

Chapter 709 Impressions

The days leading up to the council meeting passed without any major disturbances. Iana and her crew studied the Soul Forge and its secrets, in addition to the findings from Izcural. Bralin got a home provided by the Meadow and learned what he could from Goliath. The rest of the more or less permanent residents spent their time fighting each other or experimenting with their magic.

Ilea mostly trained with the Meadow, but she found the tree wasn't quite as involved as usual. She assumed it had to do with the curious Faen visitor in the form of Twin, her presence mostly made known by the occasional outburst of kingly attitude. Ilea made sure to get brunch every day. She spent some time helping the Sentinels with their pain tolerance in between training sessions, and had a few bouts with most of the faculty. With and without her armaments.

On the fifth day, Ilea sat atop a northern mountain and looked to the east. She ate one of Keyla's meals and enjoyed the freezing breeze flowing through her hair. Lightning slashed into the landscape in the distance, a constant to the north she now found comfort in. Up here, very few creatures would bother her, and those who did were likely quite interesting beings. Beings she could fight. She remained within the Meadow's domain, both so that she could be informed, but just as much to avoid an encounter with a certain Dragon.

The fact that she even thought of Audur while being up in the north was more than just annoying. *And here I thought I could be content for a while with my evolutions.* Ilea knew she needed quite a bit more than her enhanced spells to effectively fight the Dragon. Perhaps not the ridiculous amount of levels the creature itself possessed, but enough to at least comfortably fight the Meadow. And for that alone she needed a downright insane amount of high level monsters to fight.

Not that the Meadow would tell me where to find them, she thought, reminded of the continent to the east. *Land of storms. Worse than even here. But I might just as well annoy something even worse than Audur. A different realm altogether would be the best. Not like many creatures could just follow me here.*

First, train and enhance all skills. Maybe I'll manage to befriend a dragon in the meantime to balance out the issues I have with the green ball of anger from the west. Or I could ascend and put my soul into some kind of high level robot body made by Goliath and the Meadow, approved by Nes.

She smiled at the thought but in the end, Ilea preferred to stay at least somewhat human. Giving up on food was not in the cards. She finished the plate and checked the messages from the past few days.

'ding' 'Archon Strike [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 3'

'ding' 'Sentinel Reconstruction [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 11'

'ding' 'Azarinth Awakening [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 9'

'ding' 'Transfer [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 7'

'ding' 'Arcane Dominion [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 3'

'ding' 'Sentinel Core [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 10'

'ding' 'Eternal Brawling [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 3'

'ding' 'Eternal Brawling [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 4'

'ding' 'Arcane Circulation [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 7'

'ding' 'Mantle of the Titan [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 3'

'ding' 'Mantle of the Titan [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 4'

'ding' 'Titan Core [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 3'

'ding' 'Embered Heart [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 3'

'ding' 'Embered Heart [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 4'

'ding' 'Tempered Seal [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 2'

'ding' 'Ashen Wings [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 7'

'ding' 'Avatar of Ash [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 9'

'ding' 'Embered Form [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 2'

'ding' 'Fires of Creation [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 3'

'ding' 'Fires of Creation [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 4'

'ding' 'Space Manipulation [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 2'

'ding' 'Space Manipulation [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 3'

'ding' 'Ashen Limbs reaches lvl 18'

'ding' 'Bulwark of Ash reaches lvl 13'

'ding' 'Dancing reaches lvl 7'

'ding' 'Gourmet reaches lvl 8'

'ding' 'Minor Earth Manipulation reaches lvl 3'

'ding' 'Minor Ice Manipulation reaches lvl 3'

'ding' 'Minor Lava Manipulation reaches lvl 3'

'ding' 'Minor Lava Manipulation reaches lvl 4'

'ding' 'Monstrous reaches lvl 9'

'ding' 'Monstrous reaches lvl 10'

'ding' 'Oxygen Repository reaches 2nd lvl 11'

'ding' 'Sage of Torment reaches 2nd lvl 14'

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'ding' 'Sage of Torment reaches 2nd lvl 17'

'ding' 'Soul Perception reaches lvl 13'

'ding' 'Spear of Ash reaches lvl 20'

'ding' 'Teaching reaches lvl 10'

'ding' 'Telepathy reaches lvl 4'
'ding' 'Telepathy reaches lvl 5'

'ding' 'Arcane Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 22'

'ding' 'Ash Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 5'
'ding' 'Ash Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 6'

'ding' 'Blast Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 8'

'ding' 'Divination Magic Resistance reaches lvl 11'

'ding' 'Earth Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 8'
'ding' 'Earth Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 9'

'ding' 'Soul Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 20'

'ding' 'Space Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 10'
'ding' 'Space Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 11'
'ding' 'Space Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 12'

'ding' 'Void Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 17'

'ding' 'Wood Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 4'
'ding' 'Wood Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 5'

Ilea decided to use her available third tier general point to enhance the one resistance where her mantle and resilience didn't make as much of a difference.

General skills available for third tier advancement:

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Soul Magic Resistance

You have fought and killed a high level Lich Fragment and chose to expose your Soul to the harsh training of a Greater Lich. Are you sure you don't want to become an undead yourself? Or perhaps you're just incredibly scared of them. Skulls and stuff. Dark hoods? No?

