

Chapter 664 Upgrades

The two flew southwards, Verena easily resisting the high velocity.

Now that I think about it, I still didn't see her take an actual hit. How tough is she? Pierce seems mostly focused on speed and teleportation, coupled with her thick armor. Verena even shows skin, and her magical armor is just a bunch of fire.

"You're a berserker, right?" Ilea said, slowing down as they reached the southern mountains, her charged wings not exactly providing an environment for a leisurely chat.

The woman just looked at her.

"I just... haven't seen you fight at all, and you're not wearing any fancy armor. Despite your level and access to smiths," she said.

"I'm not as impressive as you," Verena said. "Getting injured. Helps," she added as a form of explanation.

Ilea smirked, wondering if the woman had the third tier of Pain Tolerance already unlocked. Considering the age difference and varied creatures she had surely fought, there was a high chance. But she assumed there were other skills as well, skills within her Classes. "To be honest, you just don't strike me as the berserker type."

"Hmm," the Elder mused, a light smile on her face as they flew past a distant Morhill, the city once more bustling with life.

Haven't visited Balduur in a while, Ilea thought. But I suppose Iana can come here through the gate whenever.

She wondered if the enchantress ever did as much, with how focused she was on her work.

They reached Ravenhall a few minutes later, merchants and travelers glancing up at the two flying adventurers with interest.

The two landed in the snow a few hundred meters away from the city, a general courtesy towards the guards and their high level teams who would have to intercept flying arrivals. And whatever alarms Claire would receive if they rushed past magical sensors likely put in place even far above the walls.

"You think it's enough?" Verena asked as they tread through the snow, quickly reaching the well traveled road, the ground here merely mud and ice.

"The walls you mean?" Ilea asked. "Not against that dragon," she mused.

"Another Meadow would be helpful," Verena said. "But they would not accept it, even if we were that lucky."

"Probably not, I agree. Let's hope the low mana density keeps monsters away, as it apparently has for a long time. Otherwise all human cities would just be rubble at this point," Ilea said.

The Elder laughed. "Probably."

“Lilith,” the guard at the gate greeted. “Elder Quil,” he added, a smile on his face as he gestured them into the city. “Welcome back.”

A few people around them started murmuring, looking at the two nondescript adventurers as they joined the flow of people in the outermost wall.

Ilea transferred into the headquarters, the door itself locked.

Two Sentinels appeared a moment later, clad in stonehammer steel and bone armor, looking at her when Verena appeared next to her.

One of them removed their helmet and smiled. “Lady Lilith. Welcome back,” the young man said and bowed lightly, his colleague mimicking the gesture.

[Battle Healer – lvl 152]

[Battle Healer – lvl 143]

“Nathan, Ford. Good to see you. Impressive progress too,” Ilea said and smiled.

“Formidable,” Verena said. “When I saw the first of them, I knew the Shadows wouldn’t remain the most respected name from Ravenhall.”

“Thank you. Not quite as impressive as yours, I’m sure. We’re supposed to register any guests that come,” Nathan said.

“Elder Quil, of the Shadow’s Hand,” Ilea informed them as she walked past. “Is Trian around?”

“He should be in his office, Founder,” Ford informed her.

She saw them through her dominion as they walked down the stairs, watching them grin at each other while putting on their helmets once more. They slammed them against each other like some kind of horned animals, resuming their posts in a guard room covered with enchantments and devices, and a game of cards on a small table.

Fucking idiots. I love them.

The few Sentinels they saw greeted Ilea and her guest. She felt pride well up as she watched the high level healers go about their daily business, training and eating together.

Verena smiled lightly when they reached Trian’s office door.

“Have you met him already?” Ilea asked, knocking.

An enchantment lit up within her perception, opening the door through a magical charge.

Verena looked into the room, the two seeing Trian sit behind his desk, a few documents vanishing as he smiled and glanced at the guests. “Trian Alymie. I had my suspicions. After what happened in Virilya. And knowing he was part of your team.”

Kyrian walked in from a side room, a cup of tea in hand. “Is Pierce here too?”

“She’s found someone else to annoy,” Ilea answered.

