

Chapter 662 Wormholes

“Nice to meet the two of you,” Neiphato said, stone breaking a few dozen meters away.

“She’s not been on edge quite as much against even the Wyrn. You really fought a dragon? Is she really that stupid?” Feyrair asked as he addressed the two human women.

“Nice to meet you, Cerithil Hunter,” one of the women said, her body clad in fire, simple armor covering her legs and torso.

“You know our kind? That’s fortunate. I hear it’s difficult to form relations with humans because of our rather... problematic pasts,” Neiphato said, trying to smile in a disarming way. It seemed to have the opposite effect. “I’m Neiphato.”

“You’re an actual elf... a real life elf that isn’t gurgling up some bullshit about killing and eating me? How interesting,” the other woman said, all but her head covered in dark armor that occasionally had lightning traveling over its surface.

“Get away from me human, or I will,” Feyrair said, pushing the approaching human back.

“You dare talk to Dragonkiller Pierce in that tone, young elf?” the woman said, a broad smile on her face as she showed her teeth.

Feyrair hissed, white flame flaring up on his body.

“Stop it,” Neiphato and the burning woman said at the same time.

“You’re no threat to me, let alone a dragon,” Feyrair hissed. “But you can try, human.”

“Oh, I think I will, elf,” the lightning mage said and vanished, appearing a few dozen meters away in the expansive hall before she beckoned Feyrair closer.

The elf obliged, jumping up as his flames spread out.

Neiphato glanced at Ilea’s burning form, a beam of heat and energy enveloping the fast moving Praetorian variant he had never seen before. He knew she would ask for help if she needed it. The being was only a three mark after all, same as her. The demon seemed to be crying, touching the stone floor with its clawed hands but currently not using its mind magic to attack anyone. And it had appeared here with Ilea, so he assumed she somehow managed to befriend it. Feyrair and the Dragonkiller woman were in a full on battle, the latter using her fast speed and teleportation to keep up with the much higher leveled elf.

The woman next to him cleared her throat. “I’m Verena. Elder of the Shadow’s Hand. Good to meet you, Neiphato, was it? I hope your friend isn’t going to kill mine.”

He looked at her now, hissing embarrassingly. “Ah, I hope he doesn’t.”

She squinted at him.

“I’m sure she will be fine. You two seem to be capable warriors,” he said and raised his hands in a placating gesture.

“Will she be fine?” Verena asked, glancing over to Ilea.

“Ah yes. I’ve seen her fight a Scorching Wurm. I think she could take a few Executioners alone by now. We should just be on the lookout if her head gets pierced again,” he said, scratching his chin as he watched Ilea fight. “Her new armor seems well suited for the job.”

“Didn’t know it was new,” Verena said, stepping next to him to watch the fight. She summoned a bottle and started drinking. “Ale?”

“Ah, the human brew. If you are willing to share, though I have nothing to trade with you,” Neiphato answered. He received the bottle as his eyes opened wide. “There is something,” he said and formed a white flower surrounded by a spiral of wood. “It would fit your hair and tanned skin, I believe,” he said with a bright smile.

“Th... anks,” the woman said, her fires gone as she received the flower with a complex expression on her face that Neiphato couldn’t discern.

The lightning woman laughed in a wild manner, streaks of blue light flashing up behind them as Feyrair joined the laughter, his white flames cutting through stone.

Ilea circled the Taleen machine, the variant as quick as the Executioners but considerably more cautious, trying to keep the distance as it used its cannons to shoot at her.

She displaced herself behind it, punching the machine a few times with Archon Strike and Tempered Seal, her abilities burning into the already weakened shield, its regeneration unable to keep up with her massively enhanced mana intrusion.

Ilea watched the cannons charge, purple energy flashing up as chunks of metal were shot out. She charged forward, the void infused projectiles hitting her mantle, ripping out chunks of her ash and lightly damaging her wurm armor below but failing to slow her down.

