downright rejuvenating. Her eyes opened wide before she teleported to reach the other side, hiding in a broad fissure with the Elders appearing nearby.

“What is it?” Verena asked.

“Healing magic. Faint, but it’s there,” Ilea answered.

“Ah that was that feeling... I wasn’t sure,” Pierce said. “In the air itself.”

“An artifact? Some kind of plant? Or perhaps a being,” Verena suggested.

“It’s extensive to say the least,” Pierce said, flying out into the open. “Here as well,” she said, summoning an obsidian dagger to cut into her hand. “The effect is stronger than my regeneration,” she mused.

“How quickly do you regenerate?” Ilea asked.

“Quick,” Verena said.

“What a perfect place to train,” Pierce said.

*Just go to Meadow’s lair,* Ilea thought.

“Depends on what exactly is causing it,” Ilea mused, following the locator as she jumped down, teleporting or using the trees and roots as steps to get closer.

“Here we go,” she said, entering through a hole in the ancient broken wall. The air was fresh even in there, vegetation growing despite a lack of light. Roots had broken through most of the buildings but the Taleen great hall was still recognizable to someone who had visited a few of them.

She led the group towards another tunnel, following her locator when a humanoid creature stepped out from a nearby entrance.

*Oh.*

Pierce had already vanished, lightning flowing on her armor as she appeared behind the Mind Weaver, her arms spread wide as if to embrace the creature.

Ilea appeared between them, extending a hand towards the now much larger Dragonkiller, her armor thicker even than Ilea’s heavy Wyrms set. She could feel the lightning flow through her, most of the power absorbed as it slowly traveled through her armor and body.

Pierce jumped back, landing with a heavy impact. “They have mind magic,” she said quickly.

“I’ll kill it if it attacks you,” Ilea answered, turning around to face the calm demon. The black abyss like lack of eyes stared right into her soul, the scrawny being moving its thin hands, long claws clicking together with unnerving sounds. “*Greetings,*” Ilea sent, initiating telepathy.

Verena had remained where they had started, her axes ready, the woman looking at the weapons with some confusion.

“*YoU spEaK a TonguE. AnD ThRouGh MinD noT sOUnd!*” the demon said, its shoulders rising slightly.

**[Mind Weaver – lvl 228]**

Ilea didn’t feel particularly threatened.

“*Indeed. You’re too loud. When you talk to humans you shouldn’t be this intense. Talk like in a whisper, faint and calm,*” Ilea explained, now able to send more complex thoughts.

The mind weaver hadn’t attacked so far, not even touching them with mind magic.

Ilea had fought plenty of them to know that they threw around their magic on a whim. Even Weavy still sometimes used it without reason.

“*Like this? I apologize, traveler. I have not met your kind, nor do I know your purpose here. And yet I can feel, the mind of a master. One that may not wield our magic but one well versed in it,*” it said and bowed, the gesture well executed, only slightly diminished by the rags it wore. “*You may*

*call me Hereven, though my true name I shall retain. You have arrived here in Izculen, may I inquire about how you did so?"*

*"I'm not sure I can trust you with that information, Hereven. I'm Lilith,"* she said, remembering that Weavy had gone on about true names as well when they had first met. By now she was somewhat sure it was just a superstition that Mind Weavers seemed to believe in. No magic or skill she had seen had suggested true names really had any sort of power over someone. And still, she couldn't help but use her moniker. *"Have you come here from the Great Salt?"*

Hereven reeled back. *"You know of... my hOmE! WonDrOuS... apologies... you do not look like our kind. Are you perhaps one of the Old Ones?"*

*"I'm not. But I've visited your realm before. And I'm friends with one of your kind,"* Ilea explained. *"What is this place? And why are you interested in how we got here?"*

*"Yes... yes. You do seem powerful. It is only natural that you have braved the Great Salt. This is Izculen, the home of Audur and those she shelters,"* it explained, hesitating for a moment as it took a step back, its claws nervously clicking together. *"Are you... servants of Audur?"*

*"We're not,"* Ilea said. *"Why don't you tell me about this Audur?"*

*"Ash it is you wield... yes... you would not be. Forgive my inquiry... the great being Audur, Guardian of the West, rests at the bottom of this cavern deep below unforgiving lands ravaged by arcane storms and walking mists. I cannot leave, for the Guardian does not take kindly to those that dare abandon her generous care,"* Hereven explained.

*"Sounds to me this Guardian is a bit of a shithead,"* Ilea answered.

*"Shit... head?"* it mused. *"You would dare... insult? The winged giver of life?"*

*"Yeah, if she's forcing people to stay somewhere? Sure, I'll insult her,"* Ilea said.

