

Chapter 574 Younglings

Ilea followed the elf through the forest, both of them flying below the treetops.

“How far away exactly is that dungeon?” she asked after a while.

Ben had been flying at a slow pace so far, constantly checking around them and often pausing when he discovered anything that seemed suspicious to him.

Ilea didn't try to argue with the elf, knowing that the forest was very much his territory, let alone this specific forest. She simply supported him with whatever her skills could find in the vicinity. A whole lot of nothing so far.

The main thing she noticed was that compared to the Navali forest south and east of Karth, this part located northwest of the massive looming mountain was quiet.

Not entirely so but she hardly ever heard anything larger than a squirrel. No challenges, no roars.

At first it had been nice, to hear the birds chirp again. Ilea had spent so much time in cities, caves, or the north, she had nearly forgotten what a normal populated non mana overdosed forest sounded like.

Compared to the east, the birds didn't have a reason to periodically swarm out in fear of whatever massive monster decided to declare its superiority.

As time went on, the serenity made room for something else.

Ben signaled her to be quiet, hovering next to a tree as he stared into the undergrowth.

I can't see shit here, Ilea thought. Neither her sphere nor eyes suggested anything that demanded attention.

But he's a level three hundred elf. I'm sure he knows what he's doing, she thought, keeping her careless side under control. Perhaps all those points into Intelligence finally did something.

Who am I kidding? she thought with a slight smile, flying closer to the elf without making a noise.

He glanced at her and motioned her to follow.

They continued onward but circling something she couldn't discern.

Ben finally spoke a few minutes later. “Something didn't feel right.”

“Aha. Well it's your forest,” Ilea said.

“The forest is home to many a creature, our kind just one of the many predators that roam these parts,” he explained as they continued onward.

They moved in silence for nearly an hour, the trees around them slowly growing in height. Some were broad enough Ilea couldn't discern where they began and ended.

“Do you guys live in tree houses?” she asked, glancing up towards the distant tree tops. There were smaller trees growing below, grasping at the light that broke through far above. Closer to the ground moss had taken over the stone and much of the ground, creeks sneaking through the terrain and flowing into rivers farther down below.

The forest had split into various layers, each housing different animals and monsters, few of which showing themselves. None had challenged them so far.

“Tree houses?” Ben asked intrigued.

He refilled a water flask in a nearby creek, careful not to leave behind any tracks in the moss.

Ilea floated close by, barely any light reaching down to the ground where they stood. *It's just another cave, she thought. But green.*

“Yeah, like made of wood and built on the side or within trees. Some of these could hold entire settlements,” she said, staring at one particularly massive trunk. The thing was surrounded by dozens of other trees and vegetation, moss and ivy snaking up on some parts, large mushrooms and purple sludge clinging to others.

Ben chuckled to himself. “What a silly idea. Such houses would provide very few ways to defend against monsters.”

“Nothing showed up so far,” Ilea said, gesturing to their surroundings.

“There are reasons we travel through the Navali forest by day. When the suns shine, we have to be wary of hunters. By night however, we will hide,” Ben said.

“Scary,” Ilea said.

“Monsters prowl these lands that even you would have difficulties facing. Though I suppose that will only encourage you,” he said and smiled. “No. We do not live in tree houses. The forest is the hunting ground of many a domain and often the battlefield of our endless war.”

“And yet there hasn't been a single Taleen machine, nor an elf for that matter,” she said.

“Let us hope it remains that way,” Ben said.

They continued onward, Ilea only able to somewhat estimate their locations thanks to her various marks strewn through the continent. By now it wasn't possible for her to track the cats. Instead she focused on her own position in relation to her marks.

Half an hour of slow flying later, Ilea stopped her companion with a gesture.

“There's fighting going on,” she said.

“We shall avoid it,” Ben said.

“Aw come on, it's been so fucking boring,” Ilea hissed. “If there are Taleen, we can take them out.”

“Meeting other elves is unwise,” Ben said.

“What if they're in danger?” Ilea asked. “Bunch of young idiots overwhelmed by Centurions?”

He stared at her for a moment. “You'll get me out if they attack us instead. Otherwise I'll leave you behind right now.”

Ilea grinned. “Of course. If they can't stop space magic somehow, we'll get out of there. Even if they're four marks.”

“Speaking of... do you have four marks?” she asked.

Ben glanced at her but didn't answer the question.

They do? Sapient four marks? I mean someone had to... otherwise this realm would've long been fucked by the Ascended.

“There is a minuscule chance that we will encounter anything beyond my level in these parts of the forest. That is... if they're elves at all. Young from the Wastes of Ash, looking to find a challenge in the forest or facing Taleen sent to hunt them down,” Ben explained.

“Wastes of Ash? That sounds like something I'd like,” Ilea said with a broad grin.

“The Domain of Fire, the Wastes of Ash. And where hundreds of Taleen find their end every single day,” he added.

“That sounds way cooler than this boring forest. Why aren't we going there?” Ilea asked.

