

Chapter 591 Proposals

“It would be best for Isalthar to hold the key,” Farthorn suggested. “Should we be able to find more of them, he should be the one to communicate with that being.”

“A foolish notion,” Isalthar said immediately. “The reason we have achieved this, dear Hunter, is because she is a human. She is not of Elven blood. Privileges apply to her that would not befall us. An ally to their cause. Those words would not be spoken to our kind, not ever.” He looked at Ilea. “I do not wish to take what is yours, Ilea. You suggest knowledge and solutions I had not deemed possible, and yet you are confident.”

“You have invited us into your home, perhaps a necessity but nonetheless, you have proven yourself worthy of the title given, and an ally to the Cerithil Hunters. And yet you are not of our blood. Already we have received much from you. An imbalance that I had ignored due to your agreement with Niivalyr. Yet we have reached a point where such is no longer acceptable,” he said and intensely stared at her.

“I really don’t mind. The fight was pretty exciting,” she said. “And while you have your reasons to fight the Taleen, I have mine.”

“I must insist, on my honor as Isalthar Nauum,” he spoke.

Ilea smiled. “Alright, I want wind magic resistance training from you as a start. Resistance training from everyone here, not that we weren’t doing that already,” she said. “Plus, if we go looking for the keys, I’ll talk to my allies with only Elfie, Fey, and Neiphato.”

“You know you can trust him,” Feyrair said to her, his voice sounding a little hurt.

“Oh I trust him, but I have to be a little apprehensive of someone who can destroy entire cities on a whim. What’s your plan anyway? If you manage to destroy the army down in Iz? What if it stops the Taleen from coming? Or if the gates there allow you to find the largest facilities much quicker than before,” Ilea said.

“The war has been the plan. To bring an end to it. I dared not hope for its success, nor will I begin to entertain such at the current time. Ilea, I admit that you are extraordinary, and what we have learned in the past weeks brings us closer to change than much of our efforts have allowed so far. Yet you are human, and you are young. I dare not share in your hopes. Not until the last Guardian is destroyed,” Isalthar spoke.

“Humor me then. Taleen stop coming, what about the domains. I don’t care much about your politics but I do have people I care about, you all amongst them. And I might be young but while this war may not end in a year or a hundred, it will at some point. Because I won’t let those machines win. Not after what they’ve done to me, and to the expedition I was with.”

“But I’ve also seen entire towns erased, their populations slaughtered, by Youth from the Wastes of Ash. I don’t want one war to replace the next. That’s why, if you want my help, and the help of my allies, I want you to think about what comes after. How we can prevent more meaningless slaughter on every front. Isn’t that what this is about in the end?”

Isalthar smiled lightly. “I understand. Much has transpired between the domains and your people. Once we called each other allies, in an age long past. We know that relations cannot be repaired, not

for many generations and not with the Oracles and Monarchs that rule today. I do not expect a change for humanity in case of the Taleen destruction. However I understand your concerns. A single Elf or a group of youths could destroy entire settlements without care. I will consider, but all I can offer now is our protection from those who would seek such destruction.”

Feyrair hissed. “Our presence would just incite more Elves to come, just to see if they could best us. Ilea is enough to deal with upstart Youths. What has to change are the domains. If the Oracles and Monarchs are the problem, we’ll just have to remove them first.”

A few hisses happened in quick succession, most of the Elves participating.

“And how do you propose, to stand against a Monarch?” Farthorn asked with obvious mockery.

Feyrair showed his teeth and grinned. “Oh, how else but to become more powerful. Through training, death, and hardship.”

Farthorn laughed. “You would challenge them?”

“Who better than us? We do not adhere to the rules set by the Oracles. We travel the depths, fight monsters that would not even survive outside of a dungeon. We are hidden, and protected from the whims of the Monarchs. They may be able to kill anyone who would dare challenge them in their domains, but we operate on the outside. They deem us cursed, unworthy, heretics, and traitors. And they dismiss all but the Val Akuun. A title that shall not remain unique,” Feyrair spoke, grinning at Isalthar.