Verena sighed. "Ah, now it makes sense. Team thirty four." she mused, looking at their shifting expressions. "I'm sorry."

"It's alright," Ilea said and sat down opposite the Headmaster. "Some new findings, some new potential issues, good that you're here too Kyrian."

"You were only gone for a day. What did you do this time?" he asked, a slight grin on his face as he summoned himself a chair.

The two took the new information in stride, Verena being the most surprised at their lacking reactions, if anything.

"I saw you posted guards," Ilea said, pointing upwards.

"Yes. The interest for our organization is mounting, not just potential new students, but opportunistic adventurers, thieves, and spies. Two mid level Sentinels are enough to handle them usually. Not everyone has to know we have a working... Aki, on our side," he said.

"You can trust her," Ilea said.

"You trust too quickly," Kyrian said. "No offense meant," he added, looking at the Elder.

She just shrugged.

"I'm actually here because of him. He's still around I hope? Or did he want to go on missions?" she asked.

Trian sighed. "He's taking out his frustration on the students. Aki did enjoy stalking and intimidating intruders, maybe the machine itself is influencing him."

"No, that seems like something he'd enjoy," Ilea said.

"You knew him before... the Sentinels enjoy the rougher treatment anyway. Which means I'm the only one left to make sure this doesn't turn into a cult," he sighed.

"More than it already is," Kyrian said. "It's good that you showed your face, and that you're human."

"You took the job?" Ilea asked.

The man looked down. "A bit of combat training and curse resistance. Not much yet. I do want to relax while I'm here, before it's back to the Isles," he said and rolled his shoulders.

"Yeah, about that," Ilea said and scratched the back of her head. "It might not be safe anymore to go there."

"The dragon... you think she could follow your teleportation?" he asked before he nodded slowly. "Better be safe, you're right. It doesn't matter if she can or cannot follow."

"Exactly. I'll go see Aki then," Ilea said and stood up. "I assume it's fine if he's gone for a while?"

Trian waved her off. "I'm here too. And your monster healers are already more of a threat than that single machine."

Ilea grinned. "A good time for an upgrade then," she mused.

"I'll join up in a few days," Kyrian said.

“Sure, just send me a message,” Ilea said, leaving with Verena in tow, the woman giving the two men a nod. “Speaking of message, I can remove the mark if you like. I’m pretty sure you can too.”

The Elder looked at the rune on the back of her right hand. “It’s useful. While we work together. Aki, he’s a Taleen machine?”

“Not really?” Ilea said. “Kind of? You’ll see,” she added, checking through the training halls with dominion until she heard the familiar steel impacts, seeing the fast moving spear wielder run after a few teleporting Sentinels, their missing limbs regenerating.

“No wonder they’re already so strong,” Verena said. “This would be incredibly risky, even with healers nearby.”

“Being one yourself is the best way to know what to fix, and how to do so,” Ilea said. “He’s not going for lethal blows.”

“The device in its neck, I assume that’s what you meant,” Verena said.

“Perceptive,” Ilea answered.

“The core... I see. Not quite another Meadow, but your working hard to add terrifying beings to your allies. What’s your end goal?” she asked.

“World domination, of course,” Ilea said in a dry tone.

“Hmm,” the woman mused, mostly ignoring the comment.

“Fresh meat, I see,” Aki said with glowing green eyes, twirling his spear as he looked at the two newcomers.

The sentinel squad paused, using the time to heal up and spread out in a tactical manner.

“We will continue later,” the Centurion said, dismissing the group.

They greeted the two women and vanished.

Aki deflated a little when the large double doors closed behind the group. “I’m telling you, it’s getting harder and harder to keep up. I wish I could go on hunts as well, to fight and kill monsters.”

“Can you not?” Verena asked.

“I don’t think we’ve met. Who might you be?” Aki asked.

“Verena Quil, Elder of the Shadow’s Hand,” she said.

“You can trust her,” Ilea said. “Maybe there’s a solution to your problem. It’s why we’re here.”

“You managed to disable a Praetorian?” Aki asked, his eyes glowing just a little brighter.

Ilea grinned. “Something like that. Do you mind coming north for a little while? Iana and Chris are there too.”

