

Chapter 666 Stormy Weather

The journey brought them even further north, the winds picking up as they advanced. Ice started to form on the group, despite their heat generation and fire magic. It hadn't reached Ice Elemental levels but Ilea wondered how anything below level five to six hundred could feasibly survive in an environment like this.

They took a break in a small cavern above a mountain outcrop, Feyrair producing a flame that provided warmth.

None of them would be in any danger of actually freezing, but the comfort was appreciated. Ilea shook the ice off her wings and shoulders, her own heat generation not currently active. "Shit weather up here," she murmured.

"Lightning will still strike here. We're not past that height yet," Pierce informed. "Gets more dangerous there, if you can believe it."

"Of course, that's where all the creatures live who can claim a place in the suns," Feyrair said with a smile.

"Have you been there?" Ilea asked, sitting down and summoning some food.

"A few times, yes," he said and hissed. "Dangerous, for someone below level three hundred. More so for those above."

Verena nodded to herself. "Worthy prey."

"Elves are not the only ones interested in hunting," Fey said with a grin. "But of course that dragon vastly underestimated me. I was about to win that battle when he decided to retreat."

Pierce started laughing, dodging a fire beam that burned into the cavern wall.

"Stop it children," Verena said. "You will attract attention," she added, looking at Ilea.

"You want to go alone instead? None of you is particularly geared for stealth," she said.

Feyrair waved them off. "Ilea's space magic easily offsets her lack of stealth. She escaped a dragon after all. Not quite the same feat as challenging one, but it's impressive enough to travel north from here."

"She did challenge it," Verena said. "To save our lives."

"How did you fare?" Feyrair asked with a toothy smile and glowing eyes.

"About as well as against the Meadow? And I know both were holding back," Ilea answered.

"I can still hear her frustrated roar before you moved us out of there," Pierce said and giggled. "I owe you one for that experience. Whatever you want," she added and grinned.

Ilea looked at the woman before she glanced at Feyrair. *Hmm.*

There was nothing quite as good as an enjoyable fight after a near death experience, but some things came close. "As long as we're all in the clear that this is strictly casual."

The Elf looked at her, raising one eyebrow.

Pierce blushed lightly, a broad smile on her face as she covered her mouth with both hands. “The elf... and... Lilith?” she muttered.

Verena sighed. “I’ll be waiting outside. Don’t take too long.”

“Interrupt if something shows up,” Ilea said.

“No I won’t,” the Elder said in a matter of fact one, vanishing from the cave.

Feyrair grinned, looking at her as he rested his chin on one hand. “There wasn’t even a fight to get me excited,” he complained.

Ilea appeared in front of him with a fist to his face, bones cracking before he slammed against the wall behind. She heard a hiss as his face and skull reformed.

“Is... it always like this?” Pierce asked in a purring voice as her metal armor flowed away.

“The fighting usually takes longer,” Ilea said, appearing behind the woman, her arms coming to rest on her chest as a spark of lightning flowed through her. “Now, do you want to try me too?” she whispered, her ash spreading through the cave.

Ilea sighed, rolling around in her bed of ash with two defeated monsters by her side. Despite her many prejudices against this experience, she had found it rather exciting, and surprisingly enjoyable. *I suppose as long as the relationships are clearly defined, nobody gets hurt.*

She stood up, her mantle layering over her body before she stepped out into the blizzard. Some of the ground inside still glowed, the cave certainly looking a little rougher than it had before.

Ilea found the Elder sitting on a boulder about ten meters away, ice and snow covering half her form as she meditated. She glanced down at the woman and smiled, joining her as she formed heat within herself, creating a small shield of ash against the blizzard.

Verena opened her eyes and looked over, accepting the bottle of ale Ilea handed to her.

“Not everyday you can share a cold one in a blizzard,” she said.

“What does that mean?” Verena asked, removing the cork of the bottle.

“My attempt at a joke,” Ilea answered. “Sorry for taking so long.”

They clinked their bottles together, Verena waving her off. “I hope you’re not insulted that I didn’t join.”

“Why would I be?” Ilea asked.

“Pierce was always annoyed,” she said and laughed. “But I should stop using her as a baseline.”

Ilea chuckled. “You really should,” she said. *Lightning wasn’t only made for flying*, she mused, feeling considerably more calm. She had never visited The Root again, but she imagined the experience would be a little underwhelming with her enhanced body.

“It’s nice,” Verena said after a short pause. “To feel nature, as well as here.”

“Not easy to find climates this extreme,” Ilea said, her bottle nearly glowing with the heat her body put out, Verena’s literally on fire. Just for the liquid to stay, well, liquid. “If we’re back in

Hallowfort later, you have to try a lava bath by the Trakorov, it's the laziest four mark monster you'll find. Great for resistance training too."

"Hmm, that sounds lovely. After this. A monster though, won't it just eat me?" she asked.

"Not if I'm there," Ilea answered. "Wait, you know Helena, right?"

Verena nodded lightly, the ashen shield moving a little to adjust for the changing winds.