Loud steps resounded as she ran, a grin on her face while she jumped. Embered Heart released in a sphere when the Pursuer jumped away, stepping on fields of mana hovering in the air as its shield shattered against the powerful surge of heat.

Ilea stopped her pursuit, her weight lessening now as she continued to charge heat. She stored her heavy armor and looked at the creature, dodging two fast moving projectiles that tugged at her mantle in passing, her void magic resistance much too high for them to leave any considerable damage. She felt space magic manifest to her right and turned, displacing the next few projectiles coming at her into the nearby walls as she watched the wavering fabric.

Her smile broadened when she felt the mark move within her perception.

Baron Violence appeared clad in dark armor, white eyes shining out from the visor in his mismatched helmet, a sword of black steel held in his hand as he floated towards the Praetorian with the point of his blade aimed forward. A small white cape fluttered in non-existent wind on his back.

Ilea dodged two more projectiles with quick side steps and laughed, waving at her friend. “You’re late.”

Late.

No.

Dragon.

He said and pointed at the machine.

Blind?

“I’m not blind. We escaped already. This one appeared afterwards. Feel like joining in? I think it just realized its ranged attacks won’t work on me,” Ilea said.

She watched as the cannon arms on the Pursuer molded themselves into blade arms much like those of the Executioners, the machine using the lull in battle to regenerate its shield. *Yeah, that should be quite a bit more dangerous,* she mused. *I wonder if it can still pierce my armor quite as easily.*

Violence appearing on her shoulder.

Danger?

“No. We’ll be just fine,” she said, walking towards the machine as her wings spread and a dozen burning spears formed behind her. *Much more comfortable than a fucking dragon.*

The two rushed at each other, explosions of heat and fire slamming into the machine’s shield as its blades cut into her armor.

Ilea laughed, letting the variant strike her. She moved her body to prevent serious damage, the void blades cutting deep into her mantle but failing to even reach her skin. She got in close and punched the being several times, its shield already overloaded again. She remained where she stood, healing the cuts in her ash as she watched the machine jump back, looking at her with unfeeling green eyes.

“It does feel good to be on top again,” she murmured to herself, summoning her focus.

The Pursuer switched its blades to cannons, charging its own attacks when a bright beam of flame and heat slammed against its shield, fire spreading to the side as the ground started to light up. The shield shattered in brilliant purple fragments of light and magic, the remainder of Ilea’s spell burning into the machine’s chest. It jumped back when the beam had subsided, silver metal dripping to the ground, a small part of its core exposed, the damage already regenerating slowly.

Ilea aimed and sent another beam at it, trying to follow the fast moving Pursuer as her spell missed. She displaced the void metal projectiles coming at her back at the creature. It dodged those too.

The Pursuer was about fifty levels above a normal Executioner but aside from its ability to shoot projectiles, it didn’t seem vastly different.

Maybe it can use the gates inherently. Or was it sent here by the One without Form?

Finish? Violence asked.

“Already bored? I’m just enjoying myself a little,” Ilea said, hoping that Audur didn’t suddenly show up to spoil her fun. “That dragon took me apart.”

Understand.

“Do you know her by the way? Audur was her name,” she said.

Audur.

Maybe

Ask

others

“I see. She was pretty far west, so maybe you’ve not been there yet. Do you know if dragons can find me through space magic?” she asked.

The Pursuer was back on the offensive, rushing her only to be pushed back by a chaotic blast of fire released from her outstretched hand.

At least the being seemed focused entirely on her and didn’t start to attack her allies.

She glanced over and smiled. *They’re doing a good enough job of that themselves. Pierce will lose again,* she thought, seeing Feyrair play with his prey. *Maybe he’s more dragon than he lets on. Ah who am I kidding, Elves do that too.*

A glance at the charging Pursuer made her chuckle. *As do I. We’re all arrogant idiots in the end. As long as we can be.*

She wondered what would’ve happened if they had killed a bunch of creatures in Izculen before meeting Audur. Would the dragon have killed them all instantly? Was it Hereven’s presence who made her hesitate and talk first? Was she confused because there was more than just ash around me? Or because I’m a human. Ilea doubted she’d get any answers anytime soon, if ever.

