

Chapter 576 Feast

Ilea kept pace with the elves, her ashen wings lazily moving behind her back. She wondered how long they'd need to get north if this was the suggested flight speed.

The trees here looked much less exotic. Evergreens that clung to the rocky hills, high and sturdy but more spaced out than the dense canopy where the dungeon had been located.

Seithir had guided them for the better part of half an hour, the soul mage locked in on his target from the beginning.

Ilea landed last in the mountainous terrain in the northern region of the forest, a small clearing the destination of their side objective.

Two Elves sat on an old tree trunk, looking at the approaching group as they continued eating.

The carcass of a large animal lay nearby, cut open with various pieces missing.

"Greetings, young ones," Isalthar said, floating a little above ground, his white robe nearly touching the earth below.

"Welcome Isalthar," one of the two said, his gaze moving over the group before it landed on Ilea. He had black eyes, his head shaved unlike every other elf she had seen before. Intricate runic tattoos snaked up his dark skin, glowing lightly to Ilea's magic perception. He wore black armor, light and made with metals. Niameer perhaps. "Share our prey, if you wish."

Feyrair hissed. "Don't mind if I do," he said and dug his hand into the carcass, ripping out a chunk with bloody delight. He bit into the raw meat, blood dripping down his scale armor.

"You bring a new Hunter?" the elf asked, his voice laced with caution.

[Mage – lvl 325]

"An ally and Guardian of Cerith," Isalthar replied.

Ilea watched with interest as Feyrair ripped out another piece of the dead beast, throwing it towards Seithir who happily caught it, nibbling on the large chunk in quiet joy.

"Hey, nice to meet you two," Ilea said and walked a little closer.

The second elf looked at her with a smirk, his purple eyes seizing her up. He held a small piece of meat in his hand, as if it was a delicate glass of wine. His black hair flowed down his back, downright luminous and perfectly straight. The elf sat with crossed legs, wearing an intricate bright red dress that seemed entirely unsuitable for either fighting or being in the wilderness. His features were delicate, no noticeable muscle visible on the little skin he showed.

Ilea would've doubted herself if she didn't know about the Oracles, not feeling the power from him that she'd expect from one of them.

[Mage – lvl 412]

"A human crosses our path. What a surprising delight you have brought to us today," he spoke.

The bald elf hissed, both annoyed and hostile. Ilea couldn't tell at whom exactly it was directed.

"I myself am named Asay, female human," the black haired one said. "I will be interested to hear your story."

"I'm Ilea, good to meet you, Asay," she said with a smile hidden behind her armor.

The bald one got up and took a step towards her.

Feyrair glanced up from his aggressive feast and hissed.

"You protect her?" the bald elf asked.

Feyrair grinned. "She needs no protecting. But once she's done with you, I shall finish the job."

The elf growled but halted in his tracks. "What is the meaning of this, Val Akuun?" he asked, looking towards Isalthar.

"He shared all that is to know," Asay said. "Or would you question his word?" his voice sounded excited, magic sparking in his eyes for a split second.

"Not his, but hers," the bald one said and pointed at her.

"Listen baldy, I don't need your approval. If you have something against humans, keep it to yourself. I'm just here to destroy a bunch of Praetorians," Ilea said, crossing her arms as she looked at him.

Ben sighed, sitting down next to Asay. He whispered something to the other elf.

"It is our nature. Yet this development is wonderful," Asay said, not keeping his voice down.

"I'm Farthorn," the bald elf said, stepping closer to her. "And I don't like you."

"You're the first one, congratulations," Ilea said.

Asay snickered to himself, hiding his mouth behind the sleeve of his complex dress.

"Ilea will lead us far into the north, where another group of Hunters we shall join," Isalthar spoke, unperturbed by the happenings around him.

"We destroyed three gates in the past week. Are you sure it's wise for us to go north?" Farthorn asked, sitting back down on the trunk, his eyes focused on Ilea.

"Praetorian facility," Ben said. "That's why we could use the two of you."

"A wonderful adventure," Asay spoke, smiling bright and showing his sharp teeth. "Much more exciting than the work in these parts."

Perfect white teeth, Ilea thought as she looked at him, their eyes meeting.

Neither of them spoke, staring at each other for a while.

"Your aura is quite fascinating," Asay finally said.

"Thanks," Ilea replied and summoned a meal herself, not about to eat raw meat. Keyla's cooking was a tiny bit better than that.

Ben perked up but didn't say anything, taking in the smells with interest.

"How far north?" Farthorn asked, finishing the piece of meat, blood dripping down his chin.

"Depends on your flight speed," Ilea said. "Half a day, maybe more."

She had the mark on Elfie, which meant no detours or getting lost.

He contemplated and finally hissed. "Very well. If Isalthar wishes it."

"Can all withstand the storms?" Asay asked.

"We shall move through the ravines, and increase our speed by night," Isalthar said.

That's a no, Ilea thought, looking at the group. She assumed Asay and Isalthar had little trouble surviving, the former mostly just because he asked. Feyrair claimed it was no issue but she wanted to see that first. The rest she doubted could take a direct hit without a care, even Ben.

