

Chapter 703 Ripples in Space

The dwarf Kerron agreed to lead them to his vault after considerable whining and complaints. He would receive compensation for the artifact from the Pit itself but it remained apparent that he didn't want to part with the key.

"Why do you want it anyway?" he asked when he returned from the vault, Ilea and Helwart waiting in the large entrance hall of the dark blue steel mansion.

"I like collecting shiny things," Ilea said and received the piece.

[The Iron Key – Ancient Quality]

Seven down and I still haven't been to Iz, she thought with a smile.

"Taleen that one, one of me ancestors passed it down. Only thing she said was to never give it away," Kerron said.

Ilea looked at him and made the artifact vanish. "Pretty easily convinced then," she mused.

He waved her off. "You beat Helwart, hardly anywhere with whom it would be safer. Just hope you know what yer doin."

"Mostly," Ilea reassured him.

Helwart laughed and turned to leave. "Aye, gotta go make sure there's no civil war in your name. See ya around," he added with a wave of his armored hand.

"Let me know if I can help," Ilea said. "I'll be off then too, thanks Kerron."

"I'm open to discu-"

She vanished, not particularly interested in whatever machinations he had in store for her. Whelp, now pretty much everyone here knows how I look like. Even if they didn't make the connection between me and the flying fire being, they'd still be annoying anyway.

"I'll be down near the Soul Forge," she sent to Verena through her mark as she found a dark alley between highly enchanted buildings. She activated her third tier transfer and vanished, appearing a moment later in front of the massive cube.

Aki reacted instantly, taking aim with an arm cannon before he realized it was her. Owl didn't notice her at all, the Lich floating through a section of heated luminescent water with glowing purple eyes.

"Tournament concluded already?" Iana asked when she noticed her.

"Yeah. The Champion challenged me after my fight. And I won the key," Ilea answered as she spread her wings, the feeling incredibly freeing after hiding them away for a few hours. She dissolved her ash copies and floated down to join Owl. "Let me know if I can help with anything, otherwise don't let me bother you. Take as much time as you need."

She activated her mantle and stored the leather armor, her ash much more comfortable than most of her clothes. The water felt nice but not quite hot enough for her tastes. "Mind if I heat it up a little more?"

The Lich looked at her, the purple line where her mouth would be moving into a smile. “Ilea. Welcome back. This sensation is... strange,” she said and moved her hand through the water. There was some resistance but not quite as much as a human body produced. “I do not mind heat.”

“Good,” Ilea mused and started forming lava below her. She added some ice to make sure the natural pool wouldn’t fully evaporate. “How does the water feel for you?” she asked, her mantle remaining only as a bathing suit.

Owl cupped her hands together and raised them up, the water flowing through her ethereal form before it fell back to the pool. “Exciting,” she said and sat down a few meters away.

It took a moment for Ilea to differentiate the frameworks, both Owl’s form and the water itself flowing into each other to an extent. It was easier to see the difference with her magic perception than with her space awareness. “Still got a lot to figure out about your new form.”

The Lich giggled. “Yes! Though I think it’s not that different from my last one but the others never really offered to teach me anything. Pain tried a few times but he didn’t know much himself either.”

Ilea checked the few messages from the Dome escapades as she leaned back and enjoyed the building heat, the red glow of lava mixing in with the luminescent blue water, steam rising from their pool.

Not a single Class skill level. Ah well, not like I was in any danger during those fights.

‘ding’ ‘Minor Lava Manipulation reaches lvl 2’

‘ding’ ‘Monstrous reaches lvl 8’

‘ding’ ‘Telepathy reaches lvl 3’

Hmm, at least some general skill levels I suppose.

She turned her head slightly and opened one eye towards the massive undead being. “How did you handle it? Being in the city of glass for what, thousands of years?”

“Hmm,” Owl mused, raising a finger to her mouth, water slowly flowing out of her arm. “You know... more has happened in the past days than in the last few centuries. I think... without... without sleep, food, some kind of routine, time quickly loses its meaning. I meditated a lot or just... floated around, tried to teach monsters to get through my section of the dungeon.”

“Meditation must’ve helped,” Ilea said. “I guess my healing would keep me sane too, if I got stuck somewhere for a few centuries.”

“I didn’t even get lonely. It just... didn’t matter? I know... humans have needs, expectations, dreams. But me? I’m just... undead. It’s nice to have more things to do though, and to learn. Like there’s more of a purpose than to simply exist,” she said with a smile.

“Aw. Kinda want to give you a hug now,” Ilea said.

The color of the ethereal lich turned a little darker, her eyes glimmering. “I... uhm. Sure, if. If you want to do that.”

Ilea looked at the fidgeting hands of the four mark being and sat back up, her eyes open. “Are you... wait. I thought you didn’t have any needs anymore?”

The Lich looked away. “Rude,” she murmured and sunk a little deeper into the water. “I know. You’re right... it just... felt... I don’t know.”

“Sorry, didn’t want to make you uncomfortable. Always up for that hug whenever you want one,” Ilea said.

“Thanks,” the Lich replied.

