

*“Your body will crumble under the mana pressure. Which is why I’m moving you back,”* Meadow explained.

“I can take it, creature,” Feyrair roared, the sound not quite as impressive with his battered dragon body, held back by thick roots and surrounded by barriers.

“Mate, even I can’t escape from that one,” Ilea said.

“A worthy opponent then,” Feyrair roared, his flames impacting the barrier in front of him without discernible results.

Neiphato glanced over. “A wood mage too. A true master at that.”

“I’m sure it’ll teach you some secrets if you ask nicely,” Ilea said.

The elf looked at her with an uncertain expression. “Should I kneel? Pray to it? Or offer something?”

*“Yes, yes, and yes, your blood will suffice for now,”* Meadow spoke.

“No, no, and no,” Ilea rebuked. “Hey I thought you disliked the divine treatment.”

A rumble went through the creature’s domain. *“Ah, well. Occasionally it’s nice to be acknowledged, Ilea. It’s only when hundreds kneel before you where it becomes tiresome.”*

“I see. So just a little cult then,” she said.

*“Exactly. Already have you five,”* Meadow said.

“Sure, whatever you say, tree,” Ilea said. “I need your help with a few things. How is the gate technology coming along?”

“We’re getting close. Well more than close,” Iana said. “The gate itself is operational. But it’s... rudimentary at best.”

*“It’s downright embarrassing,”* Meadow corrected.

“Rudimentary for humans,” Iana said, one of her eyelids twitching. “However... well if we wanted to have a working network, that’d be it. But security is an important factor. Who gets to use the gates, which destinations can be chosen, how often can one use it, how much mana is used with each activation, how many times can the gate be used before maintenance is required. Well... those are the things we’re working on. And I doubt it’ll be done anytime soon.”

*“It shouldn’t take too long. I will guide them through,”* Meadow said.

Iana sighed. “It would be easier if you just told us. I do understand the benefits of learning something and want to achieve this myself but the benefits could help hundreds of thousands.”

*“I’ve been guiding creatures to their Awakening for thousands of years, young child. Your species has survived thus far without these gates, they shall do so for another few months or years. And you will be grateful for this in the end,”* Meadow spoke.

“Like a dad,” Ilea commented with a snicker.

*“Well I do lack the capability to birth offspring on my own,” Meadow mused. “But you did not speak of the gates when you came to ask for assistance.”*

“Well no, but also, yes,” Ilea said and summoned the Tungsten Key. “There are twelve of these in total, and I need to find them. Iana and Chris, you two already know about it but I thought Meadow might be able to assist with a tracking device.”

*“An inspiring creation. Too many layers if you ask me. What would be the purpose of so many redundancies?”* Meadow commented.

“It’s not made for practicality,” Iana said. “It’s a key, made to lock something up. Twelve parts that make one, and I doubt even you could copy this or make the rest of its parts.”

*“True. Only a madman would try himself at such a task. However... with enough time,”* Meadow said.

Ilea quirked up an eyebrow, smiling at the still struggling Feyrair. “How long? Few months or centuries?”

*“More the latter unfortunately for you short lived creatures,”* Meadow said. *“Though to find the other parts, that can be done quickly.”*

“There are restrictions too,” Iana said. “Anything that uses this key as guidance would only lead one to the closest nearby part of its whole.”

*“Which is enough. With someone like her looking for them,”* Meadow said, a chuckle flowing through the area, intertwining with the whines of a cut apart dragonling whose form returned to an Elven one.

“Then I’d like you guys to craft something like that for me. Higher priority than your gate work even. Meadow is right, we’ve been fine without them. I want to find these keys,” Ilea said.

“Why are they so important?” Iana asked, receiving the Tungsten Key.

“We’ll get more information on the Taleen. But more importantly, I’ll get to explore the places where they are at the moment. Which should prove interesting,” Ilea said with a smile.

“But the gates...,” Christopher commented.

“The gates. Yes. Well, I want them to be perfectly secure before anybody else even knows about them, let alone before we build them throughout the plains. They’re a tool that may bring a lot of prosperity, but could also provide the opposite. Let’s not rush it. I understand that a tool to track these keys could be made somewhat soon?” Ilea said.

“Yes. It’s not a particularly difficult task. It seems the makers of this thing even intended for such to be possible,” Iana said.

“I see. I’ll be looking forward to it then. Also, there’s something else,” Ilea said.

“Of course there is,” Iana said and smiled. “Something interesting I assume.”

“Well, yes. I would imagine it is. I need to be able to use the existing Taleen gate network,” she said.

Christopher smirked. “Now that’s something.” He laughed and shook his head. “Arthur tried for decades. Others have too. All have failed.”

“The same is true for our kind. The enemy has control over their network still,” Neiphato said.

“Yeah, that’s why I’m asking Meadow too,” Ilea said. “What do you think? Does that sound like something you’d have an interest in?”

Feyrair was pierced by a dozen roots, his body slammed into the ground a few times before he was flung towards the group, hitting the ground with a wet sound and a groan.

