

Chapter 545 Hunting

Something big and furry, Ilea thought as they walked through the small patch of forest. She hadn't scanned the area from above and hadn't used Monster Hunter to challenge anything inside. It would be more interesting to rely on Sentinel Huntress and her other abilities.

Ilea didn't exactly expect a four mark creature to be hiding in the area. Not at ground level at least.

If it was that strong, she was sure it would find them quickly enough anyway.

"You don't look like a tracker," the woman said.

"Yeah, I'm not really," Ilea admitted.

The group had accepted her *help* and even offered their names. The old man was called Horace, the woman really went by Pain. Baleron was the name of the handsome mage.

"Why didn't you bring one?" she asked, checking the ground with her sphere and enhanced eyes.

I'm like a super fucking computer at this point. Just need some laser guns for the Terminator aesthetic, or a bunch of shotguns.

Getting distracted again. Man I suck at tracking.

"Tracking won't help you when it comes to a fight," Pain said.

"And a fight there will be," Horace confirmed.

"Yeah but tracking would allow you to find its lair, set traps, prepare for what's inside, maybe get something to counter its strengths, something to use against its weaknesses," she said.

Horace chuckled.

"What?" Ilea asked.

"Spoken like a noble," Baleron said with a tinge of disdain in his voice.

"Don't have to be a noble to get a tracker into your team, or to consult local libraries. She's right. But this is what we have. We're not exactly from around here," Horace said. "Searching the beast is just one part. I don't want to kill it with poison or smoke it out. I want to face it."

The man gripped his axe as he stared forward, his jaw clenching slightly.

"I see. Why are you two here then?" Ilea asked.

"Is this an interrogation?" Pain asked, checking a few scratches on a nearby tree before she grabbed a few berries from a nearby shrubbery.

"Cinderberries. They're poisonous," Ilea said helpfully.

The woman threw them to the ground after sniffing on them.

"Horace is experienced. We've worked together for a while. It's only natural that I'd support him in this personal quest," Baleron said, the mage wary of his surroundings, turning at every noise.

"Hmm," Ilea said as they walked deeper into the forest.

“Talking to a minimum now. We’re getting closer, I can feel it,” Horace said.

Ilea didn’t disagree with the man. She casually summoned Quiet from her necklace and let it rest on her shoulder. She got a few glances but the group refocused on their surroundings again quickly, the matter at hand more pressing.

As they went on, she noticed a few smaller tracks, even a few empty homes of various birds and smaller critters.

Ilea made sure her Veteran extended to her allies, just in case the creature was above two hundred.

They reached a small creek flowing through the forest about twenty minutes later.

“That’s it,” Horace whispered, crouching down where a few sticks had been broken, the moss pushed a tiny bit inward.

Ilea raised her brows. *I didn’t even notice that. Guess the Huntress skill isn’t quite that amazing. Or is it?*

The wind had changed and now she smelled something that made bells ring in her mind. *Hmm. That should be it.*

“The trees are marked,” Pain said, tapping one.

“That’s pretty high up,” Baleron pointed out.

True, Ilea thought, looking at the deep gashes. *Not healthy for the trees either, I’d imagine.*

She squinted at them but the only thing that appeared was **[Tree]**.

And if I get it to the second tier, it’s going to be Battle Tree? Birch?

Ilea turned her head slightly, hearing a noise coming towards them. *Quick steps, something small.*

Horace reacted a few seconds later, ice forming on his body as the vegetation around him slowly froze. He made a hand gesture and a clicking noise.

Baleron turned towards the noise as a shield formed on his body, his spear poised and thrumming with power.

Pain remained in a mostly relaxed pose, power emanating from her as she took an obvious central spot between the four.

Ilea stayed behind her, the hammer resting casually on her shoulder.

No shout or cry yet, Ilea thought. *The smell isn’t getting stronger either.*

Her sphere picked up the critters a moment later, small salamander like beings with forked tongues and three eyes. They moved quick and somewhat quietly too. Not enough for her ears and the senses of the other adventurers.

