

Chapter 660 Audur

“You know quite a lot about this realm. Your own research or did Audur teach you?” Ilea asked after they had walked for a while.

Every new hall or room they came into showed signs of a long past battle, not a single working machine remaining, nor anything more than a few small pieces.

“I have learned from the Druned. What little they know, they share with those who ask,” Hereven explained.

“The Druned. I have not heard of them,” Verena said.

Pierce seemed occupied with checking their surroundings.

“They’re stone golems, but I didn’t know there were any this far north,” Ilea said. “I’d be interested in meeting them too.”

“Many of those who live here are not born of this environment,” the demon said. *“Though few find their fate limiting. They are safe here. Protected. Predators hunt prey still, but compared to the lands above, Izculen is peaceful. I too have shared these views for many years,”* he explained.

“Did you try to leave then? Or ask Audur about it?” Ilea asked. “She seems intelligent enough to come to a similar conclusion. Especially if she’s protecting the creatures here.”

“As I have explained. Audur is above all. A wish to leave her side is seen as either betrayal, lacking self preservation or missing common sense. I have offered my wishes and based on her reaction to similar situations have to assume that I only am alive today because she thought me inept, unable to understand the dangers of this world and the extent of her generosity,” Hereven explained, his tone drifting more into sarcasm.

“Doesn’t sound like she’s particularly grounded,” Ilea mused.

“She is winged after all,” the demon said.

I like this demon, Ilea thought. “At least you tried. Maybe she’ll understand it at some point.”

“The issue does not lie in understanding. Her superiority is not imagined. It is fact. Based on my limited experience on the surface, I have to agree with her logic as well. But... it goes against my...,” he paused, clicking his claws together.

“Your dreams, feelings, your passion,” Ilea supplied.

“Yes... perhaps those words are fitting, though their meaning partially eludes me. You too seem unreasonable for coming here,” the demon said.

Ilea chuckled. *Yeah, probably.* “I’ve done some things that could be considered unreasonable.”

Verena laughed.

“Quiet it down a little. Please,” Pierce said.

“Yeah, you’re right. Sorry,” Ilea said as they walked into an spacious unlit hall, shattered tables and shelves littering the floor, pieces of destroyed machines nearby similar to the rest of the dungeon. The locator pointed at the pile of metal near one of the walls.

There were Taleen swords and hammers, pieces of machinery, and even armor. *No bones*, Ilea noted, looking through everything within her dominion. *There you are*, she mused, finding the key at the back of the pile.

“Do you hear that?” Pierce asked, checking the main entrance to the hall, two more leading out to each side.

Ilea moved a few ashen limbs into the pile and got the key. She blinked her eyes a few times, unsure why the gesture had felt different. *Almost like my ash moved through water*.

“There is no noise,” Verena confirmed in a whisper.

She’s right, Ilea thought, turning around with the key in hand as she listened intently. The insects and birds were gone, some still visible within her perception but unmoving, as if frozen entirely. She stored the key and activated her third tier transfer, but the runes refused to form. Focusing on a random sword in the pile, she used Displacement. The spell failed to move the weapon.

“Hide,” she said, layering her mantle and forming two ashen copies as she rushed to a nearby pillar. She imbued the ash with commands to hide and help if necessary, both her or her allies.

The others followed suit, Verena crouching behind a large chunk of rubble and Pierce downright melding with the pile of metal, her armor changing shape to something non human. Hereven found a pillar for itself.

Ilea had started to form heat within her core, just in case. She could feel the mana density rise in the next moment, a wave of magic flowing into the room in a near visible manner. The color of the air changed within her dominion as a lithe being stepped into the hall, its form crouched as it passed through the large entrance, expanding its body when it was no longer constricted.

She checked the others, finding them tense but calm. The presence of the creature would not outright kill them at least. Ilea knew the mana alone outclassed the Meadow. By how much, she couldn’t tell. She noted that the animals and insects in the vicinity didn’t die however, either resistant or protected in some way.

The creature itself had four legs ending in claws, its whole body covered in scales that shimmered with light within Ilea’s dominion. Its head looked similar to a Drake or Wyvern, scaled with two long horns jutting out from its skull, angled backwards and rather straight. Its maw remained closed as it glanced around the hall with inquisitive eyes, a tail sliding out of the entrance as the being moved down the set of steps without a sound.

Its wings remained tucked on its back, the creature still reaching a height of nearly five meters, about three times as long, more with its thin tail.

“I can see you,” it said in a whispering growl, its eyes looking straight at Ilea. “Who intrudes, with ash and fire?”

Ilea could feel the air vibrate with the words, the sound waves visible to her dominion as if spells flowing through the air.

“*Tell the others to flee when the chance presents itself, I’ll try to distract it. You too,*” Ilea sent to Hereven, stepping out from behind the pillar, her helmet retracting to reveal her face. If the creature

disliked ash, perhaps she could show that she wasn't made entirely of it. Her wings spread out to allow for quick movement, her teleportation still restricted. She focused on her space awareness to try and decipher whatever ability it was the creature used to prevent teleportation.