Then again they're elves. They probably had a lot longer to train resistances. My healing and Sentinel Core advantages for training would easily be overcome with a few more years or even decades.

Ilea summoned her map and sat down in a chair of ash, focusing on all her marks. She could easily place them but the distance to most was too high for specific tracking. Walter and Dale were the closest, their movements sometimes perceivable. More so Dale, because of his profession.

"Sure you don't want some?" Feyrair asked, holding out a bloody chunk of raw meat, intestines and bones sticking out on one side.

She continued eating while looking at the map. "You should really think about improving your cuisine."

"What do you mean?" he asked and sat on the ground next to her. "This is just perfect," he bit down, grinding through the bone with his teeth.

The sound was grating in her ears but she didn't show a reaction, knowing his diet would simply change to purely bones whenever she was around.

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Humans should go out more, she thought, sighing at the wonderful hearty taste of her cheese and potato dish.

Asay still stared at her but she didn't mind much. There was a reason Ben sat down next to him immediately. Perhaps they shared an interest in humans and their peculiar behaviors.

"What makes a human join a group of elves?" Farthorn asked.

Ilea looked up, chewed for a moment and swallowed. "I met one in the north. We made a deal. I'd explore a lost city dungeon, and he would share information. He wasn't even a Cerithil Hunter then."

"But he is now?" Farthorn asked, glancing over to Isalthar. "Are we sure this isn't a trap?"

"The dungeon is real, and I trust them," Ilea said. "Elfie wouldn't lie about that."

"Elfie..." Asay tasted the word before he giggled. "Spectacular."

He raised his hand and looked at her.

"Do you have a question?" Ilea asked.

"Are we all Elfies? Or is there only one?" Asay asked.

Ilea smiled. "I'm not sure. I like Asay though. It's a good name."

“Indeed it is. You have fine taste, for someone so fiercely dressed in ash, reeking of death and power,” he spoke.

“A potential disruption in Praetorian production is worth the potential risks,” Isalthar said. “Or would you disagree?”

All the elves quieted down, looking at Farthorn.

“No,” he said, his eyes towards the ground.

What just happened? she thought, looking at Ben.

He smiled but didn't say anything.

Power dynamics, or maybe a hierarchy thing? I wonder how much the Hunters took over from their respective domains' structures.

Feyrair had eaten a respectable part of the beast, hissing when he seemed done.

A question?

He stored the carcass in his storage item as white flame burst from his body, burning away the dried blood and small pieces of skin and flesh still sticking to him.

Isalthar floated to Ilea, his eyes fixated on her. “We shall follow you, Ilea. Do not lead us astray.”

“Is that a threat or a plea?” she asked with a smile, standing up as her map vanished and the ash dissolved. She finished the food with a few last bites and spread her wings.

The elf didn't clarify, leaving the interpretation to her alone.

“I'm not familiar with this area. Any reason not to go north directly? We could fly eastward first,” she said.

“There is nothing in our way,” Isalthar said.

“Good, then let's see how fast we can go,” Ilea said and started flying. She assumed it was a bad idea suggesting she carry some of them.

The next hour turned out quite underwhelming. Isalthar, Feyrair, and Asay could keep up with her non-charged wings but the rest fell behind quickly. Seithir at the lowest level was surprisingly the quickest of the three others.

The group managed to pass the Naraza mountain chain rather quickly, the winds growing harsher and the mana more dense.

Ilea tapped Feyrair's arm, the group now flying through a broad crevice leading northwards. “I think we've reached a suitable stage,” she said with a grin.

The elf looked up to the looming dark clouds, his red reptilian eyes turning towards her. “Indeed,” he said. “Seithir, call for me if we are needed,” he said.

“Our guide is already abandoning us?” Farthorn asked, looking at the two before he hissed.

“Few forks in the way, just keep going northward,” Ilea said.

“Enjoy yourselves, barbarians,” Ben said.

Ilea blinked up, flying out of the tear in the land.

Feyrair followed, as did Asay.

“I merely wish to watch,” he said with a broad grin.

Feyrair rushed ahead, flying for a few minutes with Ilea effortlessly keeping pace.

Asay fell behind but he would catch up soon enough.

The elf came to a stop when a large cloud filled with arcane energy loomed over them, purple streaks of lightning slamming into the savage landscape nearby.

She felt the power and shock waves from hundreds of meters away. Compared to her first time in the north, the natural phenomenon no longer proved an insurmountable challenge. Flying here instead was a testament to their power.

“You’re a few levels lower than me, Fey. Are you sure you want to do this?” Ilea teased.

The elf glowed with power, his body erupting in white flame, his eyes a blazing red.

“A human like you needs more than a few levels and Classes to best me,” he said, a streak of purple energy rushing past him a few meters away, taking with it a part of the white flame covering his body. His left arm was left limp and blackened.

Ilea watched as he started moving it again, both his skin and armor above reforming before her eyes.

“Surprised?” he asked, his sharp claws extending with blazing white flames.

“I thought dragons would be invulnerable,” Ilea said, feeling the power build above her.

She displaced herself into the trajectory of the lightning that came down close by, letting it spread through her with its blazing purple energies.