“As long as I don’t have to leave the entire defense of our headquarters to these young imbeciles for longer than a few days,” he said. “Trian is busy enough as it is.”

“I can bring you back whenever,” Ilea said and activated her third tier transfer, moving the three back into the Meadow’s domain.

It seemed Pierce and Feyrair had settled their animosity, both currently getting ripped apart by the Meadow. Its healing made sure neither would be overwhelmed by the damage.

“How gruesome,” Aki remarked, looking at the unfamiliar environment.

“You brought him!” Iana exclaimed, rushing over. “How have you been, everything working fine?” she asked, her eyes glowing a deep blue as she checked the enchantments on his body. “You’ve been using them a lot it seems. Don’t overcharge them, they’ll break if you do it too much.”

“I’m sorry,” Aki said. “The Sentinels are growing quickly, and I have to keep up somehow.”

The enchantress grinned ear to ear, leading the machine away and a little closer to the Meadow. “Our teacher will help us figure out the next step in your evolution,” she said, pointing at the silver sphere floating towards them.

“What is... a Pursuer Praetorian? I haven’t heard of them. What level is it?” he asked.

“You’ll see,” Iana said with a smile. “Ready for some testing?”

“Of course,” Aki answered, eyes flashing a little brighter as he gazed at the sphere.

“How did you meet him?” Verena asked as the enchantress got to work, magic flaring up a few times before she carefully removed Aki from the now limp Centurion.

“Found him in a Taleen dungeon. Below Dawntree,” Ilea said.

“Any idea what he is?” she asked.

“Iana tried to figure it out but nothing conclusive yet. To me he’s a person like everyone else. Species, dagger,” Ilea said and smiled.

“*Aki is not a living being,*” the Meadow informed her.

“*What exactly constitutes a living being? He seems to have his own thoughts,*” Ilea said.

“*He produces no mana. The creation of this object is... intricate. I will need some time to decipher what it means. Far more complex than the gates produced by the same makers,*” the Meadow explained.

“*So the Taleen definitely made him?*” Ilea asked. Iana had mostly confirmed as much but the evidence hadn’t been conclusive as far as Ilea had understood.

“*Yes. It’s highly unlikely that someone other than the makers of this Pursuer have created the being you call Aki. But there is no... essence, no life. Not truly. I believe the enchantments... yes... it seems to be... a mind, of sorts,*” the Meadow explained.

“*That much is obvious,*” Ilea said.

“*You misunderstand. It’s far too complex to be random. Either that... no. If the same makers created the Dagger of Akelion, their battle machines would be far more intricate and dangerous. They found a way to analyze the mind, translate it. To go that far. Dangerous,*” the Meadow mused, starting to be a little more absorbed.

“What do you think?” Iana asked.

Ilea assumed the enchanters could comprehend the Meadow’s speech by now. Either that or they found some other way to communicate other than floating writing.

“Aki is a mind, similar to those of the beings present. He will not be influenced. You were right to disable the enchantments that aimed to do such, Iana. Some remnants remain but they are harmless. His make is perfectly interlinked with the enchantments making up this Pursuer core Ilea has brought us. Of what I have glimpsed from its design, only simple commands could rest within. There should be no issue simply connecting the two beings,” the Meadow explained.

“No safeguards?” Iana asked.

“There are many, though none against this mind. It should disable everything, more efficiently than even I could ever hope to do,” spoke the Meadow.

“Hear that Aki, you’re perfect for this new machine,” she said with a smile. “Should we do it then?”

“Better let the tree handle it, in case something goes wrong,” Ilea said.

“A reasonable suggestion,” the Meadow spoke, both Aki and the core floating closer to its tree. *“I will first disable the shield,”* it said, the sphere vibrating as magical pressure built around it.

Ilea could see the fabric of space shifting around the two objects, the Meadow using space magic to break the defenses.

They all watched with bated breath as the thin shield shattered, the dagger instantly slammed into the core.

“Wouldn’t that damage whatever tech is inside?” Ilea asked.