*“Hmm. A contest of skill against the species whose secrets have eluded the locals for centuries or more. Yes, that does indeed sound like a worthwhile time investment. If only to show my apprentices how something like that is done,”* Meadow said. *“Ah, and for you, Ilea. It may prove beneficial to your space magic.”*

“I won’t complain if I gain a few levels out of it. Question is, how do we go about it? I don’t think it’s a good idea to take you out of here and into a nearby Taleen dungeon,” she said.

*“Indeed, I shall remain here. Iana, why don’t you explain to our friend here why a relocation won’t be necessary,”* Meadow said.

“She can understand you now?” Ilea asked.

*“Well of course. Contrary to your self centered beliefs, you’re not the only creature capable of resistance training. And neither are you the only one capable of healing,”* Meadow spoke.

“I can’t yet,” Christopher admitted. “Though it’s easy to read the signs.”

*What signs?* Ilea thought and glanced towards the Meadow. She looked at the regenerating form of Feyrair, the elf still coughing up blood as his fires flared up from time to time.

“You... trained... with this... one?” Fey asked in between coughs.

“Oh yes. I know your pain,” Ilea said.

Iana cleared her throat. “I’d imagine a relocation isn’t necessary because the Taleen gates are simply run on enchantments. But Meadow... with all due respect, I don’t think we can simply create a copy here.”

*“A copy is not the problem. The problem is linking said copy into the network already established. But what a copy, or more precisely, two copies will allow us, is something else entirely,”* it said.

“You want to replicate their network to learn how to bypass their defensive enchantments? That could actually work,” Iana mused, looking to their own gate with a thoughtful expression. “And we could learn how to avoid their mistakes.”

“They didn’t make any mistakes. We tried for years and years. Whole groups of enchanter,” Christopher said.

“I’ve studied the layouts. You failed because the gates were powered off after too much tampering. If Meadow can replicate the gates, that won’t be a problem,” Iana said. “I’d also just like to mention that it could just give us the working Taleen gate technology if it wanted to. All our goals solved instantly,” she added with a sigh.

*“Not just that. With improvements even. But where’s the fun in that. I didn’t come here to solve all your problems,”* Meadow said.

“Kind of seems like you did. Also you didn’t come at all. I brought you,” Ilea said.

*“I lead creatures to solutions but I try to avoid simply spelling things out. Those are my ways and while I do bend my rules for a friend from time to time, I don’t see a reason to do so here. However, your request to break into the established network in search of those keys, is something I can help with,”* it explained.

*“I knew it was the right decision to befriend this eldritch monster and bring it into our realm,”* Ilea sent.

*“You know I can hear you, right? Also it wasn’t your decision, it was my inconceivable charm that manipulated you into helping me. Now that I’m free, there is no stopping me,”* Meadow sent.

*“Sure. Just, you know. You’re not exactly moving around.”* Ilea said.

*“My roots grow, to the core of the world, and soon, they will devour all,”* Meadow rebuked.

Ilea blinked closer to the tree and squinted her eyes. *“You don’t even have roots.”*

A rustle went through the fake grass, Ilea pushed back by a barrier until she landed close to the group with a smug expression on her face.

*“The audacity. Truly, you do not know when to stop,”* the Meadow said, apparently sent to everyone who could perceive it again.

*“Don’t act offended. You’re too old to be capable of that,”* Ilea replied.

*“You do not relent,”* Meadow said, creating a loud sound that seemed to imitate a sob. All it really did was send a shiver down everyone’s spines. Clear proof of the otherworldly nature of this creature. *“Ah, I have to work on that.”*

*“You do indeed. Sounded like a pig being killed or something,”* Ilea suggested.

*“More like when a health potion is mixed the wrong way and it melts off half the alchemist’s face,”* Christopher said in a quiet tone, shuddering slightly as his eyes glazed over.

*“You okay?”* Iana asked, touching the man’s shoulder.

He nodded, taking a deep breath. *“Yeah. Yeah.”*

*“To get back on topic,”* Iana said, glancing over the group with a slight smile. *“What do we need for your plan?”*

*“The research provided by Christopher shall suffice. At the very least he knows how to document things. A peculiar trait humans seem to share. Smart too, considering their tiny brains,”* Meadow said as two platforms of stone formed nearby, runes and magic flaring up as tiny incisions appeared in the material. *“Here we go. Now to figure out how to break into it. I’ll leave you to it, with some guidance as I doubt your current knowledge will be up to the task.”*

*“Did you just fart out two working copies of the Taleen teleportation gates?”* Ilea asked.

Neiphato hissed, even Feyrair looking at the tree in a different light.

*“You didn’t rescue a plum tree, Ilea,”* the Meadow sent.

Ilea started laughing, brushing away tears. Nobody else seemed to think the experience quite as funny, though Feyrair’s will had apparently been renewed with vigor.

*“You’ll find the results the same, elf,”* the Meadow spoke, welcoming the burning dragonling with expanding roots.

“I’d like to ask for your guidance, master,” Neiphato spoke, going down to one knee.

“*Show me what you have, young one,*” Meadow said.

“Doesn’t look like I’m needed here,” Ilea said. “Hey Meadow, the Sun Sprites still around... layer eighteen I believe.”