"I'm Lilith," Ilea said. "Greetings, Guardian of the West."

[Audur – lvl ?????]

No further information showed as she identified the creature, its eyes like molten gold, its scales a dull green. Powerful muscles were visible below its scales, though there seemed to be little tension in its body. Veteran failed to discern the creature's power, its level beyond that of the Meadow.

"A human. So far north, so far... west," Audur spoke.

Ilea could feel a wave wash over her, something brushing her instincts. More subtle than a roar. An aura, just barely visible within her perception, but she knew it to be there, among another set of more prominent spells, her own abilities like drops in the ocean before her. She refused to budge, remaining where she stood with a slight grin still on her face, her focus mostly on unraveling the space magic restriction.

"Rare it is, for thine kind, to reach into these heights. With endless greed, you push on. And here, in a land thou do not know, thine end will come," it spoke. "Lilith," it said, as if tasting the name.

She's a talker, Ilea thought. That's good.

"You're the first Dragon I meet," Ilea said.

"Dragon... your kind once used that name. Long past. Tell me, deviant corrupted by ash, what did you seek within these halls?" Audur asked.

Audur's gaze was on Ilea, but she didn't doubt the dragon could see or perceive the others in the hall. Ilea had a hard time even grasping what was interfering with her teleportation. The dragon had several sets of auras, each doing different things, each periodically changing. She found that a part of it influenced her ash, the parts not close to her body.

Ilea considered lying but something told her that was a bad idea. She couldn't win against this creature in a straight up fight, that much she had known from the instant it had stepped into this hall. She didn't know if she could flee without her teleportation, let alone the allies still hiding nearby. Time would be of the essence, which meant she had to keep a conversation going. *Let's hope she's bored out of her mind.*

"I came to find a Taleen artifact," Ilea said, walking a few steps to the right, in the hopes to get just a tiny bit more distance between herself and the others. It was a faint hope that the dragon relied on its eyes alone to see, but even if it brought but a split second, it was worth the shot. "I assume you're the one who cleared out the machines that had remained within Izculen?"

"Naturally," the dragon replied in its whisper like tone, slight impatience lacing her words.

"Perhaps you'd be willing to trade? Both for the artifact and my life," Ilea said. "I can bring you gold, cake, metals, dresses?" she said, none of the words provoking a reaction in the slightest.

The dragon growled quietly. "Thou hast a commendable grasp on reality," she spoke.

Ilea saw the attack coming, sidestepping the root breaking out of the ground in an attempt to pierce her chest. Ash covered her face as her wings took her upwards. "I assume that means you're not interested in negotiating?" she asked with a smirk.

“Fight to the end, human. I shall free you of that dreadful magic,” Audur spoke as a hundred wooden spears formed and shot out.

Ilea couldn't avoid them all, instead covering her body with wings and ash. “Run!” she shouted, her ash shaved off with each glancing blow, the spears infused with magic. Four more volleys came at her as she perceived flashes of fire and lightning going for separate exits, the Mind Weaver rushing out at a much slower pace.

The second volley pierced her armor, the wooden spears digging into her flesh before they splintered, exploding in a flash of fragments. She could feel time slow down, her speed increasing considerably as she managed to avoid a thin projectile coming at her eye. Ilea used the doubled resilience and speed to move forward, her wings shredded and healing, same as her mantle.

Her hand extended as she charged Archon Strike, dozens of roots breaking out of the ground to meet her fast descent. Embered Heart released in a bright cone ahead of her, hitting an invisible force that blocked and consumed the fires and heat, snuffing out the spell in an instant.

Ilea's third tier healing remade her body and mantle in the time her speed remained doubled, allowing her to avoid more of the spears. She tried again to teleport but failed to activate either spell. A part of her considered fleeing right now but even with the boost it was questionable if she could even get out of the hall. Audur's focus was on her.

Not close to what the Meadow can do, she knew, which meant the dragon was still toying with her. She could gain more time to figure out the auras. Ilea decided not to increase the length of her ability spike, to make sure she could use it again later. Instead she burst into white flame, pushing her reverse healing into the creature as she circled around as fast as she could, dodging projectiles and sending back burning ash where she managed a window of opportunity.

A few spears had shredded through her chest and stomach, a dozen more ripping her apart in the next wave. She could see the damage being done, each splinter fighting against her tough ash and muscle, scratching the bones below before she was flung aside.

Ilea couldn't move, a large chunk of her skin and muscle gone, some of her bones showing scratch marks as white fire burned on her ash and skin. She coughed, her third tier healing regenerating all of her organs, flesh, and ash, the layers once more protecting her as she stood up, looking at the dragon who had ceased its attacks.

