

Chapter 913 Ner cerithial

Feyrair carried the corpse of the former Monarch towards the city, the surviving elves parting as the Hunters and Ilea followed him. She could tell just from the hisses that there would be a lot of discussions and fights in the coming days, weeks, and probably months, though few of those present were at a much higher level than Fey, only a handful above seven hundred. He himself was at six twenty five by now, plus his dragon transformation likely made him more powerful than some of the higher leveled elves she had fought today. Or at least more durable.

“I thought there would be more above seven hundred,” Ilea sent to Isalthar.

“There were,” was all he said.

The wounds. I suppose his decision to come here and attack humanity didn't sit well with some of the higher ranking elves. Or they had fought him before regardless? She looked up at the city as they approached. A part of her wanted to be with Riverwatch or Dawntree, but if her presence in this endeavor could prevent another battle, she deemed it worth it. And she wanted to see if she could learn anything about the fate of Heranuur and Seviir.

Elfie followed with the Hunters, glancing her way when she looked at him. Their eyes met for a brief moment before they continued without speaking a word. He was here too. For the same reason.

The Sky Domain elves flew up to the lowest platform above the burnt and crushed rubble.

Ilea landed among them.

Earth, trees, houses built with smooth white stone, lined with silver, gold, and green metals, cobbled streets and enchanted lights above. Near all of it was blackened and burnt, bits of melted armor and bone visible between the ash and black glass.

Ilea walked past it all, with all the others. A few glanced her way from time to time, some of them hissed, though it was respect they showed now, and fear.

She didn't like either.

“How old is this city?” she sent to Isalthar and Feyrair, looking at the high ceiling of the next layer up as they ascended a broad set of stone stairs overgrown with ivy, dim warm light provided by the glowing magical lights above. They were closer to the center now, much of this space untouched by the Primordial Flame.

“We don't know,” Isalthar sent. *“An ancient gift and collaboration with a dwarven kingdom lost to history. That is all I could find out, and the most plausible explanation considering the building style, though many claim we have built it ourselves, or that the Oracles were the ones responsible. I won't deny that there have been additions throughout the millennia, conducted by both elves and others hired or forced.”*

“The Sanvaruun has left it all in disrepair,” Feyrair sent. *“Your fires were just the last part. Terrifying and beautiful by the way.”*

“You didn't close your eyes?” Ilea asked.

“I probably should have,” Feyrair said and hissed. A longing and thoughtful sound. *“I’ll feel inadequate until I can produce something remotely similar. Dragonslayer. But I’m afraid that will take... some time.”*

Ilea didn’t comment as they ascended the stairs. She wondered if the Druned could fix this place up. They did promise to help her out, but for the time being, she wanted to leave the Sky Domain to their own devices, with the help of the Hunters of course. Perhaps the Accords could figure out some trade agreements, not that she expected anyone to be keen after the attacks.

They went up two more layers, the same once lavish architecture now overgrown, in disrepair, and partially burnt seen throughout. Ilea could see many signs of battles beside the one she had just fought.

And soon enough they climbed a set of stairs that led into a central hub. Spherical in shape, the walls here black and glittering with lines of silver flowing through it all like roots. Golden lights floated in the air near the high ceiling, the ground earth with ancient trees throughout, gnarled branches intertwining with one another, all bearing near golden leaves.

“I didn’t think I would ever come back here,” Feyrair sent.

“What is this place?” Ilea asked. She had seen the palaces on the upper layers. Here they were closer to the center.

“A place of life, and death,” Feyrair answered. *“You really shouldn’t be here, but I suppose the same is true for all us Hunters.”* He smiled and finally set down the corpse.

Ilea looked up at the golden lights hovering above. She could feel the magic around her more present now. Not higher in density, but as if something was watching. She assumed it was an Oracle of Verleyna. Where the being resided exactly, she couldn’t guess.

She saw the first elves approach the corpse, silently kneeling down before they bit down into the scorched flesh. Ilea watched the ritual unfold, finding in the end that she still preferred the more common practice of burning bodies and sending them off with spells. She did not participate herself, glad the Monarch was no more and not willing to show anything beyond indifference.

Ilea leaned against the black wall of the central chamber. She waited until Isalthar approached with Elfie, Feyrair already left to his position of substitute Monarch.

“The cells,” Isalthar spoke and floated towards one of the exits, an open doorway thirty meters high, stairwells up and down beyond, white stone with roots growing throughout.

“Any reason why he would’ve kept them alive?” Ilea asked as she followed the floating elf.

“Spite?” Isalthar suggested. *“His whims and moods were well known throughout this domain.”*

“And beyond,” said Niivalyr.

