

## Chapter 603 Quarry

Ilea didn't try to convince the woman of where her own loyalties lay, instead quickly shifting the topic to the reason they were actually there.

"What do you think?" Feyrair asked, glancing at the corpse.

Ilea had crouched down to inspect the body. "Low level, definitely. Weak bones, barely any muscle, no signs of battle."

"Shit himself too," Fey said.

"Common when things die, could've easily happened afterwards," Ilea said and inspected the wounds. Everyone in the village had either died or fled, the bodies left behind for fear of returning monsters. Their descriptions hadn't been useful exactly, but neither were they trained monster hunters. Both had their fair share of experience, Feyrair likely ten times more, but neither already knew what kind of beast they were looking for.

"Claws of some kind. Long and thin. If it was just one wound I'd even consider a fine blade," Ilea said.

"Nothing else? The missing head?" Fey asked.

"No. Some of the other bodies had their heads attached. A random hit I'd say. See this cut here?" she said and pointed at the thin cut below the man's neck. "One of the claws. Judging by the furniture I'd say he tried to hide and retreated in the end, falling before he was struck in the side. Then his head came off. I'm also fairly certain the beast uses ice magic of some kind, though I'm not sure to what capacity."

"Didn't know you were an ice mage," Feyrair said.

Ilea put her hand into one of the cuts and slightly spread the wound open to show him. "Turns out being injured constantly with magical perception and healing magic to check on myself let me analyze some of the effects certain magic has on a human body. It's faint by now because the attack happened a few weeks ago but you can still tell."

"The pooled blood?" Fey asked. "Doesn't look this way when I cut into someone with my claws."

"Yes, well that too. The muscle is slightly brittle, just like it looked when I was hit by particularly strong ice magic," she said.

"Not that it helps us much," Feyrair said. "Beast isn't here, you even used your whistle."

Ilea stood up and grabbed the body, stepping outside to add it to the pyre they had quickly prepared, using a few apple trees from a nearby farm. "I think we're dealing with more than one beast. People escaped after all. If it's fast enough to attack all those villages in the span of a few weeks, nobody would've escaped."

"Guards could've stopped them?" Fey suggested.

"See any guards around? They barely had weapons," Ilea said and put the body down.

“Doesn’t mean there’s nobody with powerful magic around, or a skill in battle,” the elf said. “But I suppose you’re suggesting they weren’t here at all?”

“Yes. Most would’ve been with the army, either in Nara or a military camp somewhere in the region. If any returned by the time these attacks happened, it doesn’t show,” she said and summoned her monster encyclopedia.

Feyrair glanced over her shoulder. “Your book doesn’t list anything powerful enough to be a danger.”

“To us,” she mused. “For normal humans it’s quite natural to be scared of something a whole team of adventurers would have trouble fighting.”

“Reasonable. Maybe we should make a book like that too,” he said.

“I’ve thought about it before. Just didn’t have the time nor artistic talent so far,” Ilea said and leafed through the book.

“What about that one?” Feyrair said.

Ilea read through the description. “Vile Prowler. The claws fit, that’s for sure. And I suppose there could be variants with ice magic, they have been seen to use water magic. But it doesn’t fit. It only attacks single travelers and avoids settlements. Plus it hunts to eat, not just to kill.”

“Maybe it got desperate?” Feyrair asked. “Or just stumbled in.”

“If this was an isolated incident, sure. Maybe. But there’s bound to be plenty of corpses and scattered refugees around to find an easy meal. I doubt it would attack a village,” Ilea said and continued, glad there was an index with various magical and bodily features that let her find creatures somewhat quickly. *Maybe we should make a book like this. Would benefit the Sentinels in the long run, both for jobs and for treating people.*

She opened the book at the indicated page and smiled. “How about it?”

The illustration depicted a floating humanoid creature covered by shroud like clothes. Its body looked like a corpse and its eyes glowed in a deep purple. The Camara it was called, a spirit of vengeance that could appear in areas where death, sacrifices, war, and blood magic were prevalent. A good fit, as was the ice magic that flowed through their thin razor like claws adorning their hands.

“Gotta be this one,” Ilea murmured. “It’s assumed they form from corpses left to rot, betrayed or murdered with joy. They tend to return to where they were killed, their weeping sometimes audible for several hundreds of meters. Hunt the people who killed them and their kin through what is assumed to be blood magic.”

“Lots of information on that one,” Feyrair said.

“Lots of wars and betrayal,” Ilea said. “Not like people could do much with this information. The creatures are above level two hundred and three marks have been sighted too, though the sources haven’t been confirmed,” she said and put away her book.

“What happens if they’re left alone?” Feyrair asked.

“They go away, leaving behind the corpse from which they formed,” Ilea said.

“So we’re supposed to deal with creatures born from the betrayal and murder these villagers or their kin caused? I’m sure there are hundreds of those creatures around,” he said.