There were eight of the cat sized beings, circling around to surround the group in a quick fashion.

Pretty impressive, she thought and watched the adventurers.

Ilea assumed the monsters weren’t super dangerous but was ready to intervene a bit more directly if she was wrong.

They emerged nearly as one from the various trees and shrubberies, hissing at the group as they spit a clear substance at them.

[Velean Lizard – lvl 58]

“Hmm,” she exclaimed and held up a hand to catch the liquid. It didn’t even sizzle on her skin.

‘ding’ ‘You were poisoned by Velean venom – You resist its effects’

Ilea licked the substance, finding its taste a little spicy. *Not quite as interesting as Helena’s creation.*

I wonder what the meat tastes like, she looked at one of the creatures. It stared back before it hissed.

She noted that Baleron had already skewered one of the critters, his arcane shield holding off the substance with ease.

Pain had climbed one of the nearby trees, her armor covered in spit as she rushed after one of them.

Horace avoided them mostly, moving around the trees to stay in cover and using his icy aura to slow down the monsters that got too close. His axe finished them with precise strikes.

Ilea displaced the monster ahead into her hand. A small spike of ash formed and slashed through its brain, killing it instantly. The heat in her body and ash grew, kept in check by her Lava Magic Resistance. She removed the creature’s head when it was about to burst, cooling herself down a little more to cook it more steadily as it was surrounded by ash.

When she thought it done, she skewered it and added a bit of salt.

The three adventurers stared at her with a mix of expressions as she took the first bite.

Not a lot of meat on this thing, she thought but kept eating anyway. Compared to Keyla’s cooking, it wasn’t even worth calling it food but she had to keep her addiction in check.

“What is it?” she asked.

“You cooked it... with ash? What?” Pain asked.

“Yeah. I can generate heat, and regulate it with a third tier Lava Resistance. It’s more difficult than I thought. A little overcooked too,” Ilea said.

“Third tier resistance, that’s a thing?” Baleron asked.

“Oh sure it is. The requirements were pretty steep though. Lots of resistances. I wouldn’t recommend it if you’re not a healer or enjoy pain. The latter can be fixed with a second tier Pain Tolerance,” Ilea said.

“What do you mean?” Pain asked.

“You can turn off your pain perception,” Ilea said, taking another bite out of the lizard.

“What??” Pain exclaimed with wide open eyes.

Ilea snickered. “With a name like that. You should really know about that.”

The woman squinted at her. “I inflict pain.”

“More benefits from enduring it,” Ilea said.

The woman nodded with a thoughtful expression.

Horace glanced between them but didn't comment on it.

"Anybody injured?" he asked.

"My health took a hit but I'll be fine in a few minutes," Pain said.

Baleron walked up to her and touched her face, checking her right arm and her back. He used a spell and pat her shoulder. "That should do it."

"You're a healer?" Ilea asked the man.

He smiled. "Not exactly. A field healer. Has some offensive and fighting capabilities too. Better at stabilizing than full restoration."

"More useful in life threatening situations," Pain said and rolled her shoulder. "Normal healers often get overwhelmed with real injuries, failing to patch up the damage and just letting their spells do what they can. A bit of health doesn't help much when you're bleeding out."

"Hasn't been my experience. Maybe I only met capable healers," Ilea mused.

"Lucky you then," Pain said. It didn't sound like she was mocking her either.

"Sounds like you're a medic," Ilea said to Baleron, throwing away the meatless lizard.

"What's a medic?" he asked.

"Combat healer," Ilea said.

Pain chuckled at that.

Ilea didn't try to convince the woman. She really didn't mind. The Medic Sentinels would make a name for themselves. She didn't have to force the idea into people's minds. Especially not someone who still refused to take it seriously, even though her teammate was one.

"Don't get me wrong, Lilith. I know it works. I just always picture a bunch of girls in robes, beating the shit out of each other in training," Pain said with a smirk.

"Pretty much," Ilea said, happy to have misjudged her.

