

Chapter 616 Fear

Ilea appeared alongside Neiphato and Feyrair. “Finally,” she murmured.

“You could’ve found something closer,” Fey commented.

She hissed, displacing the group outside. The Miststalkers were dancing around mistily. “Who the fuck knew that dungeon would be so far underground? Doesn’t matter. We’re here,” Ilea said and looked around. *Bluetails, bluetails, bluetails. Plenty of groups around.*

“We will want to hunt alone,” Feyrair said.

Ilea went to Neiphato and grabbed his hand. “I’ll leave a mark on you too. Call for me if you’re about to die.”

“What if You are about to die?” Feyrair asked.

“Against a Bluetail? Worst that can happen is them ripping off my head and eating it,” she said.

“You don’t die from that?” Neiphato asked with a straight face, looking at the mark on the back of his hand. “Thanks.”

“That’s not even a scratch for her,” Feyrair said. “But seriously, don’t be too arrogant.”

“Too Elvish you mean?” Ilea asked.

He smiled. “Exactly. Come Neiphato, I will show you the spot Kyrian used in his hunts. I will hunt nearby too.”

“Good luck you two,” Ilea said.

“Where will you be?” Feyrair asked.

She looked around as they ascended, moonlight illuminating the mists below, dark swaths of smoke rising from one of the distant isles. She gulped and nodded to herself. “Gonna have to face my fears if I want to get stronger.”

“What could you possibly fear?” Feyrair asked.

Ilea looked at the waves crashing against the stone shore, ripples going through the mists form below. *Plenty of things, my dear Elven friend. We’re not all blessed with a draconic ego.*

“Good hunting,” she said and moved her wings, her body carried towards the ocean.

Oxygen repository will help, Harmony of the Drowned as well, she thought and summoned the Drowning Bear ring she still had. Displacement if I get caught in pressure similar to Hector’s. That should lessen the risks somewhat. And I have a third tier water and wind resistance.

Ilea still would’ve preferred to go face the high level creatures in the caverns below some of the other isles that Kyrian had mentioned. Getting stuck under a few metric tons of falling rock may be more difficult to get out of than water, but she still very much liked the idea more. It just felt more grounded.

The mists parted where she dove into the water, her wings retaining their magical ability to propel her through the liquid, her water resistance allowing her to move nearly as if she was in the air. Her

Light Magic Resistance allowed her to see in the darkness of the ocean, pretty far actually when coupled with her Eyes of Ash.

It didn't alleviate the fear she still very much felt but that she tried to lessen with her constantly active Meditation and healing. Her mind would simply be hammered by magic, not allowing her to fully experience the unknown.

For a few minutes, Ilea simply drifted in the water, feeling the coolness around her, observing the currents and spying for Bluetails. Her body wouldn't have issues without air for quite some time. Indefinitely, according to her Oxygen Repository, though she would supposedly be weakened significantly, however that would manifest. Either way, she didn't exactly plan to stay down here for days on end.

No creatures showed.

She sighed, a few bubbles of air floating up from the gesture before she looked down to the darkness, the depths an unending abyss even to her heavily enhanced sight. *Fuck it. Want to improve? Then you have to do the work.*

Ilea slowly descended, her wings nearly floating in the water as she felt the pressure build. She wondered when her ears would pop, already she was dozens of meters deep. Perhaps it wouldn't happen for another few kilometers, her body simply too strong at this point.

How would I compare to a submarine? I'm probably faster.

She turned her head when she noticed movement. A single Bluetail. Large. Ilea locked eyes with the creature, the reptile smoothly flowing through the water, even faster than she had seen them flying before.

It circled her a few times before it stopped, opening its beak.

Ilea couldn't see the spell itself but she saw the ripples in the water. When it reached her sphere, she could see the magic like a bright underwater freight train barreling straight at her. And she remained, crossing her arms and wings in front of her as she waited for her precognition to activate. When it did, she grinned slightly and remained, letting the wave push her back.

