

Ilea watched as Feyrair sent guided flames into the darkness, her healing pushing hard to keep their minds from giving in.

‘ding’ ‘Mental Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 15’

She glanced over at the elf, his eyes glazing over slightly before an ashen limb pierced deep into his eye. He winced before glaring at her.

“A simple punch would be enough,” he hissed.

“Have to be sure, otherwise you might just be doing its bidding,” Ilea said, smiling as he continued his attacks with renewed vigor. “Good way to gain Mental Resistance too if you ask me.”

He just continued to hiss.

She would’ve shared a snickers if she had any in her storage. But alas, this wasn’t Earth.

“I don’t think we’ll get that one from up here,” Feyrair said. “It fled the moment it realized we weren’t quite that easy to kill.”

Ilea smiled. “Yeah, but now we can train our resistances. That’s all that really matters.”

“Resistances are all that matters?” he asked with a confused expression.

“Well yes and no. You see, young elf, if you fight stronger enemies, you need better resistances, stronger enemies will give you even higher resistances which then will allow you to fight even more ridiculous enemies. It’s really quite simple.”

He nodded alone. “Perhaps I haven’t focused on it as much as I should have. It goes against all that I am to let something attack me without retaliation,” he said and hissed.

“Well then you should channel your inner human. Think about the long term options... battling Oracles, Elementals, downright cosmic beings! It will be spectacular. And all that for the simple price of knowing your limits and taking advantage of stupid ass creatures that keep throwing their magic at you,” she said and tapped her temple.

Feyrair considered it for a moment, his flames still firing into the darkness below. “I cannot find a logical reason to deny it. But it just doesn’t feel right.”

Ilea shrugged. “I can only show you the way,” she said and smirked.

The two continued their training until the creature stopped its attempts, the mind vanishing into the depths below.

Ilea thought about pursuit but deemed it too risky. It had shown the capability to overwhelm even her ridiculously high defenses. If there were more of them down there, she wasn’t sure they could come out in one piece. Her Veteran had informed her the creature was around level seven hundred.

Contrary to the Veramath she had fought before, its attack was much weaker but about a thousand times more nuanced. It didn't even try to take them out with mind magic alone, only leading them close enough to let it attack.

"We should warn the others and then continue with the facility," she said.

"You do not want to hunt down that being?" he asked.

Ilea shook her head. "It's at the level of a Hunter. And something tells me we'll have a harder time finding that thing down there than finding more Taleen."

"Reasonable," he said, hissing as he stared at the darkness.

"Come on, not worth your time," she said and pulled him with a few ashen limbs.

He growled but joined her in the end, the two mapping out another part of the dungeon. Nothing quite as interesting as the Executioner or the mines presented itself in the next few delves into the unknown, the two reporting back to Isalthar in regular intervals.

"Recover," Seithir said after a few soul magic spells had tore at her essence.

Ilea nodded, letting Feyrair's fire burn through her skin and muscle, her resistances disabled to allow for more efficient training.

"Such a barbaric notion," Asay said when him and Farthorn arrived at their small camp site near the teleportation gate.

Ilea didn't have the vocal cords to reply.

"It's quite fascinating actually. She is growing more resilient against my damage... but I agree, to let someone do this is... disagreeable," Feyrair said, a thoughtful expression on his face.

"You gain strength by fighting and killing enemies, not by letting yourself be degraded like this," Farthorn said.

Ilea was really glad she didn't have an elf's pride to wrestle with. How often would she have died? It was a wonder really that any of them were still around. *Less of a wonder maybe if one considers their high level start.*

She had to smile at the thought of level one Elves being ripped apart by wolves, too proud to retreat or work together with others.

"We found another gate room," Farthorn said, turning to Isalthar.

Elfie and his group returned too, battered and beaten, their eyes averted. Except for Niivalyr himself, a grin on his face as he added his curses to the mix.

Ilea glared at him and reactivated her Heat resistance, healing her body before she talked. "I don't need your curses. The resistance isn't leveling."

"It builds character," Elfie said with a sweet smile, the teeth barely detracting from his almost human expression. "I can at least work on my magic."

She rolled her eyes and deactivated her resistances again, her skin melting again quickly.

Seviir hissed and walked away, joined by Heranuur who glanced at Isalthar in passing.

"Active gates?" Isalthar asked.

“Yes. We refrained from teleportation so far. How should we proceed?” Farthorn asked.

“The facility takes precedence. Asay, we will examine the gates while the rest continues their exploration,” Isalthar said.

Ilea burned while the elves updated their maps, copying each others’ discoveries. She would do so later, Feyrair the only one who didn’t actively give a fuck about her lacking skill in art. He still teased her about it of course but the less verbal judgment she received from the others somehow hit harder.

She checked the few notifications she had received when they were about to continue.

‘ding’ ‘Soul Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 10’

‘ding’ ‘Soul Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 11’

“Ready?” Feyrair asked, standing casually near the exit.

“We don’t HAVE to work together, you know?” Ilea said and smiled.