*"What's going on. You two have been staring at each other for minutes,"* Pierce said, walking a little closer. *"Did it get into your head?"*

*"We're communicating telepathically,"* Ilea said.

*"Figured. Just wanted to make sure we wouldn't have to escape a brain dead Lilith,"* the woman answered, laughing to herself. *"Ah..."* she mused and shook her head. *"That wouldn't be fun at all. No, no it wouldn't."*

Verena joined them too, looking between the being and Ilea. *"My fire is subdued,"* she whispered, giving the demon a wary side glance.

*"Audur, does not condone the burning flame,"* it said.

Verena touched her head. *"I don't like telepathy."*

*"I don't think it can communicate in a different manner,"* Ilea said.

*"I cannot. But I can hear your words, and may fathom their meaning,"* Hereven said and turned back to Ilea. *"You are brave to insult her. A foolish bravery it may be but one I welcome wholly,"* it said. *"What would it take for you to free me from this prison? All I can offer, but servitude and my life itself."*

“I’d want to get to know you a little. But I suppose if you don’t just randomly attack sapient creatures you’d be welcome in Hallowfort,” she said. *And the Meadow would step in anyway if it goes too far.*

*“I have learned much about this realm since my summoning many centuries past. I merely wish to tread freely. I will not use my magic on creatures that did not provoke or attack, not beyond my need for nourishment,”* the demon explained.

*“I’m sure we can figure out the specifics. Shouldn’t be an issue to get you out of here once we’re done. First, I’m looking for an artifact shaped like this,”* Ilea said and formed an ashen copy of the Taleen keys.

The demon hesitated. *“I... advise you... not to take from Izculen, that which is not yours to take.”*

“I’m afraid it’s not negotiable. And I know where to find it. Do you know of additional traps or dangers on the way?” Ilea asked.

*“There are no such things,”* Hereven said and pointed to one of the open entrances. *“That which you seek, will surely lie within. I will guide you,”* he said and rushed ahead, floating slightly.

“What did you learn?” Verena asked, still looking at her axes.

“A being called Audur rules this place, and it will stop creatures from leaving apparently. Hereven here at least. We are in the north, there are supposedly arcane storms and mists up on the surface,” Ilea said.

“What kind of creature is this Audur?” Pierce asked, addressing the demon.

*“The winged guardian rests at the pinnacle of magic, her will alone having formed this dungeon,”* it explained.

“Be more practical. Is it humanoid, two legs, two arms, armor, weapons, what kind of magic does it use?” Pierce said.

*“I understand. The magics of life... and wood, I believe it is called. She is... four legged, with two wings sprouting from her back. Scales, green like leaves protect her form from all that is and will be, slitted eyes of gold see all within and out of her domain. Horns larger than yours adorn her head,”* Hereven explained.

The three women remained quiet for a moment, walking silently through the corridors of overgrown Taleen ruins, every section where traps would’ve once been, were broken and destroyed.

“Seems like you might get your chance sooner than you thought,” Ilea said, winking at Pierce.

The woman gulped, a wry smile on her face as she addressed the demon. “Is Audur a dragon?”

*“I do not know that word. Audur is Audur. There is none like her,”* Hereven said.

“Dragon cult,” Ilea mused. “They are supposed to be vain after all.”

“Says who?” Pierce asked. “Nobody knows a damned thing about these beings.”

“I have my sources,” Ilea said with a smirk.

*“I have seen... the hunters in the Great Salt, the beings that rest below the endless waves. None of them would challenge her. I am certain,”* Hereven said.

Ilea wasn't quite that sure. And even if what he said was true, she had helped kill a rather large demonic being flying above Ravenhall. Back when she had been considerably weaker. There was really nothing the present group could offer her to help her gauge the power of Audur. A part of her hoped the being would find them. *Would be a shame to lose these three in the process though*, Ilea thought. *Guess I'll just have to teleport them out if it gets too dangerous.*

Hereven may be from the Great Salt but with his level, Ilea doubted he had seen creatures comparable to the Daughters of Sephilon, the Meadow, or the Fae. Time would tell of course, and right now they had to focus on the task at hand.

"You said she can see everything. Do you think she will come here to stop us?" Ilea asked, the group entering a decrepit Taleen hall. She glanced back behind and found that the hallway looked decidedly large, parts of it smashed because of the traps but some of the damage seemed unnecessary.

*"I do not know her intentions, whims, and desires. Rarely have I seen her move from deep below, surrounded by lakes and monuments,"* the demon answered.