She felt her wings and body tense up, nearly buckling against the immense pressure. Ilea coughed, her blood floating in the water ahead of her as she opened up her wings again.

The Bluetail swam in smooth small circles, its eyes on her at all times.

My turn.

'ding' 'Fear Resistance reaches lvl 14'

Ilea sped up, using her wings as if she was flying through air, the pressure on this depth barely noticeable now that she was in motion. Her spells would be just as damaging, except perhaps Heart of Cinder, but she would try nonetheless, already charging up heat.

[Northern Bluetail – lvl ???]

Eight fifty. A worthy opponent, she thought, hoping it would do more than send a few waves of water at her. Grapple and kill.

Kyrian tasted the tea, closing his eyes as he enjoyed the warmth spreading through his body. He really did appreciate Ilea's storage ring she had gifted him a few years past. Everything he had stored in there came in handy during his long time on the Krahen Isles, but well, everything was cold.

"Like it? I assume you didn't set up an herb garden on your island," Trian said.

Kyrian sighed, twitching slightly at the taste he didn't realize he had missed that much. "No talent for gardening. Especially when the ground is frozen and made near entirely of stone."

The mage smiled, putting his boots up on the table as he crossed his arms. "Understandable."

Still the noble after all, Kyrian thought.

"What is it?" Trian asked.

Kyrian wasn't wearing his helmet anymore. He knew he had always been somewhat easy to read but after years without human contact, everyone might as well have been mind weavers.

He looked down, moving the metal spoon with his magic to stir the reddish liquid. "Just thought... that you were different. Last time I saw you..."

Trian lightly tapped the table with his heel. "After the Birmingdales. Yes. I was... lost in a way."

"Did it help?" Kyrian asked, his gaze moving up to meet his friend's. "Killing them."

He remained quiet for a few seconds, the smile gone from his face now as he pondered the question. "It felt right. Back then. It was the only thing that mattered," he said and paused. "I don't think it was wise. We killed people who probably had little to do with what happened to my family... and yet it's difficult, to care. To regret it. I know I should, but I don't. What they did..."

Kyrian grunted, sipping on his tea. "I wanted to kill him. Arthur."

"Redleaf?" Trian asked.

He nodded. "I had agreed to help... I blamed myself, sure... but it was his fault, his spell, the Taleen gate. I know it's not comparable, I know. I'm... I don't know."

"You're pissed that you didn't get the chance to stomp his face in?" Trian asked.

Kyrian looked at him. "Maybe. Yes."

"Isn't it poetic to know his daughter was the one to kill him? She had her reasons too," Trian said.

"It is. Of course. And I'm glad they resolved the matter," Kyrian said.

Trian started laughing. "Oh don't give me that look. I get it. You promised to help, you were sent away and they still finished it. Without you there. And then you're stuck on an island for several years."

"Isles."

“Isles, sure,” Trian said. “And now there’s nobody left to aim all that anger at. You know... I’m not sure if it really helped, doing what I did. What I do know is that I was still angry. I was still bitter. I looked and looked, to find someone responsible, a person, a system, something to punish for what I had experienced.”

Kyrian just looked at him.

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, but no, I didn’t find anything. Well that’s not true entirely. I realized that what had happened to me, happened to others too. I realized that in the war alone, so many people lost their families, loved ones, their sons, daughters. And why? Because a faraway king they didn’t know needed a war to keep his country from falling into a civil war. The king never knew them, never cared for them. It’s just some sick twist of fate.

“Maybe they died to a monster attack on the way to a safe haven, maybe they were even killed by Imperials, deserters who chose to rob their own instead of fighting in the war. Or they blamed the Shadow’s Hand, who summoned the demon plague whose few survivors happened upon their camp of refugees,” Trian said.

The two men remained silent for some time.

