

Chapter 575 Reunion

“What about the ice one then? He seemed like he understood the danger he was in, even suggested we leave without a fight,” Ilea said.

“It takes experience and wisdom to reach such a conclusion. Perhaps he has made similar experiences before, or he learned from someone older than him. Our expertise in magic is inborn, our bodies powerful from birth. Challenges are met to grow or to perish. Negotiations are barely even a concept and if they ever come up, it’s because a loss is inevitable.

“It took a lot of courage for him to speak out like he did, for him to stop attacking when you asked him to. Something that seems logical to a human that strives most of all to survive is not inherently the logical step for us. Instinctively so even,” Ben explained as they walked through the tunnel.

They soon reached stone, the walls changing from tube like tunnels to a more rectangular setup.

‘ding’ ‘You have entered the Iznacarisa dungeon’

“So you’d rather die than admit defeat or submit to someone?” Ilea asked.

“Yes. More so the younger... or well, inexperienced we are. Instincts can be useful, but they can be a crutch too. We have grown into powerful beings with vast territories we call our own, but there are many creatures and beings in the world that are stronger still. You should know the benefits of persevering, of taking risks that seem unreasonable, but you have the benefit of instincts that pull you in the other direction. At least I assume you do, being human and all,” Ben said with a smile.

“It’s come up, yes,” Ilea said. “I don’t see any shame in retreat if my enemy is obviously stronger than me. My healing has mostly allowed me to persevere where I would’ve died otherwise. Especially with a monster, there’s just no reason to keep going when the only outcome is death.”

“Powerful regeneration is a luxury that many do not have. Though the healing orders I’ve seen humans build might change that in the future. There is much we can learn from your kind, though few of us would ever even consider or admit such,” he said.

“Because you’re obviously stronger,” she said.

“Precisely. Thought there are those of us who think differently and I’d like to believe it’s a larger group than most assume. Given the chance, they too shall understand,” he said.

“Sure, priest elf,” Ilea said.

He smiled, glancing at her as they reached some sort of camp in the darkness. Embers still glowed in the small fire. “It isn’t religion I try to spread, but the process of individual and critical thinking.”

“Bringing the Enlightenment to Elven kind. Not a small goal you’ve set for yourself,” she mused. “Your friends aren’t here.”

“Yes. I too, have eyes. Would you like to wait or find them?” he asked.

“There might be things to hit, what do you think?” she said.

“Do go then, I’ll be right behind,” he said and rolled his eyes.

Ilea didn't waste any time, flying through the simple corridors with her senses peeled for anything that suggested magic.

Cut apart and half molten machines littered the floors. *Doesn't look like I'm needed here*, she thought, displacing a rather large head into her hands. The molten steel had a hint of Praetorian to it.

After a few minutes of quick searching, they entered into a large hall with high ceilings. To each side lay a stacked pile of scrap metal. And in the center was a taleen gate platform.

Around it stood three familiar faces.

"Heyo," Ilea called out with a wave, landing on the ground as her wings dissolved.

Feyrair turned towards her, immediately changing into a battle stance with extended claws and bursting white flame.

[Warrior – lvl 368]

Daaaamn, not bad kid.

"Hey I can do that too now!" she said and laughed, Flare of Creation bursting out of her armor.

Ben took a step back, his eyes focused on the flames.

"Youuu," Feyrair hissed, surely with a broad smile behind his scale helmet. His long wild hair changed in color from orange to a deep red.

"Missed you too. Did you forget about leveling? You're far behind," she said offhandedly, winking at him.

"You shall get your foretold battle. Though I ask thee to leave this hall intact for the time being. Restrain yourselves," Isalthar said, glancing at her with his white eyes, his focus quickly returning to the gate and its control mechanism.

[Healer – lvl ??]

Damn, still not... hey wait a minute. I should be able to see everything in the four hundred range. Or not?

She used Veteran to gauge his level, her eyes squinting as she frowned.

Seven hundred? Closer to eight even. But he didn't strike me as that powerful, or did he just hold back?

"Hey why aren't you a three mark?" she asked him directly.

