

Chapter 764 Gathering

Zoy felt the warm breeze move through her hair. It was definitely rare for a Cerithil Hunter to stay in a ruin so close to the surface. She could feel the moss covered stone with her hands, perceived it within her magic. She felt bits of sunlight break through the ancient ceiling far above. Some of the others were within her range but most elected to stay at a reasonable distance. Humans were not welcome among the Hunters. She had learned as much in the few interactions she's had, though there were always outliers.

"Have you eaten?" Neiphato asked, the wood mage approaching with the carcass of an animal. Six legs and a beast like head. A predator, though not as dangerous as an elf.

She shook her head ever so slightly. Hunting she could do herself, though the elf who had called them here wanted secrecy. A gathering within the ruins of Elvator, deep within the Navali forest. She grabbed for the animal. "Ter valras," she spoke, a few hisses resounding from those who had heard her. A saying of thanks, enough to inspire hostility. She hissed back.

"Your Elvish is good," Neiphato said as he gestured to the bit of decrepit stone wall next to her.

She didn't react, instead using a hunting knife to cut away a chunk of skin. She bit into the flesh right after. When Inarulis had found her, the raw meat used to give her stomach aches, or worse. Not anymore.

"I did not expect to find a human here," the elf said.

He was the first to make conversation but she would much rather prefer he stare in silence too, or fight her. "Why are... you talking... to me?" she asked between gulps, blood rolling down her chin.

[Wood Mage – lvl 370]

The elf was among the weaker ones here, as was she. Zoy had learned early on however, that humans were different not just in looks and customs. She could hold her own against many of the present hunters, though most she didn't know.

"I'm bored," the elf said.

She raised her brows and hissed.

"You know, I spent some time traveling with a human. A few ones actually. And our group of Hunters wasn't quite as... difficult as the ones gathered here," he spoke.

Zoy remained quiet, eating more of the fresh meat. Hunters talking to humans, traveling with humans? A few decades prior the thought might've made her angry, knowing what she had been through to even be accepted here. Now, she would have to lie to say that she wasn't at least a little bit intrigued.

"Well no... we were probably even more difficult. But she more or less beat the others into submission. Hard to argue with strength," the elf continued. "Then they betrayed us, betrayed Isalthar, and everything we chose." He shook his head in a solemn manner.

"Savir e nave," she spoke. Hunters and prey, a saying Inarulis liked to use.

The elf smiled and hissed. “Indeed, though I wish they would’ve thought beyond that. It’s one way to look at life but I’ve learned there is more nuance.”

She remained quiet, watching as another elf stepped out of the dark and into her perception. She had heard his approach, had made an assumption based on his weight, his gait, and the grinding of his teeth. Veratin. The elf from the Fire Wastes did not hide his disdain for her species, though he respected Isalthea enough not to outright attack her. A challenge he did not issue, though Zoy assumed that was just another insult.

She didn’t much care. He would likely kill her if it came to a fight, and then she wouldn’t be of any help in fighting the Taleen. Illogical, she thought, though not unexpected. A gathering like this was strange in the first place.

“Young Neiphato. Why do you talk to this creature?” spoke Veratin, the elf adding a long hiss to underline his words, spoken in Elos Standard as a show of disrespect.

“She is a Hunter, like you and I,” he said.

A mistake, Zoy thought.

Veratin remained quiet for a few seconds before he hissed, magic flowing around him as he looked at his claws with orange red eyes. “Are you ready to prove those words?”

“No,” Neiphato said, eliciting a few more hisses from the nearby Hunters, some having moved closer now, others discussing amongst each other in whispered voices. “But our visitor might be willing to come here a little earlier than planned,” he added, looking lost in thought for a moment before he refocused. “Yes... she is... willing.”

“She?” Veratin asked.

Zoy perceived as a being appeared next to the wood mage, her form entirely clad in a magical armor. She nearly winced when the woman landed on the ground. *That weight.*

She knew her too, the same woman who had come and fought her near the isle of Garath. The woman who claimed to have fought Praetorians in the past. But she was different now.

[Battle Healer – lvl ???]

A three mark human. Why did she come here?

“I heard someone wants to fight?” the woman said. Zoy tried to remember her name but she came up with a blank.

Veratin hissed. “Who are you, to interrupt this conversation?”

“Lilith. A friend of the Hunters,” the woman said. “But I might reconsider if you’re here to represent them. Then again, you’re not quite on his level.”

He hissed once more.

Lilith ignored it, glancing over to Zoy. “Found you,” she spoke, her demeanor casual and relaxed.

Zoy felt trapped, feeling the attention of the predators around them shift from Lilith to herself.

“Didn’t expect you here,” Lilith said again before she turned back to Veratin. “If you want a fight, I’m happy to indulge you.”

The elf grinned, showing his sharp teeth as he hissed in an amused manner. “What could a human know about battle?”

“Yes, yes. Come on, less annoying talk and more fighting. Show me what you have,” Lilith said and spread her arms, magic flaring out from her form.