The Elves remained utterly silent, Farthorn staring at Feyrair with eyes wide open.

Isalthar was the one to break the silence. “Feyrair. You speak of a path I have long abandoned. It is a path of destruction, of suffering, loss, and death. A path on which I cannot follow you.”

“When we are ready, you won’t have to,” Feyrair said.

Asay grinned. “Finally found your conviction. And here I thought you would never stop with your stagnating ways.”

The dragonling didn’t say anything, just glancing at the elf. “What about you? You have idled in pursuit of magic. Do you not wish to see change?”

“Change? Oh truly, it would be joyous to see the Monarchs slain, their domains in disarray, music in the streets, humans and dwarfs invited to our homes. But alas, I have little interest to see the death needed for such an opportunity. The results however, I shall welcome,” Asay spoke with a broad grin and sparkling purple eyes.

“What about the rest of you?” Feyrair asked. “Niivalyr? Neiphato? Seithir?”

Elfie looked up, a thoughtful expression on his face before he glanced at Ilea. “I’ll do what is needed to protect you and yours, Ilea. Already you have shown me a path, one I shall continue to follow. But when you have reached the strength to challenge Monarchs, I will be but a shadow, nowhere near such heights. Nor may I ever reach them. I want to see an end to this meaningless slaughter. But to return to the domains... to challenge the Oracles...,” he said, looking at her with a sad expression. “I’m sorry.”

Feyrair hissed. “Pathetic. And you call your-”

Ilea flared up her deviant aura and hissed with Monster Hunter. “Shut it,” she said and looked at Elfie. “Thank you, Niivalyr. There is no need to be sorry.”

The dragonling looked at her with consideration but didn't challenge her.

"I will stand by your side," Neiphato said. "The Taleen are merely a symptom. An ancient wrath brought upon us by the very domains we have called our own. Their removal will be replaced by another. Let me travel with you, and I shall reach for the same strength you have gained," he spoke and looked at Ilea with a soft smile.

Seithir didn't say anything but instead appeared next to Isalthar, his allegiances clear.

Ilea noted that Feyrair hadn't even asked Ben about his opinion, the ice mage remaining quiet as he observed the conversation.

"Others will want change. Ancients, Chosen, perhaps even a Monarch. As long as we can bring an end to the status quo, our ancient ways, and stagnation," Feyrair said and gestured around himself. "Look at this house. Built by those we consider lesser, masterfully set in stone, spacious and beautiful, shelves filled with writing, stories and history. You all ate the meal Ilea has shared with us. I want that too. Raw meat can be so much more."

Ilea grinned. "Now you just sound like you want to take over."

He looked at her with a smile. "Would that be too much to ask? It's natural to challenge the powerful. And I'm tired of fighting machines alone. Of ignoring those who would call me cursed," he said and glanced at Elfie.

"I just want to beat up the two assholes who fucked me up," Ilea said. *That's motivation enough.*

"Then let us find those keys, and let us find creatures so terrifying, even a Monarch would not dare engage. For only then, will we be able to face them," Feyrair said, flames erupting on his armor.

"You're burning my chair," Ilea said.

He stopped the fires, patting the wood carefully. "Apologies," he said and glanced at Neiphato.

The elf lifted a hand, the wood regaining its color as a few swirls and flower like extensions formed on the chair. A nice addition really.

"I'll go back to the Praetorian facility. A lot of work left undone," Farthorn said. "Do what you must, Feyrair, Ilea."

"And I shall join you," Asay said before he glanced at Ilea. "Yet I shall watch your growth and progress with interest."

"You will need allies," Isalthar said. "If your goal is the freeing of our domains, and not the death of all our kind. I have decided. Should your hope come to pass, Ilea, I shall support you two in any way I can. Not all my ancient bonds have yet been broken. However I shall not face another elf in battle, should it lead to death. With one exception."