“The one you could’ve blamed is dead. And killing him wouldn’t have given you back the years you lost. Killing them didn’t...,” Trian said, his voice getting stuck for a split second before he continued. “Didn’t bring them back.”

“What did you do?” Kyrian asked, his hands shaking ever so slightly.

“I meditated. I cried. I wrote down my thoughts, focused on my magic, trained, and thought some more,” Trian said and laughed in a bitter tone. “I hated it. Hated every day. But with time, my anger lessened, the guilt I felt... lessened. There was no sudden change, no easy solution. It just took time, and work. Claire set up a few things for me to do, and as the months went by, I got assigned more duties, then we founded the Sentinels. I still have days... where it feels suffocating, when something reminds me of them. And I don’t think that will ever stop. I don’t want it to stop. But I want to live too. I’m proud of what we built here, I’m proud of what Ravenhall has become, I’m proud of my own progress, and I won’t stop there.”

Kyrian chuckled. “I’ve been waiting for two years.”

“You didn’t just wait. Look at your level,” Trian said.

Kyrian just snorted.

“If you were Ilea, I’d suggest a good hunt, maybe on the very isles you were stranded on. She’s probably there now, taking on the strongest of the beasts she can get her hands on, losing her head over and over,” Trian said, the last words a murmur before he refocused. “There’s power in self improvement, be it working on skills and Classes, or just learning about what you enjoy, learning about tea.”

“You suggest I should cultivate herbs?” Kyrian asked.

Trian shrugged. “Why not? Plenty of space in the Haven. Plenty of mages ready to show you the ropes. But not just that. You’ll be among people. You can even start here, with the Sentinels. We have Classes on Alchemy, enchantments, monsters, and various training exercises. I don’t think it’s herbs you need, I think you just need to be with people, and let time do its thing. And write a journal,” Trian said.

A journal. She did teach me to read, didn't she? Maybe I should try.

“And tell your story. Tell of the monsters you have fought, how you did it. Show the Sentinels what a member of team thirty four has to offer,” Trian said with a grin.

“Ilea was here too, wasn't she? I'm not exactly impressive compared to her,” Kyrian said.

Trian laughed. “You'll know how impressive you are when a team of level two hundred Sentinels have fought against you. When did you last fight another human?”

“I'm not interested in a bout against your students, Trian,” Kyrian said.

“I wasn't talking about a bout, Kyrian. They stand no chance against you. I stand no chance against you. I doubt the whole council of Ravenhall could do much to stop you, not the way you are now,” Trian said with a dark smile. “I see that you don't exactly believe me. And that's okay.”

The man removed his boots from the table and leaned forward a little. “So, Kyrian. I can offer you a room here, food, and company. You can enroll in whatever Classes you like, train with the students, or teach them if you like. And of course you can come and go as you like.”

Kyrian thought about it, relaxing in his chair as he finished his tea. “I'll go back to the isles.”

“I told you, you can come and go as you like. But you should stay some time at least. Lest you turn into another Ilea,” Trian said.

He smiled. “I fear what I will find when I return.”

“I stopped trying to imagine it. I'm just pleasantly surprised whenever she returns and tells of her exploits,” Trian said.

“You don't mind... how strong she is? We were in the same team. You, me, Claire, Ilea, and Eve,” Kyrian said.

The vampyr smiled. “We all excel at different things. And we all make our own choices,” he said and paused for a moment. “The only thing we can't forget, is that we'll have each others' backs. You know, Ilea wasn't the only one looking to get you back. But while me and Claire have considerable resources, we didn't exactly have a way to use the Taleen teleportation network.”

“Thank you. I didn't mean to waste your efforts,” Kyrian said.

“No efforts were wasted. What's important is that you're back. Alive,” Trian said. “So, a few weeks with the Sentinels? Maybe some visits to the city if you have a good day?”

Kyrian nodded slowly. “I'll have to take care of my birds.”

“Sure,” Trian said with a smile and stood up. “Great, let me show you around then. Or just to your room if you want to be alone?”