"She makes poison cake. And other insane foods that only high level people can even survive," Ilea said.

Verena smiled. "I see. My interest is limited, knowing what she likely uses them for on a daily basis."

Ilea sighed. "I think she has less extravagant ways to conduct her, business. She struck me as somewhat practical."

"That she is," Verena said. "Just so we are clear, I don't think there's a better alternative than Helena, but that doesn't mean I have to like her."

"Maybe one day, her business won't be needed anymore," Ilea said. *I'm still unsure if it's needed right now.*

Verena chuckled and finished the bottle. "You're awfully optimistic," she said and threw the glass into the storm.

"Didn't think you'd be one to litter," Ilea mused. "Throwing trash into nature," she clarified.

The Elder smiled wickedly. "What other way do we humans have to leave our mark in these hostile lands?"

Ilea considered the words and smiled. It resonated in some ways. Back on Earth, they had been the Apex predator, the beings controlling everything. Here however, they were lucky to have a territory of their own. She looked at the bottle and threw it into the storm, wondering if another intelligent being would ever come across their unforgivable crime.

Pierce joined their side, hugging Ilea with her metal armor and giving her a kiss on her cheek. "Thanks, darling."

"You're making it weird," Ilea deadpanned but smiled right after, seeing the woman give her a wink before her helmet formed as well.

Feyrair stepped out from the cave and transformed into his dragon form. He spread his wings and roared into the storm, most of the sound lost rather quickly within the fast moving winds and snow.

"Men will be men," Pierce said.

"Elf," Verena said and stood up.

"It's not the teeth and ears that make a man," Pierce replied and laughed when she saw Verena's tired expression.

Ilea summoned the locator and turned around. "Alright, last chance for a pee."

They continued their flight through the freezing blizzard, the strong winds and ice slowing them down considerably, even Pierce now carried by Ilea as her own flight wasn't exactly made to handle this kind of weather.

Ilea could only trust her dominion and the locator, the visibility in the storm even with all her advancements only around three meters in all directions. She had to adjust their height a few times as the environment seemed to lead further up. So far she didn't notice any difference in the air but she had a few skills to help with that. The mana density certainly increased, however not as quickly as down in the Descent or near high level creatures.

They broke out of the storm an hour later, coming to a stop on a frozen over ledge above the chaotic clouds below. Ilea could see flashes of red inside the freezing storm a few dozen kilometers west, a set of ice crystals flashing out and towards the sky, moonlight reflecting off the shards before they shattered in a spectacular set of ice magic explosions.

"We just barely missed whatever is fighting in there," Ilea said.

"That storm isn't natural?" Pierce asked.

"It should be," Verena answered.

Ilea sat down on the ledge, summoning a meal as she watched the storm. "The scale alone could suggest an ice elemental, or something close to that power."

"Well, we probably made it past the storms," Pierce said and looked around. "And it just goes further up," she added and spread her arms.

Ilea looked behind herself, seeing the mountains reaching up towards the sky. She shivered, the air crisp but not the reason for her reaction. She felt small, the endless northern lands spreading below, white specks showing large masses of collected mists, hundreds of white lines showing the cracks in the land. And above them loomed mountain ranges that rivaled the Himalayas.

She savored the breathtaking sights, almost considering to set a teleportation point here to have a bottle of ale and a meal every morning with this ludicrously beautiful view.

"That's why I love this fucking place," Pierce said and twirled while giggling, suddenly in a summer dress that froze near instantly. "Ah shit," she murmured and stored it again. "Hope that's salvageable. Ah well."

"Just have to use your element," Ilea said, moving her mantle into a copy of the dress she had worn at the Yinnahall ball.

"Yeah, hah. Let me just make a dress out of metal," the Dragonslayer complained.

"And here I thought you said ash was inferior," Ilea mused.

The woman glared at her. "You're above level five hundred, woman, of course your shit is better."

"Levels have nothing to do with that," Ilea answered. "It's just superior. Audur focused on me too because of it," she said with pride. "Which means I'm special."

"You're special alright," Pierce said and sent a bolt of lightning at her.

Ilea just let it hit her face, the sparks flowing through her as she grinned. "It adds to the dress, thanks."

The Elder growled and stomped the ground, walking away as she grumbled something about ash abominations.

Ilea checked the locator and smiled. "And we have a reading too. Something nearby."

"Here?" Verena asked, looking around. "Inside the mountain?"

"Doesn't seem to be pointing down that much. Maybe one of the Key Wardens liked the view and got eaten by a dragon," she said and scanned the skies. There were no dragons. No visible ones at least.

She finished her meal and stood up, walking along the ledge as she tried to pinpoint the location of the key with the locator. "Might still be a ways off," she said and spread her wings, the others joining her as the group flew along the side of the mountain and towards the indicated location.

Ilea slowed down about ten minutes later as they were getting closer, a rather spacious ledge covered in snow, ice, and rocks spreading below with the angle of the arrow changing downwards.

"There's nothing here," Pierce stated.

