

Chapter 873 Hunting

Ilea spend the next few hours patrolling the Marshes, flying along the edge towards the south and west, then the north and east. She killed every Dread Beast she came across, but was sure she had missed a few.

Occasionally, she summoned a gate to Iz, to allow patrols of normal Guardians to spread out and search, Aki keeping track of the creatures she had missed. Ilea found that those who had stayed closer to the lake of blood were at a higher level, many still remaining in the swamp itself. A few ashen clones were hunting, to help clear out the territory.

Ilea found another few creatures that had made it into the Sava desert. She killed them quickly, with burning spears of ash, too few of them here to require her new Fourth Tier.

The Marshes were vast, and hundreds of monsters had remained, many now moving out to wander into the nearby lands. Ilea learned from Aki that this behavior had never been seen before.

Should've realized it before.

Even one of them could go on to kill entire settlements of Orcs, Mava, or other creatures, if their level was high enough. As if she had unleashed a Domain's worth of elves upon the world. Monsters though, and few of them capable of flight.

When night was falling once again, Ilea landed near the outpost south of the marshes. More machines were present now.

A Hunter Praetorian looked her way.

"No more sightings, and we're fanning out. The Hunters inside the Marsh are removing Dread Beasts as we speak, and Guardians are posted around the entire territory. The Orcs have informed their tribe, and knowledge should spread soon as to the changes of the Marsh. The Mava are informed as well, some already on their way to hunt, and to investigate the outskirts of the Marsh."

"Good. I believe there should be at least another Oracle in there. The one responsible for the Marsh itself," Ilea sent, seeing a few Mind Weavers appear on the teleportation platform set into the desert.

"Octavia Strand had requested to allow Mind Weavers brought back from Kohr to hunt and control monsters. Dread Beasts could be potential candidates. The vote just passed, more will arrive shortly," Aki explained.

"Any word from the Cerithil Hunters?" Ilea asked. She hoped they wouldn't care much about what she had done.

"The Meadow chose not to inform them as of yet. It suggests you talk to Isalther personally, should you wish to do so. They are busy as is, with everything in the Domains," Aki informed.

"Any major changes?" Ilea asked.

"More elves reaching Accords territory, more battles between elves in the Navali forest and beyond. Different Domains too. The removal of the Taleen threat has certainly caused some chaos. So far it

is manageable, Hunters and myself capturing the young elves reaching our territory,” Aki explained.

“They’re certainly busy enough. Sorry for causing another issue,” Ilea said. “Hope you have the Guardians to spare.”

“Guardians I have. It is Executioners I lack, but production has resumed, and is increasing with the help of the Accords. I’m sure the gains you have made are worth the investment here. And you have already established yourself as a figure of respect among the Orc tribe you have met and introduced me to.”

“Another people to add to the Accords?” Ilea asked with a smile. She landed now and summoned herself a meal. Violence had left during her hunt, finding her clean up job not nearly as interesting as her battle with the Oracle. She watched a few dozen Mind Weavers fly towards the Marshes, accompanied by a squad of Guardians.

“Their tribal nature will make it difficult to incorporate them as whole, but trade should be easy enough,” Aki said.

“Sure we can trust the Mind Weavers?” she asked.

“The meeting came to the conclusion that the risk is minimal compared to myself and the Meadow. Our evaluation is clear. They are here with the purpose of defeating the Ascended. Beyond that, we will have to see.”

“Fair enough, I guess,” Ilea said. “Do inform me if any of them or if you yourself find another Oracle in there. I’d be happy to take care of it,” Ilea sent.

“Will do,” Aki sent. “You plan to go back in there yourself?”

“Soon. I think a break is in order. I was beaten to a pulp quite enough in the past few days,” she said. “Nothing new from Savien?”

“The curse of the Sanguerrihn has remained below Paarah, and we have not sighted him anywhere.”

“Good. I’ll keep the Untainted title for now, just in case,” she said. Even past the cooldown.

