

The Fae watched Aki walk into the Soul Forge with cautious steps.

“Why are you so interested in him?” Ilea asked.

Magic

Imitating

Essence

New

Information

“You could tell from just a look?” Ilea asked. *“What do you think about it?”*

Intelligence

Real

Form

Irrelevant

She smiled. *“Yeah, I think so too. One of our enchanters helped him stabilize a bit more too. I don’t think he’ll get influenced anytime soon, not more than anybody would be susceptible to mind magic or other spells.”*

Caring

“He’s a friend. And even if he wasn’t, he deserves to have his independence just like everyone else,” she said.

Understand

“I’ve come to accept that I might’ve died a while ago, and this is the fever dream I came up with in my last waking moments,” Bralin said, his smaller armor on as he looked at the cube.

“Let’s see what kind of knowledge your subconscious thinks the great Joggoth has hidden in his Soul Forge,” she said and went inside. Ilea left the two armored ash copies where the Tuned Soul Wardens had stood before. *The Soul forge is under new management.*

She didn’t bother joining the largest group in the central hall, instead taking the steel stairs up to the fourth floor where she had seen a cozy room with a small kitchen adjacent. A glance through her dominion showed Pierce going through various storage rooms, picking up treasure as she went. Ilea used her fabric tear to save a few more interesting chests for herself. They were stacked up on the red velvet carpet in front of the cold hearth, coal the only thing that remained within.

Ilea raised her hand and moved some of the old wood into the opening. A bit of lava came to life a few meters away from her before it floated between the logs. *“Any clue how we can get rid of the smoke?”* she asked, looking at her floating Faen companion.

The creature moved towards the hearth before it touched the frame, tapping it a few times until something lit up.

A series of enchantments were activated within the vent. The smoke was pulled in and replaced with fresh air entering through a nearby opening, all likely intertwined with the magic mesh protecting the cube in the first place.

The rest of the room housed three comfortable leather armchairs, two large bookshelves filled to the brim with thick volumes, and a polished wooden coffee table with an artistic base of curved steel. Warm magical light came from a spherical orb connected to the ceiling by a thin strand of metal.

Ilea added some more lava to the logs and went to the small kitchen. The various compartments and tools were likely enough to create an absolute feast but she wasn't exactly a master chef. Instead she checked the extensive selection of teas, smelling on each until she found something to her liking. A mix that reminded her of black tea with a hint of cinnamon. "How do I cook water?" Ilea asked as she checked the steel plates. *This kitchen looks more modern and earth like than half the shit I ever had.*

She looked up and checked the wall. Everything was clean, well sorted. Ilea watched the Fae fiddle with the stove until it jumped up, having stood on the plate that now started glowing.

"Thanks," she said and touched the familiar water collection enchantment before she filled a small ceramic pot with a small crown on it.

"You would dare drink from MY TEA!?" demanded Khan.

Ilea looked at the Fae. "It's not like you need it," she said. "Is he just straight up trapped in there? Conscious and everything?"

No, the Fae replied before it thought for a few seconds.

Essence

Only

Echoes. Of. Memory. If. Outburst. Takes. Control. Cognitive. Function. Active. No. Outburst. Dormant. State. Lacks. Capability. Remain. Conscious.

"Hmm," Ilea mused as she waited for the water to boil. She filled a spherical metal sieve with tea and put it into a black mug. "Still seems unnecessarily cruel. Can you not just kill him?"

Agree. Amusing. First. Century. Removal. Dangerous. Requires. Soul. Magic. Lich?

"Owl could probably help at some point, sure. But she's not very experienced with her magic," Ilea said.

Cannot. Return. Foreign. Influence.

"You can't go home with the soul in there?" Ilea asked.

The Fae nodded.

"They'll figure something out together. The Meadow will want to talk anyway, two birds with one stone," she said and poured the water into the mug. She closed her eyes and smelled the strong scent slowly spreading through the room before she sat down in one of the armchairs. Flames had started consuming the wood, the fragrances mixing to create a downright Christmasy feel she hadn't remembered in a long while.

‘ding’ ‘You drank tea from the famous personal collection of Khan Joggoth while the remains of his soul are within a Fae sitting on your shoulder – One Core skill point awarded’

How very specific, Ilea thought and relaxed into her chair. She summoned a comfy looking blanket from a nearby room before snuggling into it, her eyes focused on the crackling fire as the mug warmed her hands.

Relaxing, sent the Fae before it drooped down into the blanket.

Ilea patted it with a gentle touch, her perception still active to see the happenings within the cube. She displaced more of the treasures and artifacts Pierce was about to find, the pile next to her armchair growing in size. The enchanters and Aki were reading through the notes and books in the central hall, talking to each other with excited and energetic gestures.

Bralin in the meantime inspected the soul wardens, specifically interested in the large crowned model. The Shades had joined the group in the main hall, open books in front of them.

Verena seemed a little lost, the woman looking at some scientific tools before she sighed.

Ilea formed a gate next to the woman and one in the cozy room. “*Tea?*”

The woman smiled and stepped through the slightly fluctuating air. She appeared in the room and smiled. “Better,” Verena murmured and walked to the kitchen to check the various teas herself.