The group continued onward, the smell getting stronger. More trees were marked too and even Ilea managed to spot the tracks at this point.

She could see the ruin long before the others, stone pillars and decrepit walls overgrown with vegetation. The distance would make it difficult for the others to spot, the natural camouflage similar to the lizards they had encountered.

Few other animals here, she thought, the tracks leading them towards the ruin.

"No birds," Pain noted, jumping down from a nearby tree.

"Few tracks too," Horace said. "Something is ahead."

Exciting! I hope it's a Basilisk or maybe a Trakorov?

Nothing roared as they got closer.

Ilea sadly didn't feel the presence of a four mark either.

Would've been annoying too if I got my four mark kill here. At level four o one.

The group slowly made their way towards and into the ruins.

“This is it,” Horace said, grabbing a few brown hairs he found on the ground.

An ancient stairwell led down towards a broken entrance that now more resembled a cave. Rubble covered much of the ground and stairs, the edges had smoothed out from years of use or something deliberately doing so.

Vegetation grew down into the entrance, little light reaching into the tunnel beyond.

Ilea could see inside with her sphere but couldn't spot anything living. There were a bunch of skeletons, but what ruin cavern didn't have a few of those?

“It's down there,” Horace said. “I can feel it.”

“How?” Ilea asked. She couldn't hear a heartbeat. The smell was obvious but that didn't mean the creature was here right now.

“Heat,” he said.

Aha. Makes sense.

“Could be a fire or something else,” she said.

“I'd notice. It's more faint,” the man said, obviously not comfortable with answering questions right now but doing so anyway. He had been the first of them to understand that Ilea wasn't just some random traveler and he had remained cautious around her.

Baleron didn't really care and Pain just didn't mind being offensive.

Ilea assumed the woman would react the same way when facing a Trakorov. She liked that quality in a fellow adventurer. It was very stupid of course but a lot of risks were necessary to reach Ilea's heights in power. Either that or an insane amount of time, preparation, knowledge, and training. And who really has time for that? Or the patience, for that matter.

“I lead,” Ilea said and walked down the stairs, her footing sure on the rubble, twigs, and smoothed stone. Her ash armor was hidden under her shirt.

The others didn't complain, following in a small formation behind her as they prepared their torches.

She didn't need the light, reaching the large entrance a few moments later.

Ilea gripped her massive hammer and stepped inside.

The hall beyond was spacious, at least sixty meters in length. Dozens of decrepit stone pillars stabilized the ceiling, some of them already broken down, others showing cracks.

Skeletons of various animals and people lay scattered on the ground, most showing bite or claw marks. It wasn't exactly a tomb of a necromancer but whatever had brought their prey here to eat had certainly been doing so for a long time.

The stench was quite overwhelming but nothing that came into the top ten for Ilea. She grinned when the adventurers behind her recoiled, their torches bringing both light and attention into the place.

It didn't matter much, as the only other occupant was currently asleep.

A man. He lay curled up at the end of the hall. He was naked, his thick brown hair grown to his lower back, his chest and nether area quite generously covered in hair too. Half his face was covered by a beard. It looked like he had tried to rip off a part of it.

Ilea estimated him to be around two and a half meters tall, his arms as thick as her thighs and then some. He still somehow managed to look wiry, not an ounce of fat on his massive body.

She motioned to the others but Horace had already signaled them to be quiet, the group carefully stepping over the soft earth, avoiding the bones and pieces of rotten gear strewn throughout.

They prepared their spells and weapons, slowly approaching the man until Ilea could identify him.

[Werebear – lvl 320]

Does that mean he's going to turn at night? At full moon? Or does he just look like a hairy man in the first place?

Ilea didn't know. *Is there a curse or something we can break? Where's Henry when you need him?*

She focused back on the task, momentarily distracted by the dazzling image of a silver haired actor.

Setting a trap would likely be the best for the group. They had little chance facing a level three hundred creature as they were.

Horace hadn't signed to retreat yet but he still seemed to be assessing the situation.

Pain looked excited to face the creature while Balreon didn't reveal anything on his face. His shield was active however.

