

## Chapter 577 Flames

Ilea felt her ash burn away, the heat itself tugging at her skin and innards. Ash covered her eyes, lest they burst from the intense fires.

Her Lava Magic Resistance absorbed what it could, entirely overwhelmed with the devastating power.

Anybody lesser would've molten away but Ilea didn't survive four mark attacks without reason. And fire was one of her specialties.

She turned around when the ash in front of her had been stripped away, falling now that her wings were gone. Her back burned but her armor already reformed in front of her chest and slightly molten face. She felt no pain and watched with joy as her health slowly dwindled away, brought up again by her hampered healing.

Feyrair slammed to the ground with his massive body, the claws digging deep and burning with white flame. His jaws closed and the spell subsided.

Ilea's armor reformed as she turned back towards him, her wings appearing yet again. Lightning roared around them, one bolt slashing through the dragonling's left wing, punching through the thick hide and evoking a hiss from him in turn.

"Wonderful presentation. I'll be sure to invite you to my next barbecue," Ilea said, lifting her hand towards the creature. She felt her chest nearly burst from the heat and power stored within, the cracks of ember light caused by her aura seemed to glow with more intensity as Heart of Cinder continued to charge.

The spell released, Ilea watching Feyrair's eyes widen before she veered her hand slightly to the right.

A beam of bright burning energy rushed past the elf in dragon form, its light illuminating the vicinity cast in shadow by the arcane storm. The very air vibrated as it was pushed aside, burnt to nothing.

Ilea lowered her hand, looking at the furrow in the land her spell had left behind, the dragon's wing reduced to nothing as he staggered to the side, his own fire ringing with the lingering flames of hers.

He roared, the limb reforming as his claws burst with bright energy, cutting even deeper into the ground but Ilea was done waiting.

*My turn*, she thought, Flare of Creation bursting out as she sacrificed her health for both her auras. She vanished and appeared to the elf's side, her fists hitting hard with fully charged spells. She hit six times and slashed his tough skin with her many limbs, not quite managing to get through entirely.

Feyrair had been stronger before, now likely even more so. But what he lacked in speed now showed ten fold with his massive body.

Ilea could sense the attacks coming, teleporting around the creature as she laid into him with consecutive heavy hitting punches. She ducked under his quick moving tail, cutting into it with her

ash. Ash that now spread around the whole creature, pushing destructive healing into it with every passing moment.

Heat and flame erupted periodically from the elf but she simply powered through, any health, ash, or skin he stripped away was back before his next attack. Lightning struck time and time again, hitting the large form while Ilea simply let the magic pass or blinked aside.

Deep furrows showed on his back, her constant unrelenting attacks adding to his slow demise.

A heavy hit to his jaw seemed to finish the job, magic bursting out with a last surge as the elf returned to his humanoid form.

He staggered, blood dripping freely from a dozen wounds, all closing quickly. His left eye was shut.

Ilea appeared next to him, holding up her arm as her third tier displacement formed above.

Asay appeared close by, looking up.

The next bolt would've hit close by, instead vanishing into her gate and slamming into the ground a hundred meters away.

The brightly dressed elf grinned and floated closer, wisps of pure arcane energy floating around his unarmored form.

Only a few seconds had passed but Feyrair's wounds had already healed, his eye reformed and looking at Ilea.

"I am here now," Asay said, "Your spell is no longer necessary."

Ilea didn't doubt the elf, having seen his display from before. Displacement deactivated, the shift in space returning to normal.

"Humbled yet again," Feyrair said, his voice not suggesting a fight had taken place, let alone with him as a participant. His scale armor had reformed, a part of his body just as much as Ilea's ash was part of hers. "I had hoped my evolutions would close the gap."

She smiled at him and touched his shoulder. "They did. But as you have improved, so did I."

This time he grinned, his sharp teeth slightly ajar and his eyes wild. "We shall hunt together!"

Ilea glanced between the two elves and addressed Asay. "Is that some kind of marriage proposal?"

He giggled, covering his mouth with a joyous look in his purple eyes before he replied. "Do not fret, young human. This elf has no concept of your courting. It is merely the thrill of the hunt, and his wish to share in it with you. A thrill you must know, for someone so mighty and yet so young."

"Do not speak for me, Asay," Feyrair said and hissed, only bringing more enjoyment to the other elf.