“I find your company comforting. Especially knowing the mind magic creature still lurking deep below,” he said with a shrug.

“Can’t do resistance training but you will admit fear of a creature,” Ilea said.

He hissed, rolling his eyes as he gestured for her to follow. “As I said before, I see the reason in your arguments. But I can’t change hundreds of years of my way of living in the blink of an eye.”

“Fair enough. I suppose it’s admirable that you’re open for suggestions at all,” she said.

He flew towards one of the corridors Ilea knew to hold an elevator. “How could I not? Seeing a fledgling human coming so close to my strength.”

“I haven’t at all surpassed you, just about eighty levels,” she said.

Feyrair just waved her off. “You’re not a dragon at least.”

“Neither are you,” she said and laughed when he swiped a burning claw at her.

The two entered the elevator, Ilea pouring mana into the enchantment she deemed the right one. A few runes started to glow on the simple stone platform before they started descending.

Feyrair stood with arms crossed and eyes averted, tapping his arm with a clawed finger as the stone walls rushed past.

Ilea glanced at him a few times, smiling to herself in satisfaction. *I can’t allow this one to EVER surpass me again*, she thought when the lift suddenly ground to a rather abrupt halt.

“What’s going on?” the elf asked.

“Just a trap,” Ilea said when about four hundred arrows shot out from tiny slits in the walls around them.

They looked at each other as the steel tipped projectiles clanged against their armor, falling to the ground without penetrating their defenses.

Ilea rolled her eyes and shrugged when green fire erupted in the confined space. “I really don’t know why they like traps that much.”

“They’re made to wear invaders down,” Feyrair supplied, brushing away a bit of dust from his scale armor.

“Are there any creatures capable of fighting Praetorians that can’t regenerate?” Ilea asked.

“You’d be surprised. Though even if they can, it would still slow them down. Not us of course,” he replied.

“I mean I can see that, yes,” Ilea said, pushing mana into the elevator platform again when the flames had subsided. The lift continued as it had before.

“Did you stumble upon the Taleen on accident?” Feyrair asked when they arrived at the bottom.

“I was asked to help with a dungeon exploration. Humans think them quite dangerous, what with all the traps and powerful machines,” she explained. “Gained a shit ton of levels though so I’m glad I went there. Despite the rather tumultuous end to that expedition.”

“What happened?” Feyrair asked, the two of them now walking through the dimly lit corridors deep below the previous layer.

“Went into the throne room and found two Praetorians. I was barely level two hundred if I remember correctly. And most of the other humans were below even that. We didn’t stand a chance,” she said.

He hissed. “Praetorians are dangerous machines to young Elves too. They know not to engage.”

“Let me guess, they do so anyway?” Ilea asked.

“Of course. Their only solace is that higher level Taleen machines usually don’t remain out in the wilderness or the domains for long,” he said.

“Why’s that?” Ilea asked. “Taken out by higher level Elves?”

“Hardly. Perhaps in the Wastes, but generally speaking, the powerful do not concern themselves with such matters. Though their fits and whims know little reason and predictability,” he said.

Ilea looked his way, the two of them exploring a storage hall with a few Guardians roaming around.

Feyrair halved one of the machines with a rather thin beam of heated flame before he elaborated.

“Their cores can hold a lot of energy, as you’ve certainly experienced. But they aren’t beings of life, of mana itself. We think they can’t generate energy themselves but absorb it.”

“Which means a high mana density?” Ilea asked.

“Yes. Such as in dungeons. Which is why their production facilities are usually deep below ground or in areas of chaotic circumstances,” Feyrair explained.

“I mean, the Taleen were dwarfs. Don’t they like being underground anyway?” she said.

“I suppose they do,” Feyrair said and looked at a dull green ingot, melting the whole pile with his fire. “But all we find of their kind are skeletons.”

“Enough to account for a whole people?” Ilea asked. “I’ve barely found any in the cities I explored.”

“With their teleportation network, it would’ve been simple to relocate or escape. And yet it’s unusual, that much is true,” he said.

They cleared out the rest of the hall before they came up on a massive enchanted double gate made entirely of steel.

Ilea used her mana intrusion to disable the defenses before Feyrair started melting the steel with his insane fire magic. “You think they still live somewhere? In a city as far away from here as possible? Disconnected entirely?”

“A possibility. And yet their machines are still hunting our kind. It seems confusing to me that they would leave the battlefield when the war isn’t over,” he said.

“Why? Build a bunch of machines and let them fight your enemies while you relax and enjoy life in a secluded town far away from everything. Sounds exactly like what plenty of human leaders would do if they had the choice,” she said and chuckled.

He just hissed and shook his head.

“In this case I agree with you,” Ilea said, watching the gate slowly melt away.

Revealed behind was a brightly lit space with dozens of large machines situated around a central platform where a half constructed Taleen being stood, its armor shimmering in crystalline silver. It was smaller than an Executioner and had two cannon like extensions added to its arms instead of blades.