Find

No

Without

Mark

“That’s good. Can you check if she left one? I can’t see anything with my perception,” Ilea said, appearing close to the Pursuer to deliver a fully charged Archon strike, explosions of flame rattling through its shield from her earlier tempered seal, white fire spreading onto its now unprotected silver armor. She used her ash to try and cut into its legs but failed to get deep, instead using physical archon strikes to demolish its limbs.

The machine was made to attack and push, its evasion in close quarters wholly inadequate against a small target like Ilea.

Her arms ached, ash and flesh stripped from her knuckles as she raised her arm at the immobile piece of machinery slowly remaking its heavily dented limbs. One of its arms morphed into a rapier like extension and rushed at her eye, Ilea turning her head slightly to deflect the point, her arm raised before another blast of heat burned away its head and torso. Ashen limbs reached in to pry out the core, Ilea’s continued Embered Heart pushing against the melding metal.

The core had another shield protecting it but for now she just moved it away from the silver metal on the ground, most of it losing its form as soon as the core was sufficiently far away. She couldn’t displace it but a simple jump coupled with her wings brought the same result.

No

Mark

“Good. How high do you think the chance is that our escape made her so angry as to attack humanity as a whole?” she asked. The worry didn’t seem entirely reasonable, considering they had taken an artifact left behind in a mostly unoccupied part of the dungeon, not from a treasure pile the dragon had sat upon. And they had taken Hereven with them. *Surely her pride wouldn’t have her come down to the plains.*

Low, the Fae said.

Human

Lands

Low

Mana

“Right. But she could go there if she really wanted to?” Ilea asked.

Yes

Painful

Slow

Death

“Okay. So don’t piss off a dragon to the point where it would accept its own slow and painful death to exert revenge. Got it,” she said.

The Fae giggled and hugged her face from the side.

Happy

Survived!

Ilea smiled, sending a wave of fire over the newly forming silver, making sure not to detonate the core. “I’m glad too. Another close one, but my space magic pulled through. And I didn’t have to worry, you were on your way anyway.”

Truth!

“Sorry for calling for you in such a dangerous situation,” she said. “It was a bit reckless of us to stay after we learned about Audur.”

Violence

Reckless

He shrugged.

Fun.

Caution

Boring

“Partially agree. But normally creatures don’t have an anti space magic aura that prevents my escape. But maybe I’ve grown a little complacent,” Ilea mused, checking the few messages she still had pending.

‘ding’ ‘You have escaped Audur’s domain – One Core skill point awarded’

‘ding’ ‘Ashen Wings reaches 3rd lvl 3’

‘ding’ ‘Displacement reaches 3rd lvl 30’

‘ding’ ‘Space Shift reaches 3rd lvl 29’

Ah come oooooon. Just one more skill level. It would’ve been so perfect, she thought, blasting away the silver.

“Ilea, can you make sure he doesn’t kill her?” Verena asked from a few dozen meters away.

Feyrair stood over a charred Dragonkiller, her murmured insults failing to inflict the damage she hoped they’d do. He looked downright triumphant.

“He won’t,” Ilea said, reading through the rest.

‘ding’ ‘Deviant of Humanity reaches 3rd lvl 18’

‘ding’ ‘Veteran reaches 3rd lvl 26’

‘ding’ ‘Void Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 9’

Just for escaping that thing. I guess it really was quite close. If she wouldn’t have fallen for that ash copy trick...

She didn’t finish the thought. They would’ve had to find another way to escape. Ilea thought she herself could’ve maybe even managed. The others though, she doubted it. They likely wouldn’t have had the necessary resilience and regeneration.

Don’t dwell in the past. You learned that you’re not ready for a dragon yet. Who would’ve fucking thought.