Kyrian snorted and stood up too. “Trian... thank you,” he said and looked at the ground.

“I'm glad you're back, friend. Let's see what Classes are coming up and what rooms are available, come on,” Trian said and walked to the door. He didn't react when Kyrian reformed his thick helmet, the emotion on his face likely not lost to the high level mage.

Ilea sunk her ash in even deeper. Her right wing was reforming, all her focus on the injured and struggling Bluetail. Its blood flowed past, mixing with hers as she tasted both. They were deep now, the pitch black ocean around them dark, the sinking duo alone illuminated by white flame clinging to both.

The pressure slowed her movements but she knew the same was true for the monster. It had dragged her down in a hope to get rid of her, its spells and talons ineffective against the constantly regenerating human clinging to its armored body. Many of the scales were gone now, deep cuts showing on the being that healed only slowly.

Ilea didn't dare let go. Not because the creature would flee, she knew it wouldn't, but because she didn't want to be down here without reason. She knew deep down that the end result would be the same but for now she ignored it, focusing on the next punch, the next strike of her ash, her constant flow of destructive mana that continuously overwhelmed the creature. Or so she hoped.

It was difficult to tell, all sound muted, their battle frantic as the Bluetail swerved from side to side, twirled and formed spells of water and wind, sometimes both at the same time.

Ilea lost parts of her armor many times, her organs ruptured by the forces summoned by the creature. It didn't matter. She clung onto it with everything she had. Her ash kept her close when her hands slipped, her wings readjusted her when the creature cut through her magic limbs. She felt no pain, could recover from most injuries in seconds, and she absorbed mana from whatever spell the monster threw at her.

Her resistances and healing made the fight possible in the first place, the powerful magic still enough to deal significant damage to her body. But nothing the Bluetail could do was enough. It couldn't pierce her skull, or it simply didn't attempt to do so. It couldn't destroy her brain, not in a way that would stop her. And it didn't understand that its spells were fueling hers in turn.

As time went on, Ilea could tell the monster's movements were slowing even more, its magic packing less of a punch. The fight was almost over. She didn't relax, didn't slow down, her ash and magic continuing to pour into the creature with all the might she could conjure. Until finally, the creature went still.

'ding' 'You have defeated [Northern Bluetail – lvl 862]'

'ding' 'The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 478 – Five stat points awarded'

'ding' 'The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 479 – Five stat points awarded'

'ding' 'Kin of Ash has reached lvl 472 – Five stat points awarded'

'ding' 'Kin of Ash has reached lvl 473 – Five stat points awarded'

'ding' 'The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 427 – One stat point awarded'

'ding' 'The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 428 – One stat point awarded'

'ding' 'Flare of Creation reaches 3rd lvl 24'

'ding' 'Body of the Valkyrie reaches 3rd lvl 21'

'ding' 'Deviant of Humanity reaches 3rd lvl 2'

'ding' 'Harmony of the Drowned reaches lvl 10'

'ding' 'Harmony of the Drowned reaches lvl 11'

'ding' 'Oxygen Repository reaches 2nd lvl 2'

'ding' 'Veteran reaches 3rd lvl 18'

'ding' 'Fear Resistance reaches lvl 15'

'ding' 'Fear Resistance reaches lvl 16'

'ding' 'Water Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 2'

Ilea tried to calm herself, ignoring the messages floating somewhere in her mind. She still clung to the creature, the two now floating nearly motionless. Her flames subsided, leaving her in darkness. She couldn't hear anything and closed her eyes. Her body tried to breathe but no air came into her lungs, making her hyperventilate for a moment before she managed to stop herself. No water entered her lungs either, her ashen armor preventing it from flowing into her mouth.

Up, she thought, opening her eyes. *Where's up?*

Before she started to panic, she remembered her marks, focusing on Feyrair and Neiphato's as she started to teleport as quickly as she could.