"I'd imagine there would be thousands all around Baralia. Weird that I haven't seen one yet," she mused, wondering if the blood ritual in Nara had something to do with it. Otherwise the creatures would be far better known.

Feyrair glanced at the pyre and hissed.

"Come on, don't act like that. You've had your fill, right?" Ilea said. "They deserve a ceremony at least."

"It's still a waste. I suppose if you don't start burning Elven bodies, I won't have an issue," he said and set the pyre on fire, his magic quickly engulfing the entire thing.

"We still have to hunt the monsters to stop them from killing more people. Once formed, they often target others, even if those they hunted initially are dead," Ilea said.

"And where do you suggest looking? Neither of us is a tracker exactly," Feyrair said.

Ilea summoned her map of the region. "Settlements and large battlefields. Let's just work our way through the area. If their weeping is audible that easily, we shouldn't have much of a problem. Plus it seems the attacks left a trail towards Nara, which would support my idea that the blood ritual there had something to do with the appearing Camaras."

The approach while simple turned out to be quite successful. Ilea and Feyrair followed the road leading north, the first sounds of wails audible just about ten minutes after they had left the abandoned village.

Ilea approached from above, flying over the plains until they came up on a battlefield. Well a once battlefield that was, broken weapons and corpses left to rot, wild animal corpses strewn in between. It hadn't been a massive fight, she surmised, seeing maybe twenty corpses in total. A few of them didn't wear soldier gear, likely the reason for the floating spirit amidst the carnage.

She slowly approached, her wings lazily moving behind her as she formed around twenty ashen lances. "Hey spirit," she said, watching as the monster turned immediately, her wailing stopped as she brandished her claws.

#### ***[Camara – lvl 284]***

The being started floating upwards but found itself pierced by five projectiles a moment later, dead instantly as it fell back down.

"Underwhelming again," Fey murmured as he joined her. "But I'm learning how those Sentinels of yours could really make a difference in these lands. For the people that live here at least."

"We face different threats than you Elves. Of course they'll be helpful," Ilea said.

"Should I burn it all?" Feyrair offered.

She was grateful for the gesture, motioning for him to take care of the field. Ilea watched as white flame took everything, turning the rotting bodies to ash and sending away what was left of the spirit.

She flew on without a word, their search taking them through the southern parts of Baralia on their way to Nara, glimpses of the distant city soon visible on the horizon.

Ilea wondered if the noble she and Hector had left there was still around but she didn't care enough to go check. Instead they found and laid to rest another eight spirits, uncaring if their goals were fulfilled or not.

None of the creatures were above level four hundred and all fell before they could reach either of the two travelers.

They reached Nara when night set, finding a last group of spirits floating near a devastated farm close to the city. Bones and bloodied weapons told a story of their own, the spirits just remnants of the war, claiming lives long after whatever atrocities had happened here.

"That is the city then?" Feyrair asked when he flew up to her position. "Seems like they're trying to settle in again."

Ilea looked at him and then back to the city. She only saw a few hundred lights in the sprawling urban landscape. It would take a long time for Nara to reach what it had been before.

*All because of one misguided Order, one blood magic ritual,* she thought and turned away.

"Do you not want to report back?" Feyrair asked.

Ilea grabbed him with ashen limbs and charged her wings. "I'll have a letter sent to inform them. I doubt the Camara problem is entirely dealt with but they need trackers for that."

She assumed one of the Sentinel teams would be a better fit for the job and planned to suggest giving the job to one of them.

"I doubt you'll get the coin they offered, not without any evidence or at least showing up yourself," the elf said.

"I don't care," she said and sped off into the distance.

The last job on the list was taking care Cursed in a quarry near Mophis, another city that had been devastated by a blood ritual. The only contact turned out to be an imperial officer stationed in the city. The woman turned out to be quite forthcoming, quickly giving them a map and offering anything else they might need other than personnel.

Cleaning and rebuilding the city to what it had been before took all of the imperials' time and resources.

With all the freed slaves now looking for a new place to live and employment beyond their previous predicament, the devastated cities offered both. A silver lining perhaps in the face of the destruction caused by the Order of Truth. Many of the buildings at least remained undamaged, the walls retaining their protective value.

Even now there were roots and patches of grass remaining in the city, left behind by the fractures and likely spread by the Meadow or simply caused by the mana flowing through from Erendar.

"It's quite fascinating. I don't know if an Elven blood mage could conjure up such a ritual," Feyrair mused as they flew low towards the quarry.

"Would they even care? The effects weren't enough to kill someone over level two hundred," Ilea said.

“It’s impressive nonetheless, especially with lower leveled humans working together to create those rituals. Mages reaching more power through ingenuity, study, and cooperation compared to our way,” Fey said.

Ilea smiled. “Sure, now think of the wonders we could achieve if we went out of our ways to try that.”