The Sanvaruun, Ilea thought instantly. Well, it could be whoever. Not like I know his past or many of the Elves he knows. Another Oracle perhaps?

Ben smiled slightly when she met his eyes.

Or maybe I'm right.

"I will gather the Hunters we can find, inform them of what we have uncovered," Isalthar said, glancing over to Seithir.

“Agreed,” the soul mage said and smiled.

“The next time we enter Iz, we will prevail,” he spoke.

“Ah, speaking of entering Iz. It’s probably a hassle going down all the way from Karth. Maybe we can figure out a way to use the Taleen network ourselves,” Ilea said.

“We have tried for millennia. Not even the gate keys allow for manipulation. Your hope of ending the war is foolish, but this is downright insulting,” Farthorn said with a hiss.

Ilea looked at him with a smile. “I didn’t say I could figure it out, but I do know a certain tree.”

“What does a tree have to do with anything?” Farthorn asked.

“Oh, way more than you would think,” Ilea said with a wide grin.

Ilea was joined by Feyrair and Neiphato. The two, she trusted enough to use the gate outside of Ravenhall. Neiphato anyway and Feyrair because even when the One without Form had contacted her, he left it for her to decide what to share with Isalthar.

Isalthar was joined by Seithir, their journey likely to bring them through the Navali forest, looking to find more Hunters.

Elfie, Asay, Ben, and Farthorn joined together, ready to continue the exploration and clearing of Izta. A task that would prove difficult, the group unlikely to defeat an Executioner on their own, and yet it would be priceless for their continued growth.

“Sure you’ll find it with just that?” Ilea asked, watching the four Elves prepare to leave.

“Yes,” Asay said with confidence.

“Alright,” Ilea mused. “Do make sure they don’t die,” she whispered to him.

He grinned, showing his sharp teeth. “I shall do my utmost, Guardian of Cerith.”

Ilea rolled her eyes at his knightly play and joined her own group. “I have to visit a nearby city before we go. You two better stay here.”

“What, why?” Feyrair said with a grin, his hair changing from a deep red to a yellowish color. “Are you perhaps embarrassed about us?”

Neiphato hissed, looking at him with his blue eyes. “We understand of course.”

Ilea looked at him and crossed her arms in thought. Feyrair was, well he was Feyrair. But if nothing else he wasn’t particularly intimidating. If nobody saw his magic that was. Neiphato on the other hand was downright disarming. He didn’t share some of the rougher features of most male Elves she had met, nor the wild disposition and lack of tact. He would fit into a ball for nobility with far greater ease than she ever could.

“Maybe... maybe you’re right, Fey,” Ilea said.

Feyrair immediately hissed. “You’re not actually considering bringing us into a human city, are you? As much as I like the idea, if we are revealed, the consequences would be on you. And your reputation.”

“Yeah, but I doubt you’d be found out. Not with me there. Just keep your heads covered in armor. I do have an inkling that Claire wouldn’t mind too much. And at some point I’ll have to reveal my Elven allies. Why not now?” Ilea said. *As long as Sulivhaan or other Shadows don’t see them.*

“I advise against this,” Neiphato said.

“Noted. And dismissed. Come on, fighting monsters shouldn’t be the only risks we should take. Plus I can show you Ravenhall. It’s a delightful place,” Ilea said with a broad grin.

“She really does have Elven blood in her ancestry,” Fey said to the other elf.

“Or perhaps a monster of a kind,” Neiphato confirmed.

Ilea rolled her eyes, the two Elves getting up as helmets formed on their heads, made of scales and wood respectively.

She went to Elfie, his group prepared now too. Isalthar and Seithir had already left earlier.

“Make sure you don’t die out there,” Ilea said, grasping the elf’s hand.