More importantly, Ilea had found the third key.

She summoned it, finally inspecting the thing.

[The Silver Key – Ancient Quality] – [Enchanted]

And the One without Form helpfully let me know that three keys would make me a real Key Warden. Which might answer a few questions. And surely pose some new ones too.

She stored it again, a chunk of mana used to make the key find its place within her storage necklace.

Intricate

“Yeah, it’s from the Taleen. Same as this thing here,” Ilea said to the Fae, pointing at the sphere held up by forming silver metal, the skeletal Pursuer once more burned away by her spell.

Destroy?

“Hmm... that’s the question, right?” Ilea mused. “There’s something I’d like to try.”

She once again tried to displace the core, failing in the endeavor but not entirely without progress. Using the spell a few more times, she could discern the enchantments preventing her from moving it. Somewhere etched into the core, but not overly complex in its nature. Certainly nothing that changed as frequently as Audur’s aura.

Compared to figuring out the dragon’s spell, this puzzle proved rather manageable. The fact that she didn’t have a monstrous creature hunting her definitely helped, not that Ilea easily panicked, with her high level meditation, experience, and constant healing.

“Hmm, think someone could track this being?” Ilea asked the Fae.

No

“I see. Guess I’ll trust your expertise,” she said and glanced at the others. “Come gather round, children. We’re leaving this dreadful place behind.”

“No more of the artifacts around that you sought?” Verena asked.

“Good point,” Ilea answered, summoning the locator and activating it. “Nope, just a direction.”

“Not quite as lucky this time,” the woman said with a light smile. “What level is that thing anyway?”

“Eighty five,” she said. “Keep some distance. The detonation when its destroyed is quite... extensive.”

She sent another blast of fire onto the regenerating silver, her eyes opening wide as a realization hit her. This was exactly the way someone would have to transport her, if they managed to destroy her brain somehow. *And it would be so easy to kill it at this point.*

“Verena, why didn’t you save me?” Pierce asked, her lightly charred form joining them, the woman wearing half burnt rags.

“Dress yourself,” Verena said with a hiss.

“My state of dress reflects my tragic loss. Elven kind really is superior to my weak self,” she said, her body language suggesting frailty.

Nobody seemed to fall for it.

“*Where is it you would take us?*” Hereven asked, now joining them too, the tone in its voice suggesting it had missed what had transpired earlier or it simply hadn’t cared.

The unfazeable, Ilea thought. *Guess if you live near a dragon for that long, it’d become hard to care.*

“I didn’t plan for you all to meet already, but I think it’s fine at this point,” she said. Verena and Pierce had worked together with her, the former even helping out when her life was on the line. And now they had met the Elves and behaved, better than expected. “I need some time to breathe, and there’s only one place I’d feel at least somewhat safe right now.”

“I hope you don’t mean your house. Those cats aren’t going to help against that monster,” Pierce said.

“There’s no reason to believe she can track us, nor that she would go to the human plains. Dragons shouldn’t have the best time in that kind of mana density,” Ilea explained and activated her third tier transfer once more.

“You don’t want to explore this dungeon?” Neiphato asked.

“I don’t think so,” Ilea said. “At least not now.”

She connected everyone to her transfer, including the regenerating Pursuer core that was so helpfully given into her care.

Pierce was back in her black armor, lightning flowing through her as she sighed. “What a downright humiliating day.”

“I told you about the risks,” Ilea said.

“You’re beyond madness. But true, you did warn us. Let’s hope tomorrow brings a few more creatures like that, my skills haven’t grown like this in years,” the woman said.

“Who are you anyway?” Feyrair asked.

“I told you. Dragonkiller Pierce. Elder of the Shadow’s Hand and your undoing. In a few decades that is,” she said with a toothy grin.

The elf hissed. “In your dreams, human.”

Ilea glanced at the two and sighed, her spell manifesting after the runes had fully formed. She did have to admit that they made a rather fetching pair.