

Chapter 417 Friends with Benefits

Ilea saw the facility in the distance, not quite as hidden as those they had found previously. Massive structures of steel partially set into the wall of the layer otherwise covered in sand and stone.

A bunch of scorpions and worms had shown up when she had landed, quickly turned to shreds by her limbs and spears. None of them were above level six hundred and their abilities weren't very impressive either.

She would have to check the scorpions again, their tails likely laced with venom. The sand magic they had shown was considerably less impressive than the Deep Mirage from the last floor sadly.

"You think they're in there?" Ilea asked, glancing at the floating Fae.

The creature wasn't looking at her, instead staring at the sandstorm raging in the distance. It looked to have moved closer.

Ilea was pretty sure she wasn't imagining things. "Is that a natural thing?" she asked and joined its side.

Elemental

"Another one," Ilea said with a smile.

The Fae looked at her with interest.

"There was a young lightning elemental back on layer... ten I think," she said.

Beautiful, the thought reached her.

"Pretty powerful beings it seems, yeah. I don't think I can fight that one though, not with how I struggled against the lightning one already," Ilea said.

A sad emotion reached her but she could tell there was more than a simple lack of violence.

She would leave it for now. If the Fae wanted something, it could ask. So far it had warned her whenever there was danger so she assumed it wouldn't withhold something vital.

"Come on, let's check on the others," Ilea said, the tracks now rather recent and clear. She didn't know how far this facility reached but she couldn't find a magical trail leading away from it either, making her believe her group was still inside.

"I know you believe it was just a lack of understanding but it could have just as well been a security measure," Maro said.

"To trigger the spread of corruption as a defense mechanism?" the elf asked in a skeptical tone.

“I’ve seen traps that made less sense,” the necromancer retorted.

“Why then spread the blood manipulating agent throughout the whole Descent? Would this layer not be enough? Or this facility itself?” Met asked.

Hana smiled at Jonna who was tirelessly healing Maro, the elf as well as the guardian, corruption visible on their arms.

Catelyn already had a defense against it with her flames, little interest in the resistance. She was staring at the sphere, resting her head on her paws.

“What do you think?” Relly asked as he stepped up to Hana.

“We should just bury this whole facility and forget about it,” Hana replied. “Nothing good will come with our tampering.”

“Nothing worse than the corruption should happen, it wouldn’t make any sense,” Maro said.

“We will not activate it, not without further understanding. Neither of us is an expert on runes,” the elf said.

“I know that these runes were the same ones present in the dungeon near Tremor. It summoned creatures previously beyond my comprehension. Trust me, elf. I am aware of the dangers,” the necromancer said. “Rune experts won’t help us here.”

“They will. And you won’t touch that thing,” Catelyn said, her tone final. “If what you said about Rhyvor is true then that just adds to the reasons why this thing should not be tampered with.”

“We should not destroy it however,” the elf said.

“I agree. This is the first set of runes unrelated to blood magic we have found within the Descent,” Relly said. “All the death and suffering should not have been for nothing.”

“You talk like there’s a choice. I doubt we could destroy this thing, it’s layered in defensive enchantments,” Maro said.

“Something is approaching,” Carul suddenly said in a distressed voice.

“Something? Be more precise,” the necromancer complained.

“Two beings... they are powerful, moving fast. Beyond even you,” he said and glanced at Catelyn.

“Maybe we already triggered something,” Maro said and cut out the corruption on his arm.

The others followed suit and prepared.

Catelyn too stood up and grew to her large form.

A couple tense seconds passed before the elf chuckled.

“What?” Maro asked.

A being shrouded in ash appeared near the gate, more than a dozen protrusions behind them moving slightly, interspersed by two wings that looked otherworldly.

Hana felt its presence, gripping her blade before her eyes opened wide at the appearing Spirit of Old. She had only heard stories about them but every dark one knew about the beings.

“Cared to join us at last,” Catelyn said with a grin, her form shrinking once more.

“Too late it seems,” the female said.