The others glanced at her before focusing on Isalthar.

"Oh they didn't know? Sorry," she said and laughed.

"I did," Feyrair said.

"Suspected..." their Soul mage said.

"It hardly matters," Ben added, not revealing if he had known or not.

"Very perceptive. Perhaps you have achieved the third tier? Congratulations either way," Isalthar said in a neutral tone.

"You'll need a gate key to operate that thing," she said, pointing at the platform.

“A gate key is not enough when the node has been disconnected from the whole,” Isalthar spoke.

“They can do that?” Ilea asked.

“Yes,” Ben said. “When a gate is deemed a liability. That is our current theory. Additionally it’s a way to trap us in a vastly more dangerous dungeon.”

“Let me guess, you go through anyway,” she asked.

“Of course,” Feyrair supplied before he jumped towards her. “You’ve grown!” he said and hugged her tightly. “Oh, and heavier too.”

Ilea rolled her eyes. “I don’t remember us being this close.”

He ignored the comment but let her go. “Third Class then? Or an evolution?” he asked, touching the pale flames that now clung to his body.

He literally doesn't care.

“Third Class,” she said and waved the flames away.

“They’re not quite the same but I suspect they’re closely related,” Feyrair commented, sending a ball of his own flame towards her. “You get third Classes so early. You humans really have it easy.”

“Says the guy who started at what? Two hundred? How are you so old and you’re still below my level?” she asked and tried to grasp the flame. His was much hotter. It slowed her regeneration too, she noted. And it damaged her health and mana. *He’s even absorbing a part of it. But it lacks something... the staying power?*

“What can I say? I’m a perfectionist,” he said and twirled where he stood. “But seriously, it’s quite a challenge to gain levels if you fight Taleen all the time, especially in a group. I can’t take the same risks, not with what we have to achieve.”

“Are you trying to reactivate it or what?” Ilea asked, glancing at the two elves still fiddling with the gate controls.

“Directions,” the soul mage said.

“To find the next one, I see,” Ilea said. “I have a small suggestion then. It’s the reason I’m here actually.”

“I thought you came for me,” Feyrair said and looked away, his hair swinging unnaturally past his shoulders.

“Dream on buddy,” Ilea said. “Niivalyr found a gate inside of a Centurion production facility. It leads to a dungeon where Praetorians are manufactured. That’s the guess at least.”

Isalthar turned away from the gate and floated a little closer. “Praetorians... how far away?”

“In the north. About eight hour with my flight speed. Not sure how fast you guys can manage,” she said. “Elfie wanted to meet you anyway. Maybe you can recruit his group.”

“Too many members are detrimental, in most Taleen ruins,” Feyrair said. “Especially with our power. These two hardly fight anyway.” He gestured to the soul magic user and Ben.

“He thought it necessary. I offered my help too but he deemed it not enough. Special variants were present too. The arcane arrow versions at least, apparently Hunter Praetorians,” she said.

Feyrair glanced at Isalthar. “This could be important. If we could slow their production.”

The ancient elf looked at Ilea with his white eyes, contemplating. “High risks too. Few of us can face higher level Praetorians.”

“I’ll be there too,” Ilea said. “If only to bring you out in case things go wrong.”

“You can teleport others?” Feyrair asked.

“Yes, to a specific location in the southern human plains,” she said, not seeing a reason to keep this fact hidden.

Isalthar floated back to the gate, a wave of air expanding from him as a thousand cuts split the platform apart. “We shall leave immediately,” he said.

Ilea looked at the soul mage approach, his hand brushing past her cheek.

“Beautiful,” he whispered before pointing at himself. “Seithir.”

She smiled. “You are quite beautiful, yes,” she said and smiled at the blush tinging his cheeks.

“That’s his name,” Feyrair said.

“Yeah I got that,” Ilea said.

“Seithir,” Isalthar said, still considering. “Farthorn, Asay.”

Feyrair rolled his eyes and groaned. “Really? Them? Are you sure?”

“We’re talking about a specialized Praetorians. It will be a large facility,” Ben said. “We can use every capable Hunter we can find.”