To his credit, the elf charged her right after her challenge. *And here I thought he'd go on and on about humans being inferior or something.* His clawed and burning hand slammed into her layered mantle, Ilea making no move to block or evade the attack. She tilted her head a little to the side. On the one hand it was comforting to know that the Hunter wouldn't outright kill her in a single strike, on the other it was insulting that he would underestimate her that much.

She burst into white flame, a few hisses resounding from the onlookers. About twenty elves had gathered in the ruins. Cerithil Hunters, all of them.

“I said show me what you have,” she repeated, summoning a few golden barriers around herself as she charged heat within herself.

The elf grinned, his body outright exploding with magical power, the fires intensifying as his magic fought the flame of creation stuck to his arm. His legs bent before he rushed forward, reaching her near instantly. This time his attacks were deliberate, claws reaching for her throat and eyes, flame exploding against her shields when they moved in the way. He circled her, dodging ashen limbs as he kept his aggression up, the first shield shattering on his fourth strike, the others unable to follow his velocity.

Ilea slapped away his hand, her own auras flaring up as they started to exchange blows. He deflected four of her strikes, dodging two more with swift movements of his torso before he laid into her. She mostly let him, using the openings created by his attacks to strike back. Most of her attempts unsuccessful. Six seconds passed before they disengaged, neither of them visibly worse for wear.

She hadn't expected anything less from a level six thirty elf. And she could tell he was holding back, if only to prevent this dungeon to fall even further into ruin. The same was true for her of course.

“You are inexperienced,” he said finally. “But I won't deny your strength.”

Ilea glanced at Neiphato, the elf shaking his head ever so slightly. Getting the respect of the Hunters would require a little show. It all worked out as he had planned. But a part of her wanted to go on.

“Maybe we can test ourselves more. Some other time,” she said with a hiss.

The elf grinned back. “Indeed. Human.” He hissed too, a few more hissed coming from the others.

Accepted by the monster cult, Ilea thought with a smile, locking eyes with the powerful armored elf before he turned his back to her. “*Nice preparation,*” she sent to Neiphato.

"I hadn't even thought of it," the elf replied. *"He does not like humans."*

"Figured," she mused, looking at Zoy. *"Where did you find her?"*

"I don't know. She was here when I arrived. Isalthar said she was a Hunter, and that was that," he said.

Ilea sat down next to the woman and looked at her.

Zoy didn't meet her eyes but she did turn her head towards her. *"You have grown."*

[Sword Master – lvl 340]

"So have you," Ilea said with a smile. *"Care to resume our little fight?"*

Zoy raised her brows. *"That is not why you came."*

Ilea looked away. *"It isn't, no."* She summoned herself a meal and started eating, a few of the Hunters nearby giving her strange looks.

They remained in silence for a while, Neiphato sitting down nearby while looking at her.

"The Praetorians," Zoy started. *"Did you destroy them?"*

Ilea remembered telling her about the machines below Dawntree. She smiled and swallowed. *"Yes. Some time ago. Moved on to Executioners and Hunter Praetorians."*

The woman nodded slowly. *"You are... very strong."*

"Thank you?" Ilea said.

Zoy went quiet again.

"How did you become a Cerithil Hunter?" Ilea asked, this time initiating telepathy. Even she could tell the others were watching and listening. There was some strange kind of tension in the area, and by now she didn't think it had to do with them being human, not only that at least.

"Telepathy," Zoy answered. *"Who are you, Lilith?"*

"Ilea is my actual name. Lilith is kind of a joke name I used but it stuck. Good too because people in the Plains generally know me by that. Would be weird to have bards sing about Ilea," she said with a smile, realizing the woman hadn't exactly asked about her name. *"I was an adventurer, joined the Hand, traveled north, fought a lot of monsters. That's pretty much it. I did meet an elf on my travels there."*

The woman moved her head up a little at the mention of an elf.

"He hadn't been a Hunter then but was unsure about the teachings of the Oracles, especially because they actively prevented Elves from facing the root of the Taleen threat," she explained. *"We became friends in time. I learned about Elves and he learned about humans. How about you?"*

"I..." Zoy started. She shook her head. *"I haven't told anyone."*

Ilea waited, continuing her meal.

"I was a child, living in a village in the west. A small village. Newly formed. Elves came one day, demanded we deliver the Cursed," she explained, her breathing picking up.

Ilea used her healing.

“What is this... magic?” Zoy asked, looking up and around.

“Arcane healing,” Ilea said.

“Inarulis found me. Killed the Elves that were hunting me. He spoke of a debt and took me with him. He taught me to fight, and to survive,” she spoke.

“The Hunter they were looking for?” Ilea asked.

“Maybe. But I never blamed him. It was their choice to come. And they paid for their actions,” she said.

“So he made you a Hunter? Didn’t expect an elf to do that to be honest,” Ilea said.

Zoy shook her head ever so slightly. “No. He taught me to survive. And when he deemed me ready, he brought me back to human lands. Years had passed, all those I had known... were gone. I followed him, with the skills he had taught me, and I fought by his side against the strange machines he sought to destroy.”