“*Indeed. Rude creatures. On their way to awakening but I won’t stand in your way,*” Meadow spoke.

“*Are you getting more selective now that you have so many beings available to you?*” Ilea asked with a smirk.

“*Not at all. But creatures hunt each other. It is the way of life. You are merely one such being,*” Meadow said.

“Mind giving me a boost then?” Ilea asked. “Fey do you want to come as well?”

“I’m-” he started, when his jaw was removed by a particularly nasty looking root. He reformed it in his retreat and hissed, his eyes downright glowing. “... busy.”

“Alright. You can get me out if an Ascended shows up, right?” Ilea asked.

“*They seem to be masters of space magic, Ilea. Of course I can,*” the tree said.

“*Gods, I love you,*” she said and smiled.

“*I too, am fond of you, child,*” the being said and made her vanish.

Ilea appeared in a familiar staircase, the one leading down into the eighteenth layer of the Descent. She wondered if the creatures would be the right ones to fight but most other things down here were either too weak to provide many levels, or too powerful to face. Well the latter part was debatable but she didn’t want to kill the Lightning Elemental or the Trakorov. The Griffin, maybe she would visit the thing. *To be honest, I’d like to fight the Lightning one too, just to show it how far I’ve come.*

But for now she wanted to focus on growth.

*First two Classes are fine. All maxed out. Resistances... could improve, but that will always be the case. Hmm, one thing might be worth it. I have two points after all.*

**‘ding’ ‘Deviant of Humanity reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 1’**

***Deviant of Humanity – 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 1***

***You face creatures most other humans have nightmares about, call beings your friends that occupy the pages of legends told by your kind. You have reached a level of power that few humans will ever call their own. And yet you push onward, knowing of the dangers that wait in the dark. You anticipate them. Welcome them. Those who would dismiss you may now take notice, should you wish for them to do so.***

***2<sup>nd</sup> stage: You remain human at your core but your actions have pushed you beyond the limitations of your species. Inspire terror in the hearts of your own kind or those who would dismiss humanity, should you wish to do so. The status of a predator among its prey will be***

*evident by your very presence.*

***3<sup>rd</sup> stage: You diverge further from what it means to be human. The magic you have come to call your own and the body once born human find themselves more compatible, their strengths fusing to show what you have become.***

Ilea immediately felt the change. As if her nose had suddenly been freed of snot, her lungs expanding fully for the first time in her life. She would've doubled over from the intensity of the sensation in the past but Ilea had experienced far too much to let this newfound change affect her in such a way.

Instead she observed. Both with her eyes, her healing, and her sphere. When she breathed, she could see the power flare within her, magic flowing through her very core and out towards her limbs, exiting through her pores and mingling with her ash. Not armor that constricted her, but a part of her very self.

When she spread healing through her body, she found the magic flowing out instantly, far quicker than ever before. She raised her hand and looked at it, her armor receding to her will, showing the skin below that looked very much the same. And yet it had become so very different. Ilea formed a sphere of ash above her hand, the magic manifesting instantly, created as naturally as she breathed and not at all forced upon existence by a complex spell to shape reality.

Flare of Creation activated, burning away her health as she watched the flames spread out from her armor. She checked and found her organs still in place, her heart beating like it had before, her eyes watching as they always had, and her lungs still breathing air. And yet it felt like unseen barriers had been removed.

*"Meadow, do you hear me?"* she asked.

*"I can still communicate with you, yes. What is it?"* the being said, its telepathy easily reaching down into the depths of the Descent. While it was deep, the distance itself was mostly impressive because it reached down into the ground and not across the lands.

*"Well... I just upgraded Deviant of Humanity to the third tier, and... well I'm not exactly sure what to make of it,"* Ilea said.

*"Ah... I see. Well... hmm... I can tell that you have increased your harmony. Though to what extent is difficult to discern at this distance. Ask me again when you're back,"* Meadow said.

*"What's harmony?"* Ilea asked.

*"Ah humans. I've found that you see the Classes and magic you grow into as mere tools, assigned to you by some unknown deity or somehow gained through insight. However it is closer to the truth to say that your very self changes as you evolve. Harmony is what I call your body's ability to accept said changes from a near... instinctual perspective. I suggest you test it out yourself. Congratulations on your first step to become a Meadow yourself,"* it said.

*"What?? Are you kidding me? I don't want to become a tree!"* Ilea exclaimed.

*"I am kidding. Do not fret, little human. Though new possibilities have just opened up, just like when you ingested that Bluemoon grass you have mentioned to me before. This change however is surely less forceful, achieved through your own growth,"* Meadow explained.

*“I understand. Makes sense I guess. I’ll check what has changed... seems like my ash is forming a little more quickly,” she said.*

*“Yes. More harmony with the magic born within you will lead to an improvement of control, it is only natural. Within Awakened, such changes are rare however. But I will refrain from stroking your ego anymore than necessary. For I know you didn’t achieve this through study and meditation. Did you perhaps punch a concentrated mana crystal?” it said.*

*“Very funny. Would that work though?” Ilea asked, making a fist and smiling.*

*“No... with you though. Maybe,” Meadow answered.*

*“Just checking,” Ilea said.*