“They should be close,” Isalthar said. “Do not fret, white flame. A test of patience and wisdom shall do you good.”

Feyrair bowed to the white haired elf, saying a word in elvish.

Seithir’s aura started to glow within her sphere, strands of glistening magic vanishing into nothing. A few seconds later he started floating out of the dungeon.

“We follow?” Ilea asked.

“We follow,” Ben said, touching her shoulder as he walked past.

“And when are we going to have our bout?” Feyrair asked, “We could catch up after.”

Ilea looked at him before a smile blossomed on her face. “Hey, can you tank the arcane storms in the north?”

He hissed. “Of course. Who do you think I am?”

“A bitch ass dragonling. Good then, it’ll look cooler if we fight below a storm. What do you think?” Ilea asked, spreading her wings and following the others.

“Dragonling...,” he tasted the word and hissed again. “I like it.”

That was not supposed to be a compliment, she thought and rolled her eyes.

“Our battle will be legendary,” he said.

“Your head trauma will be legendary, that’s for sure,” Ilea said.

“Have you attracted hunters?” Isalthar asked, looking at Ben when they reached their little camp. What remained of it that was, anything substantial already stored in whatever storage items they held.

“Potentially. We met four young ones. Three likely from the Wastes, one from the Valley,” Ben said.

“Did you kill them?” Isalthar asked.

“No,” Ben said, glancing at Ilea.

“Mistake,” Feyrair murmured.

“Do not mistake compassion for an inability to assess risk,” Isalthar said, still looking at Ben.

“Her teleportation would help us escape in case we were followed. I think it unlikely, however. Their shame will overwhelm their sense of duty,” Ben said.

“An assumption,” Feyrair commented. “I thought you humans hated our kind,” he added and glanced at Ilea.

She looked him in the eyes. “Just you.”

“I have that effect on people,” he said and hissed. “The hate makes them taste better.”

Ilea hissed back, a grin tugging on her lips.

“I must remind the both of you that there are no inns nearby, however should you find one, I do suggest getting a room,” Ben commented with a smile.

Feyrair looked confused at that, shrugging as he looked at the elf.

Ilea touched his shoulder. “Don’t worry, some day, when you’re old enough, I’ll explain it to you.”

“It was only in jest,” Ben whispered to her.

“Are half elves a thing?” Ilea asked him in turn.

“They are,” Isalthar said. “Rare, and quite dangerous for the other species. The children’s power is vastly inferior to a true elf, though some features remain. Hated and hunted by all, it is not a fortune one should eye. Now come, there is ample time for talk outside of hostile territory.”

“Every territory is hostile,” Ilea said.

“Some more than others,” Isalthar said.

Surprising that he would chime in. Did he have children with a human?

The elf seemed almost spirit like to her, much like Seithir. The other two were just regular old apex predators.

When they came out of the dungeon, two battered elves stood in their way.

Oh boy, Ilea thought, unsure how to react to that sight.

The lightning and fire mage from before had apparently followed them here.

She could hear Ben’s teeth grinding against each other. “You fools.”

“I challenge you to a duel,” the lightning one said, pointing at Ilea.

“Me?” she asked, looking around at the group. “Guys can we just leave? I don’t think they can keep up anyway.”

The lightning elf hissed.

Her group hissed back.

“Refusing a duel, to them, is an insult of the highest degree,” Ben explained.

“Just get it over with,” Feyrair said.

Ilea rolled her eyes, stepping ahead and giving the terrified looking Ben a quick wink.

The two elves looked between the group, their fear well hidden but not quite enough to trick her sphere.

Ilea smiled. “One after the other? Or do you want to come at me together?” she asked.

“A duel is between one elf and another. To death,” Feyrair supplied helpfully.

Aren’t you beyond those customs, as Cerithil Hunters? she thought and rolled her eyes.

“Okay who wants to go first?” she asked.