The arcane power broke through her armor and into her body, her third tier healing regenerating it all in mere instants as the lightning slowed, wreaking what little havoc it could against her resilience.

Feyrair laughed, white wings of flame materializing behind him as his magic surged. “I knew you wouldn’t disappoint,” he said and rushed her.

She let him come, her auras and spells ready to answer whatever he threw out.

The elf started with five blazing spheres forming above his head, sending them towards her with a higher speed than he himself moved at.

Ilea let them advance, her precognition informing her about the damage they would do.

She didn’t move.

The spheres exploded in bright fire, energy, and heat. The air trembled, leaving behind the uninjured ashen healer flying amidst the lessening inferno.

She saw the fires sticking to her and willed the affected ash away, reforming her armor below.

The elf was upon her in the next moment, appearing next to her with his clawed hands lashing out.

She deflected his first blow, pushing away his claws with her left hand. Her ashen limbs had reformed, lashing out at him before a bright flame spread out in a sphere around the elf.

Her ash was pushed away as he pressed against her hold. *He's stronger*, she noted.

Feyrair slashed at the limbs with his other hand, the bright flame able to cut through the ash. Four limbs still sneaked past, cutting into his armor and body.

Ilea's reverse healing and mana intrusion flowed into him with every moment their bodies touched, his fire in turn burning both her armor, skin, and mana. Her smirk widened when he broke away, vanishing to reappear ten meters away.

His fire slowed her healing but not by much. *Not more than what I'm doing to him.*

The elf vanished again, avoiding a bolt of lightning striking down from the arcane storm. Bright energy formed on his palms, beams of fire lashing out to meet her.

Ilea laughed and moved her wings, avoiding the spell entirely. She twirled and blinked through his quickly moving fire beams on her way towards him, the elf in turn keeping his distance.

When she got close enough, she simply let the fires burn into her, her ash and skin below resilient to fire more so than most other magic. She punched towards him when he suddenly vanished.

Ilea used Space Shift to latch on to his teleport and appeared with him, her fist connecting with his armored chest.

Destruction and Storm of Cinders spread into him with a sizzling noise, his armor denting slightly as he was pushed back, only to slice away at the ashen limbs that came for him.

His eyes opened wide suddenly, Ilea closing the distance with her wings and grappling onto him.

No teleports for either of us, she thought, ignoring the wild swipes of his powerful claws and the fire burning all around.

They tumbled as she slammed her fist into his face repeatedly, breaking away the helmet piece by piece as her ash dug into his powerful armor and skin. It was a test, to see whose regeneration would prevail but Ilea didn't have to take a risk, able to teleport away whenever she realized he could overwhelm her.

Lightning struck, slamming into the tumbling pair and the ground below, ripping stone asunder.

The force pushed them down, the high level warriors crashing into the ground without a pause in their attacks.

Feyrair looked worse for wear, much of his armor stripped away, blood showing on a hundred cuts, pouring from a few deeper wounds.

Ilea herself was on fire, her ash regenerating where it could, stripped away in parts by his claws where white flame now burned her skin. Much of the heat she simply absorbed with her Lava Magic Resistance into Heart of Cinder, the mana he expended returning to her through her high resistances and Sentinel Core.

Another punch cracked his cheekbone, his left eye squished instantly. A surge of energy spread out from his chest, pure kinetic force mixed with incredible heat pushed Ilea back, making her hit the ground a few times before she skidded to a halt.

Her wings reformed as she cut away the burning parts of her body using her sharpened ash, healing taking care of the rest.

She smiled to herself, closing her right eye when a lightning strike crashed into the ground a few meters away. Her wings worked against the force, her body barely pushed aside. Rocks and debris ricocheted off her ashen armor, the ground vibrating with the released energy as the air sung with magic.

Before her, Feyrair had changed. His body bulged and exploded with scales and fire. A large tail and powerful wings burst from the massive dragonling as his four clawed feet dug into the stone below. He was larger than last time, the muscle clearly visible and his whole form shining bright within her sphere.

The only recognizable feature was the white flame clinging to his body and the two red eyes set into his draconic skull, their focus on her alone.

“Show me what you can do, dragonling,” Ilea said and laughed, ascending towards the clouds as she watched him do the same.

His large maw opened as the surrounding mana seemed to flow towards him, the flames stirring as the heat increased yet again.

Charge all the way up, buddy, Ilea thought and waited, a glance to her left revealing the distant Asay floating in midair. She saw a purple bolt flash towards him before it suddenly changed directions, hitting the ground at a steep angle. *That’s a little better than my lightning redirect.*

Feyrair had finished his spell, the world growing still before he roared.

White fire rushed out in a chaotic storm of heat and energy, spreading in a massive cone loosely directed at her. Not a precise or particularly quick attack perhaps, but likely not intended for such a small and nimble target.

Ilea could’ve used her third tier Displacement to send the flames right back, or she could’ve used Phaseshift to reduce its damage. A few simple teleports might’ve done the trick as well. But of course she did none of those things.

She spread her arms wide and welcomed the dragonling’s wrath.