Its eyes started glowing a bright green, the half finished head facing them as a few pulses of mana exuded from its mostly exposed core.

“Wait,” Ilea said, touching Feyrair as he raised his arm to form a spell. “This one isn’t ready to fight.”

“Does it matter?” he asked. “It looks like an unknown Praetorian version.”

[Pursuer Praetorian – lvl 100]

Both of them shut up when a voice suddenly spoke out from the machine. Mechanical and slightly distorted. “Key warden. Why do you interfere in my purpose?”

Ilea looked at Feyrair and back to the machine. “Who me?” she asked.

“Human. You stand next to our enemy. Do not let them deceive you.” it spoke and aimed one of its arms at Feyrair. Before it could do anything else, a bright beam of fire burned into its silver form.

Its green eyes flickered out and a whatever energy had remained in its core expanded outward in a small arcane blast.

Feyrair looked at the smoldering steel with a confused look in his eyes. “Key warden?”

“Hmm,” Ilea mused with a smile. “I might have an idea what that was about.”

“What are you hiding?” he asked with a smirk and a teasing voice.

“It’s just an artifact I found a long while ago. In a Taleen treasury,” she said and walked around the room, examining the various projects that looked like prototypes of sorts.

Feyrair did the same. “Will you tell Isalhar?” eh asked after a while, holding a silver ingot in his hand.

“I’ll keep the thing for now, but I don’t mind telling him about what happened here. What about you?” she asked.

He looked at the remains of the Pursuer. "That artifact could help us find out more. As does the knowledge that there are Praetorians that can communicate like that."

"What do you mean? I've heard some talk before," Ilea said.

"Talk, but not communicate," Feyrair said. "It asked you a question."

"That's true. You think that was the Pursuer itself or something connecting to it?" she asked.

He just shrugged. "I have no idea. But I know that bringing you along was the right choice. Not that there was any doubt to begin with," he said and grinned.

"Not from you," Ilea said. "Should we take all this stuff to the others?"

"Why? We likely won't be able to infer much from these devices. We are Hunters, survivors, and warriors. Not engineers or makers," he said.

"Then don't mind if I do," Ilea said and took a random crate, piling everything in the room into it.

"Do you have this key on you right now?" Feyrair asked.

"It's stored," Ilea said.

"Which means that machine could detect it within your storage item," he surmised.

Ilea glanced at him. "I suppose that's true."

"That shouldn't be possible," Feyrair murmured.

She just started snickering.

"What's so funny?" he asked and hissed.

"Oh no, I just think it's amusing that Feyrair, the well established and powerful space and storage mage declares something related to his well studied field as impossible," she said with a bright smile.

He just glared at her. "Okay. I admit that I might not be the most knowledgeable in the field. But can you say you know more?"

"I can at least see space," Ilea said, tapping her temple. "But I know some people who might be able to tell us how such a feat is possible."

"Isalthar will know," Feyrair said.

"Nah, he won't. Except if he's a space mage, which I doubt," Ilea said. "And it's beside the point. It could somehow detect the item. Now we know. Plus, it didn't exactly seem hostile. If anything it thought me an ally because of it."

"You're right. And no machines have shown up since then," Feyrair said.

Key warden, Ilea mused. "It also knew that you were the enemy."

"Well I am Elvish," Feyrair said.

"I'm interested in the reaction it would've had if you held the key," Ilea said.

"I'm more interested in what the key does in the first place," Feyrair said.

“Yeah. I’m sure we’ll find out eventually. Though I’m pretty fucking sure there is more than one,” she said.

“Should we report back? I’ll let you talk to Isalthar,” he said.

“What if I withhold information?” Ilea asked.

He shrugged. “I’ll talk to you if I think it’s necessary to share. But if you think reporting anything here would put you in danger, I won’t force you to do so.”

“Aw, to think you care so much about what I think of you,” Ilea teased.

“I think highly of you, Ilea. However in this case it’s a more practical concern. You if nobody else could escape even Isalthar. I won’t risk your trust for a shortsighted gain. But know that if it comes down to it, I will side with the Val Akuun,” Feyrair said.

“Thanks for being honest,” Ilea said. “But I doubt there will be any hostilities. Not if he’s as reasonable as he’s presented himself so far.”

The elf just looked at her but didn’t say a word.

“He isn’t?” Ilea asked, raising her brows.

Feyrair hissed. “He is.”

“But?” she insisted.

“The title of Val Akuun is not attained by someone who seeks peace and harmony. If that is what you think he is. I believe that who he was then is not who he is now but I’m not known to be the greatest judge of character,” Feyrair said.

Ilea smiled. “I’m aware of his power. And he is aware of mine.”

He stared into her eyes and grinned, his teeth showing. “You are a fascinating woman.” The elf took a few steps towards her, his hand brushing against her armored cheek. “So very ferocious. Unyielding, and powerful.”

Ilea didn’t resist, the armor on her head receding as she watched his scales move aside, a glint of magic in his crimson eyes as his hair flowed in various shades of red.

“Ben was right about humans,” he said and kissed her.