“We do not enter the domains themselves. No Cerithil Hunters would remain were we to be so reckless. No, we destroy the gates and dungeons our enemy continues to set up. A fight just as important as the endless battle in the wastes,” he explained.

“I know, I know,” she said, moving onward towards the noise.

She saw them soon. A group of four elves fighting two Centurions. Destroyed Guardian parts littered the surrounding forest. Probably from a dozen or more.

Two of the elves floated near the Centurions. Both had red hair, wearing crude dark red metal armor that looked damaged and singed in parts.

One of them formed a small ball of fire, sending the projectile at the closest Centurion currently engaged with the third elf.

The explosion of heat and flames made the elf stumble, his arm nicked by the Centurion's weapon who had weathered the blast much better.

He said something in elvish but continued the battle, his blue fire whip materializing yet again.

The fourth elf was busy dodging the second Centurion, chaining teleports with a bored expression on his face. His body was covered in ice, two blade like extensions of the same material growing out of his arms.

The ice mage occasionally attacked the Centurion, using precise timings and openings to get in his damage. None of the machine's spear attacks connected with his armor.

Ilea watched as one of the floating mages charged up a lightning blast.

He aimed before a loud snap resounded, the lightning traveling through both the whip wielder and the Centurion he was facing.

Ben approached from behind and lightly touched Ilea's shoulder.

The hit elf went down to one knee as the Centurion in front of him advanced and embraced him in a tight hug. Its core started to glow as the elf struggled, shouting something to his team.

“Monsters,” she said, seeing the despair in the elf's face.

“Children,” Ben said. “We should go. More might be on the way.”

“You're really going to walk away from this?” she asked.

“Even if you help, they will attack us,” Ben said.

Ilea shrugged. "Who cares. They're not exactly heavy hitters," she said.

The group was too far away to identify but she was hardly impressed with their display.

"We shouldn't risk discovery," Ben said.

"We can get away. Trust me, I can escape from worse than this. And they're not going to enter the dungeon anyway," she said.

Ben looked between the group and Ilea, hearing the pleas from his fellow elf. "If they find the dungeon, they will wait, preventing both us and them from leaving."

"Not if you have me," Ilea said and raised her arm.

She smirked as Displacement took effect, teleporting the Centurion right between the two floating elves. A little closer to the lightning one. By now she knew exactly when the machines detonated.

Her timing was so impeccable that the elves didn't even realize what had happened. The explosion wracked through the surrounding vegetation, sending both of the floating assholes into the branches.

To be fair, they could've been training the whip guy.

"Hey do you think my voice will reveal that I'm human?" she asked.

"That depends on their perception. But you being with me... I would think it unreasonable to assume they would believe it. Even if they saw your face," Ben said. "They'd think it a spell."

"It's so unbelievable that a human is working with an elf?" she asked.

The ice mage shrugged. "No... well yes... but the main thing is your actual power. You're no more than an inferior race to them."

"Aah, that makes sense," she said and cracked her neck and knuckles.

Ben moved a hand through his hair with a sigh. "You don't seem terribly different than them."

"Maybe," Ilea said with a grin, her body covered in ashen armor.

Ben smiled and formed his ice armor. "Have it your way. Welcome to our lands."

Their ice mage had taken out his Centurion in the meantime, his body twirling with both hands holding two of the machine's legs.

Spotted us eh?

He let go, sending the live grenade towards the two of them.

Ilea flew towards the Centurion and stopped it with her arms. She moved it a little farther down to make eye contact with the ice mage.

His smug expression took a hit when the Centurion exploded in bright light and energy.

Ilea let go of the bent and singed chunk of steel that was left and floated a little closer. "You're the only one who spotted me. Well done," she said in a deeper voice than usual. Most elves she had met weren't exactly the pinnacle of testosterone. Perhaps it was enough to fool them, coupled with Ben's assumptions.

"Refusing to speak our language. You really are Cursed," the ice mage said.

[Mage – lvl 280]

Oh boy. And he really thinks I'm one of theirs. Well it hardly matters. Better not have them go on a rampage in Dawntree. If they manage to escape that is.

“Injuring your own and you call me Cursed. Spectacular,” Ilea said.

The two floating mages from before had woken up again, both looking much worse than before. Their armor was even more in disarray. Burns and cuts from shrapnel showed on their bodies but they just gritted their sharp teeth and joined in on the confrontation.

At least they have guts.

“If he can't survive a Centurion, he's not worth his name,” one of them spit and vanished.

“Wai-” the ice mage said but it was too late.

Ilea could see him appear in front of her, one bright ball of fire in each hand before he slapped them together. She just moved through the fiery explosion without a care in the world, a single quick jab to his throat shutting him up for the moment. A gentle kick sent him flying before he slammed into yet another tree, slumping down as he grasped at his throat.

Ben had moved closer again. “If I may ask, I would appreciate it if you spared them.”

She glanced at him. “So that's why you didn't want me to engage.”