Hana recognized the voice, her eyes opening even wider. *Are you serious?!*

“What’s that floating ball of magic?” Ilea said and pointed at the device.

“Oh, Hana is that you? Glad you survived!” Ilea said and waved at the lizardwoman.

The expression on her face confused her a little. *Maybe she forgot about me.*

“You have brought someone with you?” Catelyn asked, bowing to the Fae before she looked back to Ilea.

“Yeah, little guy, my team and some survivors of the expedition it seems,” she said, gesturing to the group.

The Fae appeared on her shoulder and sat down, waving at the people.

Elfie tapped Maro on his arm.

“Yeah, see Catelyn. Told you it would make a difference,” the necromancer said and laughed.

“My expectations were shattered. Finally, some good news,” Catelyn said.

[Mage – lvl 329]

Ilea couldn’t help but smile at that, having surpassed even the fire fox in levels. She still had a couple centuries in experience on her but with the amount of fighting Ilea did, she was sure to catch up in a couple years or decades.

Ilea quickly explained her meeting with the Enavurin, her rescue of the Fae and some of the battles. Specifically, she explained the abilities of the various creatures, finding out that the group had hardly ever fought anything. The Deep Mirage had caused the most problems, having seen through their hiding spells. Both for the expedition as well as her group.

“That one I will be able to distract, pretty sure about that. He’s just lonely and bored,” Ilea said.

Elfie hissed with an amused tone, Maro shaking his head in disbelief. Hana and the expedition people just stared at her.

Ilea felt slight distress coming from them but she decided not to comment. “Oh and the sandstorm outside is probably an Elemental, the Fae informed me,” she added in the end.

Catelyn nodded. “Good. We had assumed something similar. Are you sure we can trust the Enavurin? It could very well have deceived you.”

Friend, the thought came and went, all eyes going to the Fae on Ilea’s shoulder.

“I trust him more than myself on this,” she said with a chuckle. “Though for what it’s worth, he seemed reasonable.”

The fox nodded and quickly informed her of their own findings, the various mechanisms that had spread the corruption and what they had learned from Met, the floating Dark Sprite.

“I can confirm the second tier of Blood Manipulation Resistance,” Ilea said. “I suggest you keep some of the corruption to bring the skill to everyone in Hallowfort. It’s discomforting but if something similar ever spreads, it’s the only way to counter it effectively.”

“That... will be impossible,” Catelyn said. “The pain is rather... excruciating. Most won’t accept the procedure.”

“I shall do this with the Hunters,” Elfie said and nodded.

“It’s perfect really, also good to train Pain Tolerance then. I have the second tier there as well where you can ignore pain entirely. It’s more risky but a great path to more general skills in the area,” Ilea explained.

“Oh, thinking of. Do you have more bottles and containers? I’d love to get some more of the corruption,” she added.

Catelyn didn’t seem particularly happy with that. “I am aware that the dangers turned out to be less extensive as initially expected but we should try and prevent a spread.”

“Don’t tell me you don’t have some stored away too. Do you really trust me so little?” Ilea asked, tilting her head to the side.

The fox sighed, summoning several large glass containers. “For what do you even need it?”

“Just collecting resources,” Ilea said with a smile, moving them with her ashen limbs before she stored it all in her necklace.

“We should question the Enavurin about this device,” Maro said.

“It cannot leave the water,” Ilea said. “And just because it’s an ancient being doesn’t mean it can read the runes.”

Read

“Oh?” Ilea looked at the Fae on her shoulder. “You can?”

It nodded.

She chuckled.

“What did it say?” Catelyn asked.

“It can read the runes. I just doubt a translation will be very detailed,” she said with a smirk.

“We should just let a Fae tamper with this dangerous and ancient device then?” Maro asked, not convinced.

Everyone else looked at him as if he was the weird one to ask.

“Come on, Ilea, you’re human. Don’t you think it’s a bit ridiculous? It can’t even speak in complete sentences, no offense,” he said.

Offense

“Yeah, he can be annoying. He’s good at heart though, I’m like sixty percent sure of that,” Ilea said, ignoring the man.