The two of them relaxed in the pool for nearly an hour, Ilea suggesting some resistance training afterwards.

Bralin and the Elders joined them a few hours later, the dwarf anxious to get away from the Pit for a little while due to the insane winnings from his betting. The fact that he could hide in the domain of the Meadow provided additional joy as none of the assassins sent to get him would manage to get even close. And by the time he would return, the whole thing should’ve been blown over. Or so he claimed.

Ilea received her share of the winnings. Not quite the seven thousand gold coins she would’ve won but three instead. In addition to a whole stack of ancient documents now stating that she was the owner of one or the other establishment or piece of land in the Pit. *More things for Claire to go through, and another economic outpost established in a faraway settlement.*

The enchanters finished their preparations after another eight hours, faster than expected due to the help of Twin, the Fae more focused on actual support than on making eyes explode.

“Ilea, Owl, we would be ready,” Iana said finally.

“Sure? You can take your time if you have to,” Ilea mused, flying in the air with Aki and Owl nearby.

“We went over everything seven times. If it still fails, it fails,” she answered.

“Optimistic,” Ilea said. “Chance of everything exploding?”

The enchantress smiled. “Always.”

“Wonderful,” Ilea replied and covered both Iana and Chris with a layer of her mantle, just in case. “*Maybe some distance then. You said I just have to push mana into it?*”

“*Yes, with a punch of space magic,*” Iana replied. “*Owl and Aki will be providing the major part of the magic, and Twin offered to channel it so that we don’t have to explain the details to the three of you.*”

“*Nice of her,*” Ilea mused, looking at the Fae that appeared on her left shoulder. “*Thanks for the help.*”

Enjoyable

Project

The being seemed pleased, albeit slightly exhausted.

“*Sure you’re up for the channeling job? Worst pain I’ve ever experienced was related to something like that,*” Ilea said, shuddering lightly when she remembered the deep layer in the Descent. She used her healing on the Fae.

Appreciate, she sent, drooping down a little on the shoulder as a small bed of ash formed.

“*Take your time,*” Ilea replied.

The Fae was ready a few minutes later, taking its position at an extension of the massive magic circle built around the Soul Forge.

The three high level beings followed the enchanters' instructions and started channeling their mana into the prepared sections on the ground, all flowing past where the Fae floated.

Ilea kept her healing active, the Fae grateful for the support as the circle slowly filled with power.

Not even close to what the Meadow made on its own, Ilea observed.

The whole thing flared to life when a threshold was reached, magic spreading through the vicinity as the whole cube was enshrouded in wisps. It was, then wasn't, a loud sucking noise resounding as the air filled in the empty space, white glowing runes on the ground the only suggestion of a spell having taken place. An empty triangular indent in the stone marked where the Soul Forged had once been.

Iana and Christopher walked past and started erasing the runes, Bralin raising the ground to get rid of the last bit of evidence.

"*Impressive,*" Ilea sent to the group.

"*We don't know if it worked yet,*" Iana said.

I could ask the Meadow... ah, probably not yet. "We'll find out soon," she said instead.

The sight of the spell had been quite, underwhelming. Compared to what she had seen in Erendar, or just in her bout with the Meadow, it felt like a manageable spell. Four mark level, sure, but nothing too flashy. "*How much could we theoretically move with this circle?*"

Iana glanced up at her, finished with her side of the circle. "*What do you have in mind? Moving people will be problematic. They'd be ripped apart by the forces, why the gates are as useful as they are.*"

"*Nothing yet. Just as a future option, I suppose,*" Ilea replied.

"*The spell is theoretically not limited in scope. The required energy grows exponentially however, and a large chunk of this one here was supplied by the Meadow. Both sides require near perfect execution,*" the woman explained.

"*I see. So you're saying we could move entire cities,*" Ilea said with a smile.

"*Not with the mana you three can provide,*" Iana said.

Not with the mana we can provide right now, Ilea thought. She let them finish their work before she gathered everyone around herself, Fae back on her shoulder, nestled in a blanket of ash.

"Buckle up, children," she said and activated transfer.

Power gathered before the fabric shifted, the group appearing in the domain of the Meadow.

Ilea smiled and started clapping her hands, seeing the familiar sight of the Soul Forge perfectly set into the prepared section of stone. "*You do not cease to impress, old friend.*"

"*With age comes wisdom,*" the being replied. "*For most.*"

"*I don't know what you're talking about, I have nearly two thousand of that,*" Ilea mused.

“It multiplies your base, Ilea. I’m afraid zero times two thousand brings you to the same result,” it answered.

“Already furbished?” Verena asked.

“Indeed, though my distribution may not perfectly mimic what it has been before,” the Meadow spoke.

The enchanters had already vanished into the ancient facility, with Shades in tow.

Bralin joined with Goliath, returning to whatever projects they had started.

“I think I’ll enjoy the hearth for a little while longer,” Verena said, Twin appearing on her shoulder after she finished.