A minute later, she sat down in one of the armchairs, a mug in hand with steam rising from the liquid within.

The Fae glanced over but remained on the comfortable blanket.

“This place is pretty well equipped,” Ilea said after a few minutes of silence. She moved her hand to bring a few more logs into the flames, adding a little bit of heat to the present ash to strengthen the flames.

“The tea selection is exquisite,” the woman confirmed, closing her eyes as she sipped on the liquid.

“Hmm,” Ilea mused.

Verena glanced over. “What are you planning? A base down here?”

Ilea smiled. “No. Not exactly. The location will be found by the delvers of the Pit soon enough. And with the defensive enchantments destroyed, it might as well just be a chunk of metal.”

“Think it’s possible?” Verena asked after a while.

Ilea patted the Fae and shrugged lightly. “Plenty of geniuses around. And it would be nice, to have some facilities in the north other than a field of black grass.”

“You know, the Meadow could just build something. It did for Iana and Christopher,” Verena said.

“Yeah, but not something quite as... luxurious,” Ilea mused. “Not instantly at least. And well... it’s all here already. All we have to do, is move it.”

Verena smiled to herself but didn’t say anything. She raised a finger, a pulse of magic making the flames in the hearth flare up.

Ilea finished her tea and stood up. She moved a bit of ash through the mug to clean it before she displaced it into the cupboard. “Want to stay?” she asked the Fae still wrapped into the blanket on the chair.

It moved more of the fabric around itself, only half of its large white eyes visible.

Ilea smiled and teleported down into the main hall. She stretched and shuddered lightly at the sudden change in temperature. She did resist the temptation of forming heat within her, only to prevent important research to be set ablaze. “Interesting reading?”

Iana looked up from the notes in her hands, a serious expression on her face. “Yes. Very. What might interest you is the fact that Khan Joggoth had trade relations with the Taleen. Shared research projects and exchanged technologies,” she said and tapped her head with a meaningful glance to the Shades.

Ilea raised a brow. “*Don’t trust them?*” she asked, using telepathy.

“I do, with what we find here. Not with the conclusions. Khan and the Taleen worked together on something they call the Ascension Project II. And yes, it has to do with the Ascended themselves. Apparently they managed to gather quite a bit of knowledge and technology from their attacks on existing Ascended facilities. You don’t look surprised,” Iana said.

“Keep this to yourself, Chris, and the Meadow. Ascended are those of their species who managed to attain the bodies they now have. They were a biological species before. It’s no surprise that the Taleen tried to get their hands on that process. But it doesn’t look like they succeeded,” Ilea said.

“What makes you think that?” Iana asked.

“We’re not living under the rule of our Ascended Taleen overlords,” Ilea mused.

“It’s that dangerous... I suppose it makes sense, with what you’ve shared of your experiences. Well, Khan was a king, local, and not Taleen. He did his own research and obviously focused on the soul more so than anything else. That’s the machine that bound his people to their Warden models,” she said and nodded towards the large apparatus at the back and center of the hall. *“A dangerous tool, and it seems like he succeeded at least in part. Ilea, the main thing I’m concerned about is the information he sold to the Taleen. Parts of it... remind me a lot of what I’ve seen on Aki.”*

“A lot?” Ilea asked, raising a brow.

“I’m near certain he was created using a part of this research. There are locations mentioned too. Taleen research facilities hidden below ground. Khan never considered them allies, and he planned to take their machines by force once his armies had established him in the local area,” she explained.

“He failed? Bralin mentioned some king defeating him,” Ilea said.

“Well, a massive natural disaster killed most of his peoples, destroyed most of his lands, his research, and everything else. He writes of a last effort to establish himself during the chaos, but well, it seems he was defeated,” Iana said.

“The Fae might have something to do with that,” Ilea said and glanced at the crowned suit of armor. *“Can you write down the names of those Taleen facilities? Maybe we can find them in the map. Might be useful to check them out.”*

“I already did that. Three of them are listed,” Iana said. *“The Fae was mentioned in the research. It had apparently found its way into the soul forge by itself, interested in the research. Once it understood more of it, the being chose not to cooperate with Khan, when he imprisoned it. He conducted... experiments on it, but... failed to gain understanding of its nature.”*

“Of course he would,” Ilea said. “Thanks for the breakdown. I’m sure you’ll find more interesting bits. But I think we should go back to the Meadow as soon as possible.”

“We have to look through everything here, Ilea. This is ancient knowledge, from a time where these peoples had an incredible wealth of resources, connected through teleportation gates... underground cities humanity might’ve never even seen!” Iana said.

“I didn’t say we should leave anything behind,” Ilea said and broke the telepathic link. “What I mean is we should move this entire facility to the Meadow.”

Iana blinked a few times, Christopher and the others now looking at her as well.

“Either that or we gather what we can and destroy the rest,” Ilea said. “Except you have a better idea.”

“I support the destruction bit,” Bralin said. “If someone possesses this thing...” he added while staring at the large and silent Warden.