Ilea took a step forward and stopped, focusing on the wisps hanging in the air. "There's a barrier," she said. "Right in front of me."

"I can't see anything," Pierce said.

"The same," Verena added.

"It's mostly space magic. Pretty well made too," she mused.

"Maybe it's Audur's brother, Audor," Pierce suggested.

Feyrair actually hissed in amusement.

Ilea suppressed the groan, knowing it was exactly what the woman had aimed for.

"Someone has kept this key hidden," Verena said. "How extensive is the barrier?"

Ilea flew along the length, out over the cliff side and back towards the stone reaching higher still. "Large. Probably something that needs to be maintained, but I don't know much about enchantments. It doesn't feel like an active spell someone is using. There's almost no change."

"Which means you can get us in," Pierce said with a grin.

"Getting in isn't a problem, no," Ilea murmured. "I just don't know how good of an idea it is. Last time there was a dragon."

"You can come back after you finish the training you mentioned before," Verena suggested.

Ilea looked at her and shook her head lightly. "You misunderstand. I'll go in there anyway. I'm questioning if I should leave you three outside."

Feyrair hissed. "I should've trained more, instead of coming here."

Pierce groaned. "Come oon, we survived last time, didn't we?!"

"It's the least we should do. You can send for us with your mark, right?" Verena asked, showing the back of her hand.

Ilea checked the barrier. "I don't see why not... but if whoever made this is in there, they might have a way to stop my messages."

"Fifteen minutes," Pierce said. "Then I come inside."

"They will be alarmed as well, if you don't slip through perfectly," Ilea said. "But alright. Fifteen minutes sounds appropriate to find out more. I'll come back if I find something or contact Verena."

"Acceptable," Fey said and sat down in the snow, staring down the invisible barrier with his reptilian eyes.

"And if the mark vanishes, you get the fuck away," Ilea said. "Just in case."

Verena gave her a nod.

"It's impossible to rid the world of you," Feyrair said.

"Cult follower of Lilith?" Pierce asked, summoning a comfortable chair next to him, the thing immediately freezing as she adjusted her back with an annoyed expression.

"Ash," Ilea whispered her way and winked, vanishing into the barrier with her next breath.

She checked the field of complex enchantments, not seeing any reaction to her passing. *I'm getting better at this*, she thought with a grin and looked around. The ledge itself looked more or less the same, the snow still getting through after all. What she saw however was a rune covered gate leading into the side of the mountain, about three meters high and two wide, made of solid steel.

Her dominion cut off at the entrance, unable to penetrate the set of enchantments. She tried to decipher them but there were quite a few, including more anti space magic ones. It took her about a minute to figure out the defenses and displaced herself inside, ready to leave the moment she stumbled upon something far beyond her capabilities.

She appeared within a rather spacious entrance hall, the ground, walls, and ceiling made of steel just like the door behind her. The hall however wasn't barren, various richly decorated carpets on the ground, armchairs, sofas, and shelves strewn about, seemingly of human make. *Human or anything humanoid*, she thought, her wings moving slowly as she kept herself afloat, just in case there were enchantments on the ground. She checked and noted that there were.

Someone's extra paranoid, she thought, the steel obviously reminding her of the Ascended facility down in the Descent. Everything else seemed wrong however. The lighting was warm, intricate near artistic magical lamps adding to the homely atmosphere, various doors leading further into the complex made of wood and beautifully carved. She could smell the tea they drank in various human cities that smelled suspiciously like coffee.

Ilea didn't remember if her dominion had ever been quite as restricted, every single room protected by more enchantments. She waited for another minute, simply observing the hall and the various barriers nearby. She smiled when the entire set changed, a new mesh now protecting the facility. This set however was easier than the previous one, at least to her. She had spent days upon days figuring out whatever the Meadow could throw at her after all. If anybody could get into this place without using brute force alone, it was her.

No signs made the navigation easier, Ilea floating over to one of the shelves where she checked the tomes resting within. *Advanced Barrier Appliance II, The secrets of vegetation magic, Advanced Healing – Order of Balance*, Ilea read a few more titles, finding various sources familiar at least based on the locations or organization.

She chose a random door and displaced herself through, appearing in a long steel hallway. Paintings on the walls depicted various beings. Humans, Elves, dwarves, all in different situations, a general focus on magic it seemed. She moved on, down a few sets of stairs before she appeared in a dimly lit hall, dozens of glass containers showing vaguely humanoid creatures frozen within. She couldn't detect any life from them, but there was magic flowing into the containers from within the walls.

Of course it's a fucked up research facility, she mused, wondering in whose home she had stepped this time. She left the bodies for now, unsure if she would reveal her position instantly if she started destroying them or removing the humanoids inside. The containers themselves felt cold even as she flew past.

Displacing herself out of the facility brought her into another hallway, another set of paintings depicting various beings. She did a double take and stopped near one of them, seeing the familiar outline of a humanoid made up of interlinked steel plates. The well depicted magical glint and glowing white eyes brought a smile to her face.