He looked down. “I know... of the history... but please. They've never known anything else... but this,” he said and gestured to the destroyed machines.

Ilea saw the whip wielder glare up at her with angry yellow eyes, forming his weapon yet again.

“Cursed, you are not welcome in these lands. Leave now and you shall come to no har-” the ice mage spoke when Ilea appeared in front of him.

He vanished but she displaced him right back, grabbing his throat as he lashed out with his ice blades. She pressed her hand together, hearing the ice crack beneath her pressure.

“I don't remember asking you anything, Icy,” she said. “Now you better stop that useless flailing or I'll snap your neck like a twig.”

He listened, the blades dissolving.

He's the smart one.

“Hey whip guy, aren't you mad at your lightning friend? Why are you staring at me?”

“I don't need your help,” he said in a seething voice, snapping his whip.

The fire extended and lashed out, aimed perfectly at Ilea's eye.

She caught the thing in her free hand. “How old are all of you?”

“Kill them!” the lightning mage howled, shooting a bolt at Ilea.

Well not her exactly. The ice mage was in the way after all. She just moved him aside and let the lightning hit her. “How very impulsive. I mean I know they're young but do they just die if they ever meet anything stronger than them?” she asked, looking between the ice mage and Ben. “This guy at least had the sense to call it off.”

“A defeat is shameful. Dying in battle brings more to one’s name than retreat,” Ben explained.

“Very logical. Good thing I grew up under a less idiotic trainer. Ever heard of the Cerithil Hunters?” she said. “Maybe you should consider joining someone that actually teaches you instead of throwing away your lives at the whims of the Oracles.”

“Heretic,” the lightning mage called out with an angry snarl, forming another bolt. He was interrupted by several ice lances penetrating non vital parts of his body.

He slumped to the ground, moaning in pain as blood seeped from the wounds.

“Quiet, fool,” Ben said.

Ilea just looked at the angry elves and shook her head. *And idiots like these slaughtered thousands of humans?*

“You’re just children, given power beyond your senses,” she whispered, the ice between her fingers cracking more now as the elf started struggling.

Ben grabbed her arm. “Please. Their deaths will bring you nothing.”

She didn’t stop.

“Keep your anger for those who are responsible. They are tools, thrown into the world without purpose. Give them a chance to rise beyond their shackles,” Ben said.

Ilea could see the fear in the mage’s eyes, even behind the veil of ice that started to crack more and more.

She sighed and let go.

He vanished immediately, joining his injured brethren with a hand on his throat.

“Thank you,” Ben whispered. He summoned four small booklets and threw them at the group, two of them conscious and watching. “Think for yourselves,” he said and leaned closer to Ilea. “We should go.”

She just nodded, sharing one last look with the yellow eyed elf and the ice mage.

They moved in silence for a few minutes, flying through the tall trees with a faster pace.

“Will they hunt us?” she asked.

“They’re fools, but not quite that stupid, nor capable enough to keep up. If a report is made, which I doubt, there may be stronger ones on our tails soon enough,” Ben said.

“Good. You won’t shy away from killing adults I hope, their choices not controlled or based on little experience,” she said.

He glanced back at her. “We won’t have a choice if it comes to that.”

“How old were they Ben?” she asked.

The elf remained quiet for a while.

“Tell me,” Ilea insisted.

“Twenty, maybe twenty five years old,” he supplied.

She just shook her head. “Humans are held accountable at what? Fifteen? Sixteen? And you call them children?”

“Would you strike down an orphan who tried to kill you? A child who never knew the love of a parent or peer? One who trained with assassins all their life? Beaten and abused until they could finally fight back?”

“I know how many humans our kind has murdered. I won’t judge you for retaliation but at least I want you to understand,” he said.

“Your society is fucked up,” Ilea said.

“Yes it is. And there are those who wish to change it,” he said.

This isn’t about the Taleen at all, is it? What difference does it make if we save these young elves from death? They’ll just find something else to fight.

“What were those books you threw at them?” she asked.

“A collection of Elvish stories, written down by our ancestors and carried through the millennia. With more recent additions. History long forgotten and not shared within the domains. Our heritage, or what little is left of it,” he said.

“Can they even read?” Ilea asked.

“They should know that much, yes,” he said. “If only for their selfish dream of political power and influence.”

“Are those booklets illegal?” she asked.

He shook his head, gesturing to a part of the forest. Beneath a set of trees, a tunnel opened up, leading down into the dark.

“Illegal? No. There are only few rules given by the Oracles. Each Domain is different but I wouldn’t put it past some higher ranking males to kill another for something as small as owning that booklet,” he explained.

“Why would they care then? If it’s not a rule by the Oracles?” she asked.

They landed in the tunnel, tracks from other elves visible in the soft earth.

“Because the stories are not about them. Some might see it as an insult, or as a weakness in those who read it. We strive to achieve greatness, each and everyone of us. Our arrogance is just one of the many barriers that prevent us from achieving such,” he said.