She summoned a gate to the domain of the Meadow, and stepped through.

Ilea was greeted by the now familiar busy scene of the Accords.

A few people glanced her way and some spells flared up, but they all quickly returned to their work when they saw it was her.

“I heard about your adventures. Eight fifty,” the Meadow sent, its words considering.

“It was fun, yes,” Ilea answered with a smile, gesturing towards the Soul Forge.

She deactivated her resistances as usual and appeared in her room. She quickly filled the bath and heated it up.

“You killed Elven Oracles,” the Meadow sent.

“Not really,” Ilea said, taking in a deep breath as she relaxed in the heat. “Crazed Oracles, I guess.”

“Exiled to the Marshes. Isalthar has shared a few legends. Legends that you apparently have now killed. How did you do it?”

Ilea raised her brows. The Meadow usually didn't care much about specifics. *“I thought you don't support killing living creatures.”*

“There is a difference between those yet to awaken, and those so ancient, they have lost most everything they had once been. Elementals, Oracles, even the Fae. There are many beings out there I would not choose to protect. Their machinations are their own.”

“Feeling like you're missing out on some good fighting? Or did Violence tell you about it?” Ilea said with a smile.

“I'm merely curious. Your advancements have been interesting as of late. The additions of Fourth Tier spells has shifted what you can and cannot fight.”

“That's true enough. Without my arcane mode, I probably wouldn't have been able to kill half of them, and even then not near as quickly.”

“Then tell me,” the Meadow spoke, its voice serious for once.

Ilea took in a deep breath. *Not exactly the fun conversation I hoped for, but whatever.*

She told the being how the Cursed Marsh worked, how the mana felt, how she found and encountered the Mist Oracle, and then the one responsible for the Dread Beasts. All in all, the battles had only taken a couple of days, most of that spent regenerating mana in Kohr.

The Meadow was quiet for longer than she was used to.

“True harmony. Coupled with your other Fourth Tiers increasing mana regeneration and reducing mana cost,” the being stated but didn't make its point.

“Yes?” Ilea asked.

“What do you plan to do?” the Meadow asked instead.

“Hunt more? I did want to talk to Isalthar, about the whole killing Oracles thing. And to Fey,” she said with a grin.

“They are both in the Navali forest.”

“I'll contact them directly,” Ilea sent, checking her marks. *“Anything new on the Primordial curse?”*

“Only whispers. Shades of legends. Cults. Records of those studying the possible phenomenon falling to madness, or found dead. The Fae call it an ancient force of magic, but know little beyond that, or wish not to share their knowledge. We believe it is similar perhaps to your Fires of Creation, and just as rare.”

“Not a surprise with it being the Sanguerrihn,” Ilea murmured. *So I'll have to figure out how to deal with that spell on my own.*

“We did learn more about the crown,” the Meadow sent. *“Fragments of a few dozen souls have been merged and molded into the creation. A connection would be established if someone chose to wear the crown. I believe for someone of your mental fortitude, it would hardly be noticeable, but to weaker beings it would lead to madness and death. The silver threads are chaotic and influenced by the fragments just as much as the crown itself, the gems imbued with divinity. A consciousness not*

quite awakened, nor open to change. We are looking into ways of removing the fragmented souls. As Owl has wished.

“Sounds good, I still don’t want to wear a crown,” Ilea said.

“Not a surprise, with your aversion to responsibility.”

“I did take care of most Dread Beasts.”

“Valiant. A hero, truly,” the being spoke, the usual dry tone back.

“I am a legend after all, talking to my god tree.”

“I should really expect you to kneel.”

“Sure. And I’ll bring some creatures to sacrifice next time.”

“Don’t bring up bad memories,” the tree sent as a sigh flowed through the fabric.

Ilea smiled. *“Sorry. Didn’t mean to.”*

“That’s quite alright.”

“Speaking of the Crown. It sent out ripples of magic that disturbed the fabric. I couldn’t teleport around while that was going on. Any clue?”