She cracked her shoulder, her reverse healing still pouring into the creature as she used the time to form more ashen spears, infusing them with heat and setting them ablaze with the fires of creation.

“Abomination,” the dragon said in a vibrating tone, spears of ash exploding in bright heat and white flame against a force like barrier of mana. The flame of creation remained, burning away the source. “Ash. Fire. Arcane reconstruction, and the flame of creation. Thou hast no regard for the natural order,” Audur whispered with increasing power, her words shaking the stone hall as more roots broke out of the ground. “Your species was not meant to reach thine power. Die now, Lilith.”

Ilea jumped back, forming several sets of ashen walls as her fires spread, embered heart flashing out in a sphere when the roots reached her, the spell pushing them back for the fraction of a second. She evaded in the air, flying as fast as she could, now aiming for one of the exits. Roots formed instantly to block her way, large lances of wood hitting her back, three glancing off against her armor, another six piercing through, one punching out of her chest.

An ashen copy jumped in to block the spear coming for her head, deflecting the projectile just enough to save her.

Two... one, Ilea thought, still flying towards the mesh of wood now in her way, more roots forming below to catch her slowing form. The lances still piercing her body splintered with flashes of energy, one of her legs torn away as her flesh was ripped through, her lungs and heart squashed in an instant. Phaseshift activated when she reached the exit, the rest of her momentum taking her through the wood. *Thank fuck*, she thought, seeing the barrier pass as she entered into the hallway beyond, deactivating the spell as fast as she could, her body healing while she remained in her phased form.

Audur had moved the barrier aside, sending another barrage of wood towards the exit. Most of them moved through Ilea without an impact, the last few dodged when she returned to normal space. One took her shoulder, nearly making her fall.

She didn't pause, her wings moving as her mantle reformed, all her speed pushing her through the corridor and away from the dragon much too large for this passage.

"Commendable," the creature mused.

Ilea felt an absurd amount of mana form behind her, coalescing as she pushed forward. She formed ash behind her, Phaseshift still on cooldown as she tried again to teleport. *Fucking aura*. She didn't glance back. She could see the magic come either way. *Healing*.

Bright green flames filled the corridor, rushing over her flying form like a cool breeze. Time slowed once more as she watched her ash evaporate instantly, the walls around her growing grass and flowers as her flesh bloated and melted, her eyes exploding as she fell into a run. Her legs gave out under her, one eye regenerating to show the blurred image of her skeletal arm. She used it to drag herself forward.

There was no pain, no hesitation, her mind going blank for a moment as the fires reached her brain. Ilea's dominion returned, her third tier healing pushing against the remains of the green flame as she stumbled up, her ash barely managing to form in the presence of the remnants. She ran instead, on bone and muscle, then on flesh, slipping before she managed to stand again. Her leg didn't feel right, nor did her right hand. It didn't matter.

"Run, little human. There is no escape," whispered Audur, her voice calm once more.

Ilea glanced back to see the dragon's tail slip away in the direction of the main entrance. She glanced down to see her leg covered in blisters, her foot angled the wrong way. She cursed, removing the leg with an ashen limb before she formed a new one.

Ilea stared at the green flames flickering on the walls, running forward until she rushed into an open room, coming down with a crash, her vision blurring again.

Verena was by her side in the next moment, groaning as she turned Ilea onto her back.

"Something's on you," she said, a flicker of flame above her palm lighting up the room before a torrent of fire washed over her.

Ilea reached up, pushing away the Elder's hand and her spell. She could see half her face missing, her own healing still regenerating newly forming injuries, her left eye was gone again. "Step aside," she murmured, ashen limbs moving above her as her weight increased, heat forming within her.

Verena made some distance as Embered Heart released onto Ilea herself, flashes of fiery light illuminating the room time and time again as she burned away the foreign magic, stone melting below. Flare of Creation got rid of the last bits as it flashed up on her skin.

“She’s not following,” Verena said from the entrance, her gaze towards the hall they had come from. “I can’t teleport and my fire is weakened still, can you move?”

Ilea sighed, blinking her eyes as she checked her body. “I’m fine. Let’s hope she stays in a playful mood,” she said and tried to teleport, the spells still not manifesting. She hissed, sitting down to meditate.

“You have a plan?” Verena asked.

“Can’t fight her. Need to get through her aura,” she said and closed her eyes.

“*Dragon aura blocking space. Ideas? Wood and Healing,*” she sent to the Meadow before addressing Violence. “*In a bind. Help get us out? Dragon with aura.*”

She had the key. There was no other reason to stay.

“*Violence Knight. Come. Rescue!*” the Fae sent back.

Ilea smiled to herself, refocusing on the aura still permeating everything around them.

“Give me that mark you mentioned. I will find the others,” Verena said, holding out her hand.

Ilea looked up and obliged.

The Elder burst into flames. “Good luck,” she said with a light smile, and rushed off, heavy impacts resounding as she ran.