“Look who’s got a Faen friend,” Ilea mused. *The next Valkyrie? Who knows,* she thought with a smile. *“You’re keeping an eye on all the tech, right?”*

“Of course, Ilea. All these gifts you have brought me to take over this realm. You will be my most feared Queen,” the Meadow spoke.

She sighed. *“I don’t think you’d need any of that fancy tech. A few centuries and you’ll have enough of a following to do the work for you.”*

“Don’t scare me with nightmares like that,” it said. *“Got your key?”*

“Yes. Still five to go. What time is it?” she asked.

The Meadow pulled on her with space magic, Ilea deactivating her resistance before she appeared in the northern lands, covered in lakes of mist, the moon obscured by clouds, non arcane charged ones for once. She looked at the cracks in the land, mist moving through as if rivers.

“I sometimes forget just how pretty it is,” she mused.

“Quite a sight. And so very full of life,” the Meadow spoke, the two remaining silent for a few minutes. The tree had of course remained down in its domain but its presence could be felt to those who knew what to look for.

Ilea returned with the help of the Meadow. *“Guess we can train a little more until the morning.”*

“Where do you plan to go?” it asked.

“Ravenhall. A normal breakfast would be nice. Any clue when the meeting between the different councils is planned? The gates are operational already, right?” she asked.

“They are indeed. Catelyn says five days from now would be an option, but they’d require confirmation from the council of Ravenhall. She informs me that your presence in the meeting is more than welcome,” it said.

“Council meeting with Hallowfort. In Five days? Will return tomorrow,” Ilea sent to Claire. *“I’ll be here. Least I can do is see Dagon’s face when he sets his eyes on you. Can’t have any Elves here though if Sulivhaan comes as well.”*

“Feyrair has yet to return,” the being spoke.

“I know, he’s at the same place. Deeper underground though,” Ilea mused. *“Just tell them to stay away while the Ravenhall people are here. Most humans in the plains prefer to stay far away from Elves.”*

“I’m aware of the history, though I’m sure adequate information in regards to the Cerithil Hunters would convince most reasonable state leaders,” the Meadow said.

Ilea shrugged. *“Maybe. No reason to risk it here though. I want this thing to work out.”*

The Meadow welcomed her with a series of wooden stakes, a barrier thrumming to life around them. *“I’m sure it will,”* the being spoke, punching through her defenses with moderate ease. *“You know them well, and they trust you. Even Elana. And she doesn’t even trust me.”*

“Of course she doesn’t,” Ilea sent, her body regenerating the damage as her fires spread all around.

“The anti divination and space magic enchantments she set up around her secret office are quite adorable. As is her plan to deal with me in case I turn out to be a danger to the people of Hallowfort,” it said.

Ilea would’ve raised a brow if she had a face at the moment, which she did not. *“You could talk to her, you know.”*

“She likes to be in control of her surroundings. Knowledge of my intrusion would push her away from my domain, which would make me unable to protect her in case of an attack,” the Meadow said.

“Gotta protect those foolish humans from themselves. Best to just lock them all in small stone cells,” she mused.

“Exactly,” the Meadow answered and did just that with her, a bright explosion of heat and white fire breaking through the small box. *“The Feynor and the armies of the Dark Protector have reduced their activity in the area. Spies employed by the Council have tracked some of their movement but it seems they deem Hallowfort untouchable for the time being.”*

“I didn’t expect anything less from the highest level seed brought in from another realm,” Ilea said.

The tree sent a sad emotion. *“Is that all I am to you? The seed of a plant?”*

“Space plant,” Ilea corrected as her body was slowly ripped apart, her flesh fighting to stay together until Primordial Shift activated and forced a connection once more.

“Five days works. Looking forward to your visit. Dancing lessons,” Claire sent back after a while.

“Just got the confirmation from Claire,” Ilea said as she flew circles in the massive barrier, dodging stones and spears whilst resisting the ever growing pressure from the fabric itself.

Did Helwart feel the same way when he fought me? she wondered, the Meadow giving her every advantage it could and she still felt incredibly outmatched. *Hmm... probably not. Don’t think he really understood what he was up against,* she thought, looking at the god like being all around her with her enhanced space manipulation. Only her meditation and rational mind kept her from running away at the unfathomable sights. She had thought she was getting more comfortable with what she perceived of her friend but every time she figured something out, new layers seemed to pop up.

Ilea did wonder if the Meadow was just messing with her, but a primal part deep within her knew it was her very own mind that sought to protect her sanity. Too much revealed in too little time may prove dangerous, but she would keep her conscious efforts up, and not just for the potential levels in Fear Resistance. It just felt right to try and see it.

“Maybe we could add some more buildings to the area, if you’re okay with that. An area below maybe? For adventurers, merchants, and others who would like to visit the north. With you as some kind of buffer in between,” she suggested after a while.

“The Council of Hallowfort has specific plans set up already. Those options are part of it. I also informed them that your Sentinels will be free to travel into and through my central domain,” the Meadow said.

“No complaints?” Ilea asked.

“Healers are welcome. You have left more than just a good impression on the peoples of Hallowfort, hero of the Descent,” it said, a metric fuck ton of reinforced stone crashing into her flying form.