Iana sighed and crossed her arms. *“So I understand you right... you want to move this entire facility... a cube with each side at a hundred and twenty meters, hundreds of tons of steel... where, to the lair of the Meadow? Hundreds of kilometers to the north?”*

Ilea mirrored the woman’s smirk. *“Precisely. Can you do it?”*

The enchantress remained calm, the smirk straightening as she summoned a large tome. She was joined by Christopher who closed the book he was looking through and sighed.

“Can I do it? No, not in a thousand years,” Iana said. “But with the help of some very powerful beings, a group of high level mages, mana sources from a triple mark human, and two four marks? It will certainly be worth a shot. I’ll get to work immediately. Chris, you have the circles written down?”

“I do. We have the measurements already. Weight might be an issue depending on where it wants to put it,” he said and summoned another book. “Ah, there was an empty storage ring here. I took it to collect as much as possible before we leave.”

“Finder’s keepers,” Ilea said with a smile, still occasionally moving chests away from Pierce. “We might keep this place so stop the raiding,” she sent to the woman.

“There’s nothing here anyway. Fucking useless,” she replied.

Ilea disagreed, seeing the gold and magical glow from various items on the pile next to Verena.

“You can send ten words, is that right?” Iana asked.

“To the Meadow? Yes,” Ilea answered.

“We’ll write them down. If we’re going to move this thing we’ll need its help from the other side, and a massive push from this one,” Iana explained.

“Any way the Fae could help?” Ilea asked. “It’s probably the most knowledgeable space mage around.”

“Possibly, if it wants to help that is. I’d rather not have any wildcards in the mix,” Iana said. “And it will take some time to set up. Longer than what we did for the enchantments.”

Ilea smiled. “You really are monsters,” she mused. “We’ll go up to the Pit to fight in the Dome, there’s still another key up there. But I’ll leave a copy here, and you have both Aki and Owl. I still have the spatial anchor in the north, if that helps.”

“Good. And don’t worry. The Meadow is our anchor,” Iana said and bit her lip. “I really really want to continue looking through this stuff...”

“You’ll have all the time in the world to get through everything once we’re not in unknown territory anymore,” Ilea said.

She sighed, Chris gently touching her shoulder. “I know, of course I know. Alright, let’s get to work then. Chris, measurements. Hmm, with the time we’ll need. Ilea, can we get a lift back to the Meadow, with everyone who wants to stay there, and then back again once we’ve discussed everything necessary? I’d also like to move everything that fits into a storage item first. In case the whole thing fails.”

“Sounds like the safe bet, sure,” Ilea said. “I’ll help with the cleanup.” She teleported up to Verena and started storing everything not connected to the rooms themselves.

“Possible?” the woman asked.

Ilea smiled as she walked out of the kitchen, a mist of ash flowing over everything, only the two occupied armchairs remaining. She even stored the wood. “Probably. Iana likes to downplay their abilities but breaking through the defenses was already done pretty easily. They’ll take some time to set everything up, we can go to the Pit while they prepare.”

“I assume we’re storing everything in case it doesn’t work?” Verena asked.

Ilea nodded and glanced at the Fae, large white eyes taking in everything. *“We’ll try to move the entire Soul Forge to my friend’s domain farther north. The two enchanters downstairs will set up a collaborative effort with said friend. I’m sure your space magic expertise would be an incredible help, if you’re interested of course. A few of us will be participating in some arena battles between war machines. A bit more action for that option.”*

Amusing

Will

Help

Move

Mass

Ilea raised her brows. “Oh really?”

Surprise?

“Yeah, sorry. The Fae I know would’ve chosen to watch the arena battles immediately,” she said with a smile.

Outlier

Amusing

Meet?

“He shows up at the Meadow’s from time to time,” Ilea said.

Fun

“Indeed,” she said and finished packing up the floor. Ilea found herself able to carry larger furniture and soul wardens in her domain that didn’t fit into the storage items of her allies, or her own for that matter. *“It was mentioned that you showed up here on your own volition?”*

The Fae landed on her shoulder.

Yes. Interesting. Settlement. Fascinating. Research, the being spoke. Help. Refusal. Trapped.

“Your kind doesn’t seem to care much for the passing of time,” Ilea observed.

Age. Irrelevant.

“I suppose so,” Ilea mused, wondering how many of the Fae were stuck somewhere. *“Do you have a way to find trapped Fae? I’d be happy to get them out of whatever magical prison they’ve found themselves in.”*

Appreciate. Friend.

Many. Cut. Off. Find. Impossible.

“But you’re insanely powerful... I just can’t imagine that you couldn’t find your brethren somehow,” Ilea said.

Many. We. Find.

“Ah, so it’s just the ones hidden behind enchantments or the like?” she said.

Yes.

“And the ones you can find... what, you go in swords drawn? The full on cavalry?” she asked with a grin.

Amusing.

No. Helpers. Sent.

“Helpers?” Ilea asked, intrigued by what exactly constituted as a helper to the Fae.

Ally. Mercenary. Friend. Monster. Many. Ways.

She huffed. *“Damn. I thought you’d have a group of Faen Valkyries or something. Ready to go out to get back the lost travelers.”*

The being giggled in her mind.