“There are abilities like that. A simple counter to those who overly rely on teleportation. It’s not subtle,” the Meadow spoke.

“Can I get around it?”

“With your skills? I doubt it. Correcting such a disturbance within the fabric requires mastery of space manipulation. To do it in the short time it takes for someone to disturb it, that is finesse that I assume few possess.”

“You do?”

“Of course. My domain is mine alone,” the Meadow spoke. “Though the Fae would find it child’s play.”

Ilea smiled a weak smile. *“Right.”*

“Hmm?”

“Nothing. Just something I saw,” she said.

“Care to share?”

“I’m sure you’re more than familiar with what the Fae can do. And with what you can do,” Ilea said and stood up from her bath, her mantle spreading out to cover her.

“I see.”

They remained silent for some time.

“I’ll check in with the Hunters then,” Ilea said.

“Do that. Trian also let me know that there has been progress with the Bluemoon Root. Perhaps worth a visit,” the Meadow sent.

“Maybe,” Ilea said and contacted Feyrair through her mark. *“Can I join you? Some things I wanted to discuss with you and Isalthar.”*

“Enjoy your travels,” the Meadow sent, right before Fey confirmed.

Ilea smiled. *“I’ll see you,”* she sent to the tree, her third tier Transfer coming to life.

Ilea appeared to the sound of hateful hisses. The forest was dark, the moons not visible in the sky. High trees grew all around, the wood ancient, the trunks thick as houses. Moss grew where the suns hadn’t reached, a river flowed somewhere in the distance. She saw many pairs of eyes, a few darting her way. Three injured elves were caught by wooden roots, a white dome like barrier covering them. She saw Fey, Niivalyr, Neiphato, Ben, and Seithir.

“Nice catch,” Ilea murmured, identifying the three hissing elves. If not for their clothing and the intelligence in their eyes, she could’ve mistaken them for Dread Beasts. They had certainly been beaten up, and they weren’t taking the loss with grace. One of them was above level three hundred, the others just below.

“Could’ve shown up a few minutes earlier,” Fey said. *“Would’ve made things easier.”*

“Please open a gate to the Meadow,” Ben said. His voice sounded strained.

Ilea checked him, but other than a few bruises, he seemed fine. She opened the gate. *“Should I throw them through as well?”*

“I have it,” Neiphato said with a joyous hiss, the roots dragging across the ground before the three hissing elves vanished into the gate.

Silence returned to the forest, a few critters audible in the distance.

Ben went down to one knee. *“I’m spent.”*

“Good thing I arrived in time,” Fey said with a grin.

Ben hissed. Fey hissed back.

Tension is high in summer camp, Ilea thought.

“Weren’t you helping with the seal?” she sent to Elfie.

“Greetings to you as well, Ilea. I can feel you have grown in power. As expected. Ormont is the only one remaining. I cannot help with Taleen runes.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to be rude,” Ilea said. *“I interrupted your hunt. Should we move somewhere less exposed?”*

“Their hunt is done for the night,” Fey spoke. *“We should move back, before tempers rise even more.”*

Ben hissed again. More annoyed than angry.

Neiphato moved over to the ice mage and helped him stand, soothing words spoken in Elvish.

Seithir did not speak, his eyes covered as always. The soul mage tilted his head slightly to the side. He hissed, welcoming, and respectful.

Ilea tried her best greeting hiss.

“Out of practice,” Fey commented. “This way,” he added and pointed, his demeanor casual compared to the others.

“Hunting youth?” she asked. Her marks indicated they were rather close to the Fire Wastes of Ash, in the eastern most part of the Navali forest.

“Returning from my own hunt. I was called to help here on my way back, one of the young ones more than a little troublesome,” Fey said.

“Seithir spots them, we either capture them or inform Isalthar, depending on how powerful they are,” Elfie added.

“You’re pretty close to the fire Domain,” Ilea said.