Ilea could feel the weight with which she spoke. The Hunter was likely no longer alive, but she didn’t want to ask. Zoy was here now, amongst the Cerithil Hunters. “Why come here? You were working with Arthur, right?”

“He studied the gates, and I needed to find more dungeons. If I could learn of the gates, it would help with my goals. You interrupted that,” Zoy said with a bit of annoyance. “Though he did use the gates to teleport us away.”

“Yeah. I found the place in the north. But you weren’t there anymore. Speaking of gates, we figured them out,” Ilea said.

“What do you mean?” Zoy asked.

Ilea considered. “The taleen network. We found a way to use their gates. We have a map, and we found their capital.”

“You were the ally...” Zoy spoke. “Isalthar talked about an ally that allowed them to find Iz. To travel there.”

“Did you know him?” Ilea asked.

“No. Inarulis taught me many things. He did not like to cooperate with other Hunters, but he regularly went to a dungeon in the forest. Every half year we would travel there. He said that when the time came, I would know what to do,” she said. “A message was there when I went. Left by the Val Akuun. The enemy was found.”

“Messages left in ancient dungeons,” Ilea mused. “You guys should really work on your organization.”

Zoy hissed.

Ilea raised her brow before she chuckled. *She’s a Hunter alright.*

“The ally has arrived,” Isalthar’s voice interrupted their conversation, his form flowing down from a nearby moss covered building. “I was informed you wanted to talk.”

Some of the elves hissed, others standing up with magic flaring up around their forms, some drew their weapons. Others watched with amused expressions.

“A human?” one of them asked, a broad and armored fellow in dark red colors, two massive curved blades on his back.

“Indeed. A Guardian of Cerith, as she was called by some of our kind. And I see she has yet again proven to be resourceful,” Isalthar spoke. He landed nearby, all eyes on him.

Ilea didn't miss the different reactions, nuanced hisses, and facial expressions. *Suppose they had a long time to build opinions and hold grudges.* He was the source of the tension. But just as much was he the reason for their presence.

“Greetings,” she sent to the elf. “*There were a few things I wanted to discuss.*”

“*A way to communicate without anyone listening in. However I must ask you to refrain.*” he said and continued speaking normally. “There may be history between myself and the present Hunters, but I trust them all with my life.”

A few hisses resounded, most in an affirming manner.

Ilea nodded slowly. “If you trust them, so will I,” she said. *With the information I would share with you.* “We went back to Iz with more of the keys. A few things came up.”

Isalthar sat down on a chunk of rock a few meters away, some of the Elves moving closer.

“The One without Form has turned off the gates in Iz, or at least prevented us from going back. It should be possible to attack the core once we have all the keys,” she said.

“Who holds these artifacts?” a three mark elf asked, though likely weaker than her based on his level.

“I do,” Ilea said.

More hisses.

“The Taleen would not recognize one of our kind as a key warden. That is what you were called, was it not?” Isalthar said, looking at her.

“Yes. And I'm missing only one of the keys. It's within the Still Valley,” she said.

Glances and hisses were exchanged.

“Nobody escapes,” the same elf that fought her said.

“I'm pretty sure I've escaped worse,” Ilea said.

“Do you have proof of such claims?” the elf asked.

One of the elves hissed. “Have you grown blind in your age, Veratin?” The elf had gray hair. His face looked young, his eyes a deep blue. His form looked frail compared to the others, wearing gray robes that seemed to flake with ash.

Ilea nearly got lost in the depth of his eyes as she glanced his way. Nobody made a sound.

[Crystal Mage – lvl ???]

He was at a higher level than even Isalthar, slightly above eight hundred.

“She wields the flame of creation,” he spoke. “This human is touched by the Fae, and she is marked by them. I recognize her as a Guardian of Cerith.”

He saw the mark? Ilea wondered how he did it. She hadn't felt any soul magic. Then again, the mark was meant as something others could perceive.

"A space mage?" Veratin asked, now looking her way. He hissed in an acknowledging manner.

"But do you have the resilience?" another elf asked, this one with a rather thin physique and near white armor, his eyes silver.

[Ice Mage – lvl 483]

"I'm working on it," Ilea said. "But try me. And don't hold back. I have met an Ice Elemental before."

The Elves once more exchanged glances.

"I am Maratas Veyun, and I will accept your offer," the elf said and stepped forward.

Ilea teleported to an open space in the area, a cold wind of frost enveloping her a moment later. She endured, not using the Azarinth Star as the cold air turned into a continuous torrent, growing more powerful by the second. Her fires kept burning, her mantle protecting her as heat gathered within her core.

A minute passed before she waved her arm, breaking the crystals that had managed to cling to her armor. White flame burned away the ice on the ground, the very air heating up with her burning ash. "I expect more within the Valley."

The elf bowed. "As you should, Guardian of Cerith."

"And I don't plan to go there before I am deemed ready. Perhaps you could help with that too," she said, looking at the elf.

"If my assistance is required, I shall provide it," he spoke.