“Sixty? So low have I fallen,” the necromancer murmured.

“Look, everything here is probably older than you. Except the healer over there, hi by the way,” Ilea said and waved at the woman who winced and took a step back. “I just think there’s a reason these creatures are revered amongst the Dark Ones and I have traveled with it for a couple days now. He’s a little bit deranged and violent but otherwise quite decent.”

Deranged?

“Come on, we played with a Deep Mirage,” Ilea said to the creature.

Deranged.

“A little,” she confirmed, gesturing with two fingers close together.

“You played... what?” Catelyn spoke but then shook her head. “Well right now I doubt anybody would have more knowledge about these runes than the Fae. They are said to be older than most creatures and powerful in many ways. Although it is unknown how exactly.”

“It’s level one hundred. Maybe it’s a child,” Maro suggested.

“The last two I met were around that level as well,” Ilea said.

“If we leave this sphere alone, someone else might come and cause even more damage,” Elfie spoke. “I say we keep a close watch and let the Fae try. They have a reputation amongst Elves as well.”

Maro nodded. “Alright. Not like I can convince you fanatics anyway.”

“It’s not fanatic. Just look how cute he is!” Ilea said and grabbed the creature, holding it out towards him.

Maro just stared back from under his helmet.

“Cute...,” Catelyn whispered in disbelief.

“Right?” Ilea asked and smiled at her.

“To call a being so ancient cute...,” her sentence was stopped when Ilea walked up and pet her head.

“Don’t worry, you’re pretty cute too. Very fucking annoying at times as well but who isn’t?” Ilea said, enjoying the various reactions.

Elfie and the Fae seemed the only ones that genuinely thought it was funny.

“Come on guys, we found out the corruption isn’t the world ending threat we had assumed and even found some survivors,” Ilea said with a smile. “Cheer the fuck up.”

Survivors

“Hmm?” Ilea asked.

More

“There are more survivors too, if I interpret this all knowing little floating legend’s thoughts the right way,” Ilea added. She let go of Catelyn and summoned a cake to defuse her potential reaction. Explosions of fire wouldn’t help.

The fox devoured the whole thing in one fell swoop, growing to her massive size as she breathed down Ilea's neck.

She didn't say a word and turned back to normal, walking past Ilea and towards the central platform. "None of you have seen any of this. If I hear rumors spread, I will hunt you down and make sure your last moments are filled with suffering and regrets," Catelyn spoke with a soft voice. She got nods in return.

Elfie chuckled and Maro just stared at her.

Catelyn reached the sphere that was around a meter in diameter, made of steel with hundreds of runes craved into various sections of it.

"If possible we would like to learn more about the corruption and why it has spread. We want to prevent something like this happening again. Any defensive measures you can disable would be helpful as well," Catelyn said, glancing at the Fae. "If you desire something in return, I will do my utmost to fulfill your requests."

The Fae waved her off.

Help

Friend

The Fae sent, pointing at Ilea.

Magic flowed from it before invisible forces changed parts of the runes with blinding speed.

"Wait, I can't foll-" Maro spoke before a powerful surge of magic washed over them.

Elfie chuckled. "Truly, the reputation is deserved."

Maro stored his helmet, eyes wide open. "Unbelievable. There were over sixty layers...,"

"What happened?" Ilea asked.

"It disabled all defensive enchantments," Elfie informed them.

Ilea turned her attention back to the sphere that started shifting, rectangular shapes moving in and out from the previously perfect seamless sphere.

"*Vanu Tes okuun. Ver saa,*" a deep unnatural voice resounded from the sphere, making everybody look at each other.

Another surge of magic changed up the runes.

"*Language change accepted,*" the voice said in the same deep tone.

"Holy shit," Ilea said, giving the Fae a thumbs up.

It glanced back at her and giggled in her mind before continuing.

Ilea was sure it was using its space magic to reshape the runes, somehow.

The others were watching in sheer disbelief, one of Maro's eyes literally twitching.