The lightning elf stepped forward, his magic crackling around him. “My name is Vaarshun Paarth, and your insult will not stand,” he said. Powerful magic burst around, his eyes turning a bright blue as his hands charged with pure lightning. His dark red armor looked singed in many spots, his right shoulder and arm unguarded entirely. Damage from dozens of battles showed in various scratches and dents. Half of his mouth lay exposed, the sharp canine teeth slightly ajar as he hissed with a menacing sound.

Ilea stepped forward, her group of hunters floating a little further back and up. “You’re an idiot, you know that right?” she said as her auras surged.

[Mage – lvl 250]

His red hair floated upwards, the magic around him zapping the air with thin white blue tendrils.

The fire mage floated a little further back, his eyes on Ilea.

“Will you deny me your name?” Vaarshun asked.

“Not much of a point to share it now, is there?” Ilea asked.

The elf hissed again, this time charging her with extended claws, blue light trailing after.

He slashed them into her ash covered head, digging nearly a centimeter deep as lightning surged through her body. His mouth moved into a grin.

Ilea grabbed his arm, ignoring the admittedly powerful lightning magic. Perhaps as strong as a few Blue Reapers combined.

She activated her Deviant aura and whistled, not revealing her name or species. “It’s quite ballsy of you to show up again but you’re downright delusional. It’s not worth dying for an injured ego. Know when you’re beat.”

Reverse healing flowed into him as he sent spell after spell into her from a point blank range.

Ilea hit his skull, making sure not to overdo it.

The elf reeled back, his eyes focusing again a moment later when another devastating fist crashed into his thick skull.

She repeated the process until he was knocked out, punching once more to make sure. "Quite sturdy," she murmured and threw his limp body to the side.

"You would dare leave him alive?!" the fire mage shouted, hissing at her with little conviction. He looked at her with confusion in his eyes.

She shrugged. "I don't really give a shit. Run away now or come at me. A few concussions won't hurt."

Ilea felt the eyes of the hunters on her. These two believed her to be one of them. While certainly stupid and reckless, it felt like putting down some rowdy teenagers. She wouldn't lose sleep over killing a few elves, not after what she'd done. But these two were downright pathetic. She felt like Ben was right. Maybe they could learn from this experience. And if they didn't, they'd die to something else.

The elf hadn't moved yet, still floating where he was. Two small spheres of flame glimmered in his hands.

"Maybe you should check out that booklet, and stop attacking Cerithil Hunters who try to save idiots like yourself," she said. "Now make a decision, fight or flight. Otherwise I'll make it for you."

The elf ground his teeth and slowly floated backwards. He turned a moment later and accelerated.

Ilea smiled and displaced the unconscious lightning elf right in front of the other. "Take your buddy with you," she said, watching him tumble and crash before grabbing the body and flying off.

She turned to the group.

"Boring," Feyrair said, turning away.

Seithir bowed to her lightly, Ilea mimicking the gesture.

Isalthar just looked at her with an unreadable expression, his eyes the same as always.

"Guardian of Cerith," Ben said with a wicked smile. "A title well suited."

"She's killed plenty," Feyrair said. "Now come on, I'm sure that idiot will bring reinforcements."

Seithir led the way, flying through the forest like a flying spear. Straight through the vegetation, occasionally teleporting through a trunk.

The rest followed with ease.

"I appreciate everyone speaking Standard by the way," Ilea said, looking at Ben who flew close by.

"There are many Elvish languages, and even more dialects. What you humans call Standard dates further back than you might think," he said.

"I see. Yeah the others might've not spoken it otherwise," Ilea said.

"Your mercy will shake the foundation of their beliefs," Ben said. "I am proud to fight alongside you."

“They’ll die against something even stronger to get rid of their shame,” Feyrair said from the side. “You should’ve put them out of their misery.”

Ilea didn’t reply, hoping she hadn’t made a mistake. She thought back to Salia, most of its population slaughtered like pigs, the ice elf fighting her without remorse or care. *His armor looked so similar.*

A part of her hoped that Ben was right, the existence of the Hunters proof that Elves were not mere monsters. But she had seen the look in the fire elf’s eyes, fear mingling with confusion. *Like a child throwing a tantrum, realizing that their parent had simply walked away.*