The elf laughed. “No, we’re not scholars. I doubt you could ever come up with impressive ritual magic. Perhaps on accident. But you’ve already found a few powerful people you can support in their endeavors. I believe that is more than enough.”

They landed near the quarry. A valley between two hills, dug deeper by the people who worked there. Ilea already heard the familiar sounds from Cursed, having killed thousands when she had traveled with Hector.

“They’re just turned humans, so not very high leveled,” she said.

“You seem bothered,” Fey said, flying in the air next to her.

Ilea watched the shuffling masses moving closer still. Cursed left behind without a purpose, wandering through the quarry on their hunt for food or the living. She didn’t know.

*I wonder how different this place looked before these monsters came here.*

She imagined it to be one of the worst places to be at as a slave. “I am bothered. By the very existence of this place,” she said and looked at him. “How much stone can an Elven mage move in a day? Compared to a human slave at what... level twenty? Not even a mage.”

The quarry had massive support structures made of interlinked beams of wood, houses and barracks sprinkled in between, a small town made up of simple buildings standing at the forefront.

“I will deal with it,” Feyrair said and gently touched her shoulder, flying lower before his form expanded both in magic and size. “I’ll make sure nobody living is hiding here.”

Ilea watched as the dragon flew through the darkness, slowly floating past the buildings as he attracted the attention of the Cursed.

He continued on his way before he reached the end of the valley, turning around before he swooped down. Bright white flame lit up the night as his fires washed over the monsters and quarry alike. Feyrair burned the houses, Cursed, and the supporting structures, leaving it all crumbling down cast in fire.

The elf landed amidst the flames and turned back to his humanoid form before he waved for Ilea, several hundred meters away.

She couldn’t help but smile at his gesture. Nobody would work in a quarry here for quite some time. And if they did, they would be mages who chose to do so freely, their work hopefully more efficient and less costly in human suffering.

“Thank you,” she said, landing next to the elf and dissolving her wings. She ignored the heat around them and the flames licking at her back.

Feyrair smiled, looking at her for a long moment before he turned towards a wall of stone. “A cave in, or made to look like one.”

Ilea blinked closer. “There’s a tunnel behind. Maybe a mine? There are faint traces of tracks leading inside.”

“Something should’ve made the Cursed come here. Either that or they made a ritual here, just for the people working in the quarry,” Feyrair said.

“Let’s see if they’re alive or got away somehow,” Ilea said

Their search was quick, the mine only about as large as the one near Samethol. One of the lowest tunnels had broken into a natural cavern, a massive one with blue shining mushrooms growing on the ground and walls. The flow of water was distinctly audible.

Ilea started to pick up more recent tracks and traces of magic. “There were definitely people here,” she said and tried to follow the trail. It led them into another tunnel and finally a cavern where the remains of campfires and improvised buildings littered the ground.

Supply chests, wagons, and even training dummies had been set up in the area, all left behind what seemed to be months ago. Some of the tracks were definitely more recent but right now, nobody was there.

“Air coming in from that tunnel. An exit I assume,” Fey said, pointing to a dark cave entrance. The rubble laying on either side suggested it wasn’t natural.

“They got out,” Ilea said, looking through the camp with her sphere before she rushed to and through the exit. The tunnel sloped up until she came out in the middle of a small forest.

Feyrair came out a moment later. “They did indeed. Do you wish to follow the tracks?”

Ilea smiled. “No. Honestly, I don’t. Let’s just hope they escaped.”

“They could’ve been slavers and blood mages,” he said.

Ilea punched his shoulder lightly. “Don’t spoil my mood.”

“I was joking. No corpses in the camp, no cages, and no chains. I suppose I may be wrong,” the elf surmised with a smile.

“Let’s report back,” she said.

“Sure. The ball is in two days, what do you want to do in the meantime? I suggest we find something a little more powerful to fight than the creatures we killed in the past few days,” Feyrair said.

“We’ll be back to fighting Executioners soon enough, don’t you worry. Let’s just go to Yinnahall already. You can see the city and we can scout out who’s coming to the festivities,” she answered, taking to the air.

“True enough. If you want to give me a tour, I wouldn’t say no,” he said.

Ilea smiled. “Not like I know the city well, but maybe we can just explore it a little.”

The two reported back to the officer, Ilea making sure her letter regarding the spirits would reach the relevant parties. Payment for the jobs would go to the Sentinels, as it did before.

They spent the rest of the night flying through the countryside on their way to Yinnahall, occasionally occupying themselves with a bout of one nature or the other.

The wildlife stayed far away from them, those lucky enough not to attract Feyrair's insatiable appetite.

When they finally reached the outskirts of the many walled city, they slowed down and watched the suns rise over the large hill.

Feyrair's eyes glinted with magic as he looked towards the city. "You know, for how weak most of your kind are, your cities do impress."

Ilea smiled lightly. "Can't wait to see what you guys built."

The elf just hissed without giving anything away. A content sound as he kept his eyes on Yinnahall.