“And beyond,” Isalthar repeated. *“Had they been agents sent to find me, to infiltrate the Cerithil Hunters, or misguided in their want to return, hoping that information on the Val Akuun would prove enough for their sins to be forgiven. We do not know, and one way or the other, the Sanvaruun would’ve chosen at a whim.”*

“Heranuur was from the Fire Wastes, right?” Ilea said.

“He was. And Seviir of Verleyna,” Elfie spoke. *“Though they didn’t talk much about their domains. Same as I.”*

“We are cursed after all,” Isalthar said, a hint of dry humor in his voice.

The ancient elf led them through the half destroyed city, past forests and near empty lakes, up towards the higher layers before he stopped in front of a square entrance barred with rusted grates. Beyond lay a dark unlit corridor of stone.

Ilea grabbed the steel with her space magic and ripped it away, the strengthening enchantments still placed on the entrance fizzling out against her will before the steel clattered against the stone floor.

She narrowed her eyes and disabled her domain, the scratch marks and ancient dried blood in the cells not what she wanted to focus on right now. She wanted to see for herself. Glancing at Elfie, she went inside.

Cell after cell, they checked. Most of them were empty. Some held bones and skeletons. Elves and dwarves, mava, humans, orcs, and even vampires. A few dozen beings all in all.

On the second floor down a stone stairwell, Ilea heard a faint whisper. She slowed and listened.

“... guard the soul of mine, oh mother of stone and steel. Let me bear strength and let my blows land true, mother, bless me, let me prevail, let the flow of power-”

“Please,” someone else said out loud before a thud resounded. “Shut. The fuck. Up.” A high pitched voice this time, a strange accent.

Ilea raised her brows. *A mava?* She took a step down when a third voice made her pause.

“You have failed to interrupt his prayer the last fifty six times.” The voice sounded tired, and yet there was an edge to it.

It felt familiar to Ilea, and yet distant. She glanced at Elfie and saw his wide eyes, then stepped down and into the entirely dark corridor.

The voices silenced when her steps resounded.

Ilea walked past the empty cells, going where she thought she had heard the last voice from.

Enchanted grates shimmering with magic locked the square room with three enchanted walls. Opposite her sat an elf dressed in rags. Thin white hair adorned his head, yellow eyes looking at her from where he sat. His ribs showed, both arms and legs thin but covered in wiry muscle.

Ilea crossed her arms in front of her and looked at the elf she had once known, both Elfie and Isalthar stepping next to her.

“A Val Akuun, and a four mark,” the high pitched voice of the Mava resounded from a cell diagonal to where they stood. “Seems like the Sanvaruun has finally bit off more than he could chew. Care to get me out? I have treasure buried in the desert, could share some with you.” Her offer was followed by a cackling laugh.

A light flashed up in Isalthar’s hand, illuminating the cell before them.

“Seviir,” Elfie spoke as he got closer to the grates, hissing.

The elf’s eyes went wide in recognition. He hissed, the sound long and complex.

[Bone Mage – lvl 315]

Seviir narrowed his eyes, then shook his head. “Why torment me with illusions? Is there another battle to fight, Monarch?”

Ilea cut through the grates with her volcanic glass, the metal clattering to the ground.

“What is the ruckus?” a new voice spoke, another prisoner farther down the corridor.

“I’m afraid we’re real,” Ilea said as Elfie rushed inside and crouched down next to Seviir, hesitating before he hissed and hugged the stunned bone mage.

Seviir opened his eyes wide when Isalthar floated closer to the destroyed grates.

“You don’t look so good,” Ilea said.

Seviir chuckled at that, then coughed. “I cannot say the same about you, Val Akuun.” He leaned back, his head resting against the wall.

Elfie finally let go of him.

“If you don’t plan to kill me, I would appreciate some food. It has been, some time,” Seviir said.

“Get in line, elf,” the Mava said. “Hey, ash lady, if you could send your blades this way? Seems fun what you did with those grates.”

“The sustenance of the Mother is all that you need, elf creature of bone. Submit yourself to her will and you shall find salvation,” the first voice spoke from another cell down the corridor, no longer a whisper. The grates shook when his hands slammed against them. “Judgment awaits the unbelieving, as I swear fealty to her radiance. She has come to free us. And so the end is upon us. Mother!”

“You’re not helping our chances, dwarf,” the Mava spoke.

Ilea glanced her way now, swaying tails brushing against the enchanted grates. Gray fur and near white eyes beyond.

The Mava grinned, a few broken teeth showing. “I’ve been listening to his babbling for decades, if you can believe it. Might be more mad than him at this point,” she giggled. “But I see you. And I felt it. The flame. For once he may be right.”

Elfie had summoned food for Seviir, the elf stuffing his face and hissing between bites.

“Why did you leave?” Elfie asked.

Ilea listened while she summoned food for the other prisoners, walking past their cells as she hovered the plates inside. The Mava jerked back and towards the wall, looking at the floating meal with suspicion.