'ding' 'Soul Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 1'

Soul Magic Resistance – 3rd lvl 1

The fleeting conscience of man and beast. Flesh, energy, motion and thought. The Soul stands separate entirely, yet intertwined all the same. Through hardship you have learned understanding, not through meditation and study. A brutal yet comforting truth, strengthening that which cannot be grasped.

2nd stage: Battered and cracked. Challenged and near broken. Your Soul has endured through sheer tenacity against that which meant to bring its end. A serene calm now sways through your very essence, changed and evolved, grounded and calm.

3rd stage: You have survived concentrated efforts to destroy your essence. Have fought and killed

those that would've harmed your very core. Steady and entirely settled it remains. And so it shall remain. Your Soul cannot be destroyed nor can it be separated from your body. Injuries sustained will retain their effects.

The addition was welcome of course but didn't change the unsettling feeling of having one's soul damaged directly. Nor did it negate the damage that pretty much ignored her conventional defenses.

She felt the pull of space magic, letting go as she was realigned within the fabric. The Meadow's domain came into view just as the teleportation gate activated.

Ilea found the entire council of Ravenhall present. Dagon, Elise, Sulivhaan, Claire, and Trian. Herself making the sixth member.

Claire and Trian gave her a look, the group glancing around with large eyes. Sulivhaan had several auras active around himself while Dagon rubbed his eyes.

"Might be best for you to deal with the introductions," Trian said to her.

Ilea raised her brow, glancing at the additional people that had joined the group. Kyrian was one of them, as were Wayland and a group of armed and armored shadows Ilea knew as well.

Navalis followed the group out of the city, her eyes focused on her target. Rock tried to get her attention but she ignored him. They had a job to do and chit chat wasn't part of it. She could downright feel his excitement. Navalis felt tense if anything. How could she not?

Three days prior, their former team leader Sulivhaan, now council member of the independent Ravenhall, had asked them for a favor. More than just a favor, but she knew that all of them would have followed him to a realm of demons if he had asked. Which is why he never had. They had continued being Shadows, as they wished to be. His new position would've surely allowed for lucrative positions in the new government but none of them had plans to settle down. Joining the Shadow's Hand was usually not a short term commitment, but a choice done for life.

They had already left for the next job when a high level Shadow brought them the summons. Sulivhaan had given them the information they needed. Wayland, a former spy master for another nation was taken in to do the same job for Ravenhall. A ridiculous idea but if she trusted anyone to weigh such a risk, it was Sulivhaan. They were to watch his every move, read every letter, listen to all of his conversations, and keep an eye on his magic. Not an easy task as it turned out, for he was a man of many talents. But they were three, and more than just experienced.

Navalis had yet to make her mind up about Wayland, but she appreciated his open communication and the logical explanations he offered for each of his actions. It seemed he either tried very hard to fool them or he genuinely wanted to stay in their good graces. Many reasons for either, but their task was to simply keep watch. Given the risks it made sense to put a whole team of Shadows on the job and it was an honor that Sulivhaan had asked them personally.

Twenty minutes prior, the man himself had joined them in the tailor shop Wayland had chosen as his base of operations, near the Sentinel Headquarters. They were to drop whatever they were doing and join him. The class of Sentinels had left without complaints, the mysterious healing order formed by Lilith even more shrouded in rumors than the Shadow's Hand. Navalis welcomed more healers, especially ones that could fight.

She had long made the connection between Ilea and Lilith, but the stories seemed exaggerated, even for someone as strong as her. If she met her again, she would get her own impression. The short notice made sense, likely done to prevent Wayland from informing anyone, or perhaps done to bait him into a mistake. He had been accepted for the job by the council but his trial phase had only just begun. And they were his watchers.

Navalis didn't know if they could take him in a direct confrontation, even with all three of them there. But considering the circumstances, that fact didn't matter. Not with the regular reports. Even if he managed to somehow incapacitate all three of them, which she considered highly unlikely, he would be found out in less than twenty minutes. Not enough time to flee the city in an effective manner. His information would be leaked, but it seemed the council deemed the risk worth the potential benefits of his cooperation.

Senia wasn't happy about her interrupted sleep, but when they had reached the meeting spot in the office of the Head Administrator, that annoyance quickly vanished.

Not only was the entire council present, but there was a man Navalis could simply not gauge. Stronger than anyone she had ever met, and yet so unassuming. He wore simple leather armor, his gray eyes avoiding eye contact whenever she tried to force it. She could feel the curse magic flowing through him, more powerful than anything she had seen in a human.

Everyone besides the man had donned their battle regalia, tension in the air as the Head Administrator informed them about a meeting that would take place in the next hour.

Wayland had shrouded them in shadow and sound magic as they held on to flying metal bars, controlled by the mysterious man Navalis tried to always keep in front of her.

They landed half an hour later, deep within the valleys of the southern mountains. A location that looked just like everything else in the area. She spotted the hidden entrance into the ground below the snow, but she might've missed it if she had simply passed through without stopping.