“The Pursuer possesses an advanced self repair function. It should apply to the core as well,” the Meadow spoke as the sphere grew a tiny bit. *“It already adjusted to the foreign object, and yet it doesn’t reject it. As expected.”*

A set of large barriers formed around the floating sphere, silver metal growing around it, soon reforming the same Pursuer that had fought Ilea. Aki was now somewhere inside, protected by the same shield that covered the core.

Green eyes flickered to life as the creature stumbled lightly, looking around as if confused. “It seems...,” a mechanical voice said. “To have worked,” it said, the voice changing slightly as it made adjustments. “Thank you.”

“Is that you, Aki?” Ilea asked.

“Yes... oh, you’re tiny... things move so slow, and I can see... farther, is that magic?” he said, crouching down a little in his larger form. “This will take more getting used to, but it’s not too different, from the... what is this,” he murmured, void magic lighting up within his cannons. The light flickered out as his arms changed shape. Dull blade like extensions that reminded more of a Dali painting formed and reformed, finally shifting back to the initial cannons. “More to figure out,” the Pursuer said. “I have a shield now too!” he hit his own body with one of the cannons, the magical defense flaring up visibly.

“Nice,” Ilea said. *“Well done. Appreciate the help,”* she sent to the Meadow.

The enchanters rejoiced, welcoming the stumbling Aki back as Iana instantly started looking over its shield and carapace.

“I’ll have an eye on him for now. But it seems my understanding wasn’t flawed. There is no need to thank me, Ilea. Even you could’ve done this,” the Meadow said.

She huffed. *“Sure. But it would’ve been a blind guess. At least you know why it’s working.”*

“That doesn’t change the result. Knowing you, you would’ve tried either way,” it said.

“Yeah, probably would’ve. I mean the Centurion worked already, why not this one?” Ilea said.

“Iana must’ve done that, because with that smaller machine, it would’ve required specific placement and preparations on the body. It lacks the same adjustment capabilities,” the Meadow explained.

“Alright. Glad it worked either way,” Ilea said, not too interested in the intricacies of Taleen machinery. Aki was a friend and fellow Sentinel. It was the least she could do to provide an upgrade when possible.

“I’ll leave him to you then,” Ilea said and summoned the locator. *“More searching?”* she asked, looking at Verena. *“I’d be up for a few bouts too on the way, need one more level for a third Class skill.”*

The woman nodded.

“I’ll join you as well,” Feyrair said, appearing close by. He healed the remaining wounds on his body and burst into flame, burning away the blood on his scale armor.

“You sure? You know what dragons can do,” Ilea said.

“I would’ve gone back to the Krahen Isles, but someone wasn’t very considerate in her teleportation choices,” he said and hissed with a smile.

Pierce appeared as well, a frown on her face as she glared at the Meadow. *“Merciless monster,”* she murmured before switching her attention to the group, a bright smile on her face as a large pack appeared on her back. *“So we’re leaving again?”*

“Is that supposed to be an explorer look?” Ilea asked.

Pierce’s eyes opened wide. *“Ah right,”* she said, a brown hat appearing on her head, a blue feather sticking out from the accessory.

“Much better,” Ilea deadpanned.

“I know, right? I love putting these together. I’d make a Lilith one too but you’re so dreadfully boring. Maybe you should get a personal tailor or something? I’m sure it would help your reputation,” Pierce said. *“You lack the natural grace of an elf.”*

“I’m not so sure about that. Haven’t met an Oracle yet after all,” Ilea said.

“How do they look, Fey dear?” Pierce asked.

He hissed, raising a burning hand towards her. *“Don’t call me that.”*

“Ah you’re so easily irritated, dear,” she said and vanished when a bright beam of white light flared up, hitting a glowing barrier a meter farther back.

Ilea smiled, turning around to see Hereven painting something into a leather bound book.

He twitched slightly when he noticed her gaze. *“Apologies, mistress. I am merely observing and taking notes. The interactions between the various species here are quite, fascinating.”*

“*Sure,*” Ilea sent back, looking at the two idiots chasing each other again. “Come on Verena, they’ll join us or they won’t. Shift, Meadow?”

“*Do not anger another dragon,*” the being said as Ilea disabled her space magic resistance.