[Wind Mage – lvl 356]

The deep voice speaking of a mother belonged to an ancient looking dwarf with a dark red beard and eyes of the same color, his hair and beard combined giving him a beastly appearance, the rags on him not helping. He was not thin like the others but broad and muscly, his skin pale.

[Hammer Paladin – lvl 385]

Ilea could feel healing magic about him. She saw that his eyes were unfocused as he whispered, calming as she got closer.

“The end... is here,” he spoke, eyes opening wide as he entirely ignored the food and looked in her direction, gaze still unfocused.

Might try to heal him later, if Aki deems it safe.

The last prisoner was an orc. A female sitting with closed eyes, thick muscle and gray skin, four arms crossed in front of her.

[Axe Warrior – lvl 321]

The orc opened her eyes when she sniffed the food. She looked up at Ilea and bowed her head. “What is the price for this gift?”

“It’s free,” Ilea answered.

The orc took the bowl. “I thank you, Val Akuun. I am Ress, of the Nel forest tribe in the west.”

“I’m Lilith,” she said, locking eyes with the orc.

Ilea turned when she heard Seviir swallow and sigh. “We left, because we were afraid.

“Because we felt conflict within us. Because we thought, at the time, that we had made the wrong decision.” He chuckled to himself and coughed again. “You called me a fool many a time, Niivalyr. I fear your teachings only reached me once it was too late.”

“We are here now,” Elfie spoke.

Ilea walked back, seeing Seviir focus on her. “What happened to Heranuur?” she spoke.

Seviir met her gaze. He looked at her for a few seconds, his eyes losing focus. He opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again.

“I killed him. Murdered him. To the cheers of a hundred elves in Verleyna.

“Those I had once considered my brethren. He was wiser than I. Always. Stubborn to his last breath. Even then, I didn’t yet understand, when he had hissed, his guts spilling out, a grin plastered on his face. His death, and my shame, my guilt, my curse, nothing but a play for the Sanvaruun, and the souls of Verleyna.”

He raised his hand and looked at the sharp nails, making a fist. “I had thought you dead, when the Noro was sent to hunt you down. An arrogant human that did not know its place in the order of the world.” He smiled to himself, then laughed, interrupted by a bout of coughing.

Seviir looked up. “And yet here you stand. Slayer of Oracle. A goddess, and me, the fool.”

“Did he at least get to put up a fight?” Ilea asked.

“He did. Enough to convince me I had actually won. But there had been strange movements, his magic not as potent as it had usually been. I didn’t want to lose then, I thought that maybe, they would accept me if I played their game. It ate me up for months, just like everything else.

“I believe he chose to die on that day. The last choice of a Cerithil Hunter, unwilling in the end, to bend to the will of a Monarch. Defiant one last time. Perhaps he had realized we were doomed after all, or he simply did not wish to kill a friend, and one of his kind. Ner cerithial.”

“Ner cerithial,” Elfie said and Isalthar spoke the words in turn.

“Why didn’t you fucking kill yourself when you realized you were the stupidest fuck in this flying ass city?” the Mava spoke, done with her meal and back at the grates. “At least now it makes sense why you’re so fucking broody all the time.”

“We’re having a conversation,” Ilea sent to the Mava. *“We’ll get the rest of you out soon enough.”*

The Mava grinned but didn’t speak again.

Seviir glanced in the direction of the Mava. “Because I held out hope, that if I fought enough fights, that if I proved myself loyal, that I’d be set free. I had to learn the hard way that it wouldn’t happen.

“And then I felt guilt. Guilt and anger. Then regret. Then loss. And hopelessness. But I put it all into my growing hate for the Sanvaruun. For Verleyyna, and for the Oracles that let it all happen.

“That too proved futile. Maybe I still am a coward after all, but a part of me believes it was all for this moment. To tell you of Heranuur, and how he stood defiant in the very end, how he was torn by fear, and how before he died, he chose the Hunters.

“Isalthar, Niivalyr, Ilea. I would tell you that he would’ve been sorry, if he had met you again, but then he would’ve probably told you to piss off, with a healthy dose of fire magic.”

“Ner cerithial,” Ilea said. “What does it mean?”

“May he be born into new life,” Isalthar spoke. “We have lost a Hunter. And we found one we had thought lost.”

“Val Akuun,” Seviir spoke with a wry smile. “I am more lost than you know.”

“Wisdom has found you after all,” Elfie said.

Both Isalthar and Niivalyr looked to Ilea.

“What do you expect me to say?”

Seviir looked up. “My choices have brought the death of a brother. Never can I make amends, but if you do not wish to kill me, I shall fight, in his memory, against the machines of the Taleen.”

Ilea smiled. *Now for this moment, I would’ve liked for him to still be alive. May you rest in battle, somewhere out there. Heranuur.*