Claire, as she had introduced herself, opened a hatch, leading them down into a cellar of sorts. Their own group waited until Wayland had gone down and followed. The mysterious man entered last, closing the hatch behind himself.

The room was filled with high quality weapons, armor, ingots, and even a bit of gold. Suspicious, but not entirely unlikely. Forgotten perhaps, a smuggler's hidden stash, or perhaps prepared as a trap. It turned out to be none of those options.

Claire activated a set of runes, the ground shifting to reveal yet another entrance, enchanted against all intrusion spells and perception abilities Navalis had at her disposal. *An expensive endeavor. One I would've missed in almost all scenarios.*

She kept her eyes on Wayland but it seemed the man was just as intrigued as they were. *They're not sure either. Only Claire and the curse mage seem calm.*

Rock poked her but she didn't react. Their task was Wayland.

"I'm afraid we have to jump," Claire said and did as much, vanishing into the thin open shaft in the ground. She landed a few seconds later and shouted for the next person to go.

Navalis and the curse mage were the last to remain upstairs when she glanced at him and jumped.

She landed without a sound, stepping out of the way as she took in the surroundings. Magical lights shined on from the side walls, a single circular room opening up with a platform at the center. The stone was lined with metal, hundreds of runes visible on the surface. It all shined with magical energy.

The council members didn't react but their group exchanged glances, even Navalis taking her eye off Wayland for a split second. The man had his brows raised, one hand raised to his jaw in a thoughtful gesture.

"Is that what I think it is?" Rock asked in a whisper.

Nobody replied. He had the tact not to say more.

A teleportation gate... in Ravenhall. What else could it be? But who would've built it? Who would it belong to? For how long have they kept this hidden? How did anyone even figure this out? Why now?

"We will now go into what has been described to me as the domain of the Meadow. Please be advised not to engage ANYTHING in combat. And be prepared for a lot of ambient mana exposure," Claire said and stepped onto the platform. "Please step on the platform."

Everyone did as asked, with the appropriate hesitation.

The curse mage stepped on as the last. "Try not to scream," he said and Navalis thought she caught a slight grin on his lips. She realized his words weren't meant for her, Trian rolling his eyes after they looked at each other.

Claire activated a set of enchantments on the platform and the thing came to life.

A spell activated a moment later, everything in her perception turning for a split second before she returned to solid ground. A bizarre experience, but not something Navalis could consider for more than a heartbeat. Her enhanced perception skills allowed her to see magic hidden to most others, allowed her to feel what others could not. But wherever she had appeared at, she had not been prepared. She had her bow in hand before she could think, her perception abilities disabled the moment she felt the nearby auras.

The impressions were overwhelming. To the point where her very mind seemed to blur with all her abilities active. So she disabled them, the action leaving her open to possible attacks but she had to trust her instincts. There had been an aura of death powerful enough to suggest a being far into the four marks and two beings of void and arcane magic close to that level. That much she could've handled, but everything combined with the downright all consuming aura coming from a field of black grass farther down the cavern, she had no choice.

"Might be best for you to deal with the introductions," Claire's voice brought her back.

Her eyes fell on the woman, a familiar face, clad in well fitting black pants and a white blouse that looked good as new. Her piercing blue eyes took in the arrivals, her gaze the same but entirely different than Navalis remembered. It was Ilea, no doubt, or something that looked like Ilea. She didn't dare activate her perception skills again but even without, she could feel the hairs on her neck stand up. Something about her didn't seem right, didn't seem human.

“I kind of wanted to watch the whole thing as a bystander,” the woman replied.

The curse mage walked towards her and smiled. “Can’t delegate everything, Ilea.”

“Good to see you too, Kyrian. Staying for a while?” the woman asked.

“A few days. I’ll be here for the meeting at the very least,” the man answered.

They know each other. Were they Shadows together? Same with Claire and Trian, they seem more than familiar with her, though just as confused with the surroundings as the others.

“Alright then, glad you made it safely. First official use of our teleportation gates,” Ilea said. “Rock, Senia, Navalis, didn’t expect to see you today but glad you’re alive and well. I’m both Ilea and Lilith, if you didn’t figure that out already.”

“What?!” Rock exclaimed.

Ilea just smiled. “Welcome everyone, to the far north, the domain of the Endless Meadow, our newly established northern outpost of the Medic Sentinels, and the town of Hallowfort, whose council will join us shortly. You should all be familiar with the Elders of the Shadow’s Hand, those that remain and aren’t absolute dipshits, excluding Pierce of course.”

The Elders Lucas, Quil, and Pierce joined them, some of the people present exchanging glances. Navalis herself was simply curious how she could’ve missed the three humans.

“For the others... we should probably do this one at a time. Guardian of our Medic Sentinels, Aki,” Ilea said.

Navalis charged an arrow with power, aiming up at the slender silver form, familiar green eyes taking her in as it slid through the air on fast moving legs, coming to a stop behind and slightly above Ilea.

“Greetings,” a slightly distorted voice spoke.

[Pursuer of Akelion – lvl ???]

What did we get ourselves into?