Elfie smiled, the mist in his dark gray eyes mesmerizing as ever. “I shall not die, forgotten and exiled. Nor will you,” he said, squeezing her hand with his. “We shall make note of all Executioners, waiting for your coming.”

Ilea grinned. “Do that. We’ll gladly take care of them.”

“Farewell, Ilea, Feyrair, Neiphato,” Niivalyr said and bowed to them. “May you find the strength you seek.”

“Fortune to us all,” Asay commented with a smirk.

Farthorn hissed. “May you succeed. Know that I hold no personal grudge, after all, you have saved my life. I just try to be a cynical voice of reason with this bunch of hopeless fools.”

Ilea raised her eyebrows before she imitated an affirmative hiss. “Cynical asshole, more like. Work on your magic, I’ll be looking forward to some void resistance training.”

He hissed back, either amused or annoyed at her try. Both perhaps.

“I’ll give my best to protect them,” Ben said. “Though it saddens me that I won’t be getting a tour of your city.”

“Not exactly my city. But who knows, if you survive, maybe sometime in the future,” Ilea said.

He smiled. “I shall look forward to it.”

The Elves too said their farewells before the four vanished out of her home, flying southwards along the coast. Hopefully to find Izta in the desert and not a death of dehydration.

“We shall be off too,” Ilea said to her group and blinked out.

“I’ve been wondering. You are aware of the monsters living in that cave over there,” Feyrair said.

She smiled. “Ah yes, I hope they’re eating alright. Probably not easy to hunt around here.”

“Animals, not monsters,” Neiphato said.

“What’s the difference?” Feyrair offered.

“One fights without thought, the other knows to hide when danger is nearby,” Neiphato explained.

Feyrair took a deep breath in and hissed. "I see. I usually kill them before I observe their behaviors."

"That kind of makes you one of the monsters," Ilea suggested.

He grinned. "Yes. Yes it does."

"I don't remember you being able to fly?" Ilea said, looking at Neiphato. "Evolution?"

He smiled and blushed a little, the wooden helmet covering his face again. "Yes. A lot has changed since reaching three hundred. I'd think you understand."

"I do. I hope it's the same at five hundred," Ilea said.

Feyrair laughed. "Oh I hope that too. Long have I waited."

"Same," Ilea sighed, flying up along the cliff side.

"Literal centuries," Feyrair mused.

Ilea nodded. "Right? Feels even longer to me."

The group flew through the southern mountain range and its valleys with a moderate speed, the position of the suns suggesting noon by now. The skies were mostly clear, snow only clinging to the higher mountains, creeks, rivers, and waterfalls supplying the lower altitudes with their life. Much of the lands had grown green again, occasional movements showing deer or wolves, bears and squirrels.

Little remained hidden to Ilea's enhanced eyes, flying in the skies like an ashen hawk. "Lower now, we don't want to get interviewed by a squad of guards."

"Why not? Would be interesting to see their reaction to our power," Feyrair said.

"Because I don't want to terrify the shit out of them. We can do that in areas where I don't care about the inhabitants," she said.

Feyrair hissed joyously. "They exist? Oh Monarch of the human domain?"

"What's that supposed to mean? I've probably killed more humans than you killed Elves," she said.

"Oh, Ilea. I don't doubt your capability for killing, just your age," he answered. "Though you do seem to care a great deal about humanity."

"She is human after all," Neiphato said.

"I care about weak people being trampled on. That's all. I don't care if they're human, elf, or bog worms. As long as they're sapient," she offered.

"Ah, Monarch of all then, not just humanity," Feyrair teased.

Ilea just rolled her eyes. "Remind me, who talked about changing the domains? Stopping their Monarchs?"

"Let me have my fun," Feyrair said. "How are you going to bring us into the city?"

They stood in the forest beyond the lake near Ravenhall. The street leading up to the gates had broadened, paved now with magical lights set within poles every twenty meters or so. Ilea watched the guards atop the walls, not finding an obvious gap in their attention.