“These lands are changing quickly, now that the Taleen threat has vanished. Or moved to the east, though I doubt many of the Monarchs and Ancients will care. There are Elves here from Verleyna, the Wastes, even a few from the Still Valley,” Fey said. “But the more powerful ones are generally busy in their own Domains. Cerithil Hunters are now moving through the forests yet again. The Domains have never been this contested.”

“Contested? I thought attacking the Domains was too dangerous,” she said.

He smiled. “We do not move into the Domains. Not often. But strife, provides ample opportunity. Young elves with the wish to hunt and fight move out farther into territory they do not know, or they challenge their elders.”

It doesn't sound like they're holding back. But I suppose taking in more young elves is somewhat safe. They didn't care back when the Taleen machines slaughtered them, they won't care that many vanish. If anything the older elves might even welcome less competition.

“Speaking of changing lands,” Ilea said. “I might’ve done some things in the Cursed Marshes.”

Everyone stopped walking.

Fey turned around to look at her. “You went to the Cursed Marshes?”

“I was looking for a challenge,” she said.

He grinned. “You found it?”

“That I did,” Ilea said.

“By the Oracles,” Elfie murmured.

Ben hissed, and Neiphato listened without a word.

“I fought two of them. They were different from the one I’d met before. Just-”

“Beasts,” Seithir spoke.

Ilea glanced over to the elf. She saw tears were rolling down his cheeks. “Pretty much. No reason, no communication. They attacked in blind fury. One of them killed the Dread Walkers, the other one created them.”

“Did you kill them?” Fey asked, taking a small step towards her. His teeth were showing.

“I did,” Ilea said.

Hisses came from the others. Apprehension. Joy. Respect. Amusement. Grief.

“You rid the marshes of their curse,” Elfie spoke.

“There is one remaining, at least,” Ilea said. *“I’m sorry, for causing you grief,”* she sent to Seithir.

“All that begins, must end,” the elf sent back and bowed his head lightly.

“They have found their end at last,” Elfie said at the same time. “I hadn’t expected you to be the one to do it.”

“She’s fought Executioners alone. We all knew she had it in her.” Fey said. He paused and hissed. “Val Akuun.”

“Val Akuun,” Elfie repeated, followed by Neiphato and Ben.

The words sounded different from each of them, but she didn’t push or contest. What was done, was done. She didn’t think the Oracles in the Marshes had been anything more than monsters, perhaps having lived too long, or never awakened in the first place.

They walked on for a few minutes, none of them speaking a word.

Fey finally broke the silence. “You’ll have to tell me of the battles. And I want to fight you, if you have time.”

“No you don’t,” Ilea said.

Elfie hissed with amusement. “You want to fight the Val Akuun?”

“I have fought Isalthar before,” the dragonling retorted. “It should be good training. And preparation, for what I’ll have to face.”

“You were nothing to the Val Akuun,” Ben said.

“And yet I still fought,” Fey said. “And I’ve gotten stronger, though you embarrass me.”

Ilea identified him then.

[Beast Warrior – lvl 610]

Still far more progress than all the others combined.

“Are you working with Aki to find hunting grounds and dungeons?” she asked.

“When he finds something reasonable,” Fey said. “But of course it’s not quite the same as hunting for Oracles.”

“You’ll be there,” she sent.

He hissed. *“It’s good to see you’re alive. And as powerful as you are.”*

“You too. We can fight after I talked to Isalthar.”

“You wish to tell him of the Marshes?” Fey asked.

“Yes,” she said and he hissed, acknowledging her answer.

They walked on for a few minutes, soon reaching a cavern entrance set into the moss covered roots of a giant tree.

They’re this deep into the forest already.

“Hiding inside of a dungeon?” she asked.

“Not since the Sentinel of Akelion took over, but the elves here don’t know that, nor would they care. All they care about is hunting and fighting,” he said, giving her a knowing glance.

Ilea smiled.