"You've been down there then?" Ilea asked.

*"Indeed. All those who have found their way here or were taken meet with the Guardian, or so it is said,"* it said.

"Meaning you've talked to her? Identified her? Four mark I assume? What did she sound like? What did you gauge about her power?" Ilea said, the group following Hereven and the locator, both leading to the same direction.

*"Four uncertainties. She spoke... the tongue of the Salt. The tongue of my kind. Her words seemed well chosen, the language though fluent, unpracticed. She spoke to me the way I speak to thee,"* it explained. *"What I felt from her..."* Hereven paused for a moment. *"I felt... unworthy."*

The demon seemed almost ashamed at admitting it. *"It was... overwhelming. To find this realm, to be summoned. I had many things to explore, to learn, to experience. The gift of earth, water, untainted by salt, the light of the suns, plentiful creatures to hunt and eat. How could I not be awed?"*

Ilea nodded to herself. Their realm seemed like a pretty rough spot to grow up in, no matter what kind of being you are. When even the North offers so many benefits in comparison.

Pierce glanced behind herself, pausing for a few seconds before she turned again. "Was she the one to summon you?" she asked the Mind Weaver.

*"No. A spirit of dark magic living in these parts sought knowledge from our realm. They were powerless against my magic. And yet I was stranded, in a place I did not know, that held so many riches,"* the demon explained.

"Maybe you wouldn't have ended up here if you hadn't killed that spirit immediately," Ilea said.

*"Yes. Indeed. I have had time to reflect, Lilith, and I had come to the same conclusion. I regret my actions but they were reasonable at the given time. My only desire for decades upon decades had been the escape from the cursed lands of my ancestors. Freedom is what I sought, not cooperation, servitude, or imprisonment. Strife is all I knew. For the concepts taught to me by Audur, I am thankful, but she sees not her own domain as imprisonment, whereas I do."*

"A reflective demon, who would've thought," Pierce said, again checking behind herself.

“You’re making me nervous, woman,” Ilea said.

They came into a large hall, tables and walls only barely recognizable in between the roots, plants, and rubble. No light reached into these sections of the dungeon, a few more hallways leading deeper into the once Taleen facility.

Ilea recognized metal pieces on the ground and in the walls, pieces from Guardians and Centurions. She paused, displacing a large chunk of Taleen out from between a few roots. “Hmm...,” she mused, looking at the piece that landed on the ground with a dull clank.

“Machines, well someone must’ve cleared them out. Audur probably,” Pierce said.

“This is part of a Praetorian,” Ilea said.

“You fought them too, did you not?” Verena asked.

She nodded slowly. “Yes. They’re level six hundred. Have you guys defeated one?”

“No,” Pierce said.

Verena shook her head.

“They detonate, much like Centurions. This part here is from a section close to their core,” she said.

“It’s entirely undamaged,” Pierce observed.

“Yep. Which means it was taken out faster than its self destruction could activate,” she said. *Could I do it at this point? With my evolutions? Fully charged Archon Strike at the right time and with the right buffs. Probably.*

With the state of this hall however, Ilea didn’t consider it a deliberate attempt to disable the machine. It looked more like overwhelming power.

“This way,” Hereven said, pushing them deeper into the complex.

Ilea followed.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” Pierce said, her armor much lighter again as she walked close to Ilea.

“Remember when you called us pansies?” Ilea said.

Pierce remained quiet.

“Do you know about the effect on my flames?” Verena asked the demon.

*“There is little you can do, in the presence of Audur. She does not condone those of death, fire, and ash,”* Hereven said, looking at the Elder before it turned its head to Ilea. *“I suggest we leave the way you came once you have what you desire.”*

“Audur sounds more interesting by the minute,” Ilea admitted. “I might go meet her either way.”

Pierce blinked her eyes as she looked at her. She sighed and bit her lip, opening her mouth and then closing it again. “Annoying,” she whispered, flicking her own cheek before a helmet formed to cover her face.

“What is?” Ilea asked.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Pierce said and crossed her arms.

“I can see why you inspire bards and fighters alike,” Verena said.

Ilea grinned. “I do remember you jumping at that massive demon back in Eregar’s Haven.”

“Ah, yes,” Verena said, scratching her cheek. “No other choice at the time.”

Ilea waved her hand sideways. *Not so sure about that.*

“Someone had to stop it. I had the best chance of the people down there,” Verena said. “And I guess it seemed interesting to fight. Not stronger than other things I’ve tried myself against before.”

*Unreasonable but not quite THAT unreasonable, is that what you’re trying to say? Kind of what I thought I was to be honest.*