Let's see what they do, Ilea thought with a grin, slowly moving closer.

A gust of wind moved in from behind, the flames of their torches flickering slightly.

The man stirred.

He sniffed the air. His eyes opened.

"Dude woke up," Ilea said in a whisper.

The others looked at her but prepared to fight.

"Spread out, distract him when one of us gets caught. If he overwhelms us, lead him into a corner, collapse the ceiling. Baleron, you think you can take the weight?" Horace said.

"For a while," Baleron said.

"We'll dig ourselves out. Just slow the stones," Pain said.

A chilling aura formed around Horace, the air freezing as the moisture in the area was collected by his magic. Ice walls formed behind him, likely the place they would retreat to in case the creature was too much.

Spells activated around her, mana enhancing the bodies of the adventurers.

Ilea kept her eyes on the man, his gaze now focused on her alone.

His eyes showed some cunning, understanding of a sort, but that of an animal, not a man.

How much do you get? Fight or flight?

Ilea thought and smirked.

The adventurers spread out, Horace and Baleron to the sides while Pain walked past Ilea in the center.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea if you attack it,” Ilea said.

“This isn’t the first high level creature we fought,” Pain said. “Watch and learn.”

“He’s at three twenty,” Ilea said.

Horace stopped in his tracks, glancing her way for a moment. “Then you’re right. We should-”

A horrible sound of cracking bones resounded, followed by a beastly screech that shook their very core.

Or it would have, had Ilea not extended her Veteran.

The sight alone however froze them just as much as the scream would have.

Ilea watched with horrified fascination as the already tall man burst out in a bright magic light, blood magic flowing freely before it congregated within him once more. His size swelled up to four meters, long claws forming on both his arms and feet. Fur grew near instantly, patches of his skin still bare but most of it was covered.

His head looked horribly distorted, his teeth sharpening and growing out as his skull was forced into a flatter shape, growing still.

Bone magic? And blood?

Maybe a Class that took over? A curse, or just madness?

She didn’t know. What she knew was that the man was lost, a monster born through whatever had caused this change.

His form now resembled a massive but somewhat thin bear, his shoulders slightly touching the ceiling of the hall, scraping against it as he moved.

Ilea felt a primal fear within her, telling her to run. It was a ludicrous instinct of course, her skills immediately quenching it. *Bears. How did anybody ever think of making cuddly toys of something this horrifying.*

It moved. A wild stride fueled by rage, lunacy, and incredible muscle shot the creature forward.

Pain could hardly get her arms up in a defensive gesture when the bear swiped his large paw at her tiny form.

She wasn’t hit, instead appearing near the door with Horace. She blinked a few times before she realized where she was.

Baleron had resisted her displacement somewhat, either his shield or a resistance leading to him appearing halfway to the exit.

The bear howled and charged, its size and weight probably comparable to a large truck.

Ilea gripped her hammer and waited, her precognition letting her know about the coming attack. She swung sideways, her body moving in turn just like she had learned in her hammer lessons.

The hammer connected with a dull thud just when the bear's head came into range. Its momentum continued as it barreled to Ilea's left, staggering a few times before it hit the wall.

It turned slowly, half its head flattened. Pieces of bone stuck out as dark blood soaked its fur.

Ilea blinked in front of it and lifted her hammer.

The Werebear swiped its claw at her, a wing of ash materializing to block the attack.

The hammer came down, shattering the monster's skull before pushing deep into its neck.

Ilea waited but there was no notification.

Were. Regeneration? Or do I need silver or something?

She doubted the latter. She would simply have to overwhelm its regeneration.

"Are you alive?!" Horace asked from behind the entrance.

"I am," Ilea said.

The three adventurers had retreated but remained close to the exit. An unnecessary risk, she thought.

Good people though, she smiled to herself.

She stored her hammer, not about to turn this hall into a smithy.

Ash formed around the bear as its skull slowly reformed.

"Rest now," Ilea said, a pale white flame illuminating the hall.