"*All defensive measures and traps disabled. Remaining Manipulation agent destroyed,*" the voice continued.

“Displaying map of testing facility Zeta.” A hologram appeared above the sphere, displaying the Descent in its whole.

“Displaying population and success parameters for Project Animus.” Various new information appeared, displaying species and levels of various monsters.

“That doesn’t exactly line up with what I’ve fought,” Ilea said.

“Dungeons are rarely static. I doubt this one was as well,” Catelyn said.

“Many are there however... the lighting elemental is registered on level ten, same with the Veramath at five,” Maro said.

Ilea noted that there were twenty five total levels to the Descent. Everything below twenty was listed as unstable and without any species information at all.

“The Young Lightning Elemental is listed as level nine fifty. Does that mean whoever built this place can identify that?” Relly asked, gulping.

“It could also just be an estimate,” Maro said, one hand on his chin.

“The success rate is two percent,” Ilea said. “Seems optimistic. Project Animus is the corruption?” she asked the Fae.

Hundreds of small lights appeared on the hologram. *“Displaying Animus Agent distribution systems. Time elapsed since activation – 42 orbits.”*

“That should line up with Verita leaving. It has been difficult to track time however,” Relly said.

“It lines up,” the Dark Sprite confirmed.

“Is there more information on Project Animus?” Catelyn asked.

The Fae used its magic again.

“Project Animus – Priority: 1

Redacted test of redacted. Control of redacted with impact expectation redacted.

Status: Failed”

“What the fuck did we stumble into...,” Maro murmured.

“Someone removed the juicy bits,” Ilea said. “Well, the important thing is that the project failed. Meaning, we activated it on accident.”

“Redacted failed to change composition in meaningful way. Distribution approved by redacted in case of facility breach. Document success rate.” the disembodied voice spoke.

The expedition members seemed to shrink at the confirmation that it had been their tampering after all.

The success rate percentage for the twentieth layer was sixty six, all layers below showed zero. Some of the layers above as well. Many had the word *unknown* written next to it, the necessary technology, sensors or runes having failed to provide the information.

“Are there other projects?” Catelyn asked with a tense tone.

The Fae nodded.

“Project Fluctuation – Priority 3

Observation and documentation of redacted in relation to redacted.

Status: Complete”

“Is there a time mention of when it was completed?” Maro asked.

“Time elapsed since completion: 1123935 Orbits.”

“That’s a lot of days,” Ilea murmured.

“Three thousand years, give or take a century,” Met commented. “What? I’m fast with calculations.”

“I confirm the result,” Elfie said. “Sadly, I have not been alive back then.”

“You don’t know when exactly the great change happened that the Dark Ones still retell?” Maro asked Catelyn.

“You believe it a correlation?” the fox asked.

“Someone has been fucking with this realm,” Ilea said. “We should at least consider the Ascended.”

“Ascended?” Relly asked.

“We found documents talking about a common enemy between Humans, Dwarfs and Elves. An enemy coming from another realm,” Ilea said. “They were defeated but it’s possible that this is one of their facilities that was left behind.”

“The Enavurin... you said he came here centuries past, not millennia,” Catelyn said.

“When was the status change of Project Animus?” she asked.

“Time elapsed since project designation change: 108184 Orbits.”

“A little less than three hundred years.” Met supplied again.

Ilea nodded. “That fits with what the Enavurin told me.”

“So whatever is in control of this facility was still working on this project three centuries past,” Catelyn said. “I had already found consciousness then and had been a member of the Hallowfort council,” she murmured.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” Relly said.

“No shit,” Ilea said and smirked. “What else can you give us little Fae?”

“Project Eden – Priority: 2

Test compatibility of redacted in redacted area. Document changes and behavior of redacted.

Status: Ongoing”

“There you go,” Ilea said. “Still ongoing.”

“Can we deactivate it?” Catelyn asked.

“Project Eden is in Passive state. Deactivation requires authorization.”

“We don’t have that?” Ilea asked.

The Fae shook its head.

“Any more projects?” Maro asked.

Negative, the Fae sent to all of them.