Ilea smiled and stepped towards the dragonling, her mouth nearly brushing his pointy ear. "I wouldn't be opposed to other things as well," she whispered and took a step back. "We shall hunt together either way," she added with a wicked grin.

She addressed Asay before the warrior could form a cohesive reply. "Your magic seems quite impressive too. Are you interested in a mock battle too?"

They slowly flew towards the crevice, the storm above continuing its journey through the north.

"I am not particularly interested in the arts of war, let alone the competition of one's magic against another," Asay said. "Both of your displays of resilience leave my magic with little chance to gain the upper hand, nor a way to entice interest. For what am I but a shadow to the wild storms of this region?"

"You are an arcane mage then?" Ilea asked. The wisps and manipulation of the lightning had been indicators but there was a chance he had more up his sleeve.

"The study of the most pure forms of mana have left me with no way to branch into other forms in which it may occur. The future is uncertain and just as volatile as our time right now. Perhaps these circumstances will change at one point or the other," Asay spoke, magic twirling around him, wisps and shapes that lent his floating form an ethereal quality.

"Can you heal?" Ilea asked. It wasn't fully a shot in the dark, her sphere picking up something quite familiar from his wisps.

He smiled. "Indeed, I am both a master of arcane restoration and destruction."

She laughed, the parallels almost direct. And yet the two of them seemed so very different. "My healing is arcane in nature too," she said.

"I have noticed, human. Peculiar, with your limiting biological cage. However if humanity has proven to possess anything, it is a keen sense for ingenuity and a will to improvise," Asay spoke.

"Could you teach a human without a changed biology?" Ilea asked.

"I see neither a possibility, nor a reason for me to engage in such affairs," Asay said with a smile.

"A shame," she said. "Feyrair, we have to do that again later. Are you up for some resistance training? Your fire might be enough."

"Most certainly. The more I can resist your ash, the more my chances rise. You said your healing is arcane in nature, but my resistance hasn't risen," he replied.

"It is not the arcane energy that invades your form, but healing, twisted and changed to seek destruction," Asay supplied. "Quite an intriguing application, and testament to humanity's depravity."

"Hey, I didn't make the Class. And if it works, I don't really care how twisted it is. I've met plenty of decent necromancers, blood, and curse mages. Magic is just a tool to be used," she said.

"Not when a will is weak. Magical schools just like political or inherited powers are corrupting in nature. Humans perhaps may have a choice as they ascend, to try and resist their temptations, knowing where they came from. The decision to resist what has always been natural is not quite as forgiving," Asay said.

"Cry me a river. You poor powerful elf," Ilea said, winking at him with a smirk on her face.

The elf giggled, quite aware of her sarcasm. "It is truly a delight, to have been brought to your attention. I must thank the both of you, for that marvelous display. However I would've preferred a synergy instead of competition."

*Ah, so that's what you're into.*

"We'll get ample opportunity against the Taleen," Feyrair said. "I do hope you will share your power too, instead of watching from the back."

“I merely have an interest to explore what lies beyond the boundaries our Oracles have set. Though I may be labeled as cursed, I have little stake in your cause,” Asay said.

Feyrair hissed but didn’t comment on his words.

“So you won’t join the fights?” Ilea asked. “Why are you even here?”

*Didn’t Isalthar specifically seek those two out?*

“I can heal and support. Should the situation truly demand it, perhaps I may be able to offer more than that,” Asay said, winking at her with an amused expression. “Tell me, human. What is your stake in our plight?”

“People I consider friends have asked for help, so here I am. I’m not sure what you mean by the exploration of boundaries but I quite enjoy ancient dungeons too, contrary to you, I like fighting what’s within. The higher the challenge, the better,” Ilea said.

Feyrair hissed again, now an animated sound compared to the annoyance from before. “And what better challenge is there than to face the ancient enemy we elves have fought for millennia.”

Asay rolled his eyes. “Plenty. You may be limited in your imagination, Feyrair, but for a human, there are many other options. The domains themselves are an example. Perhaps we will again see a day when their territories aren’t quite as unchallenged as they are today.”

*Again?*

“There were times when they were challenged?” she asked.

“Whispers and ancient history, long lost or silenced. But are you not living proof that humanity is not quite as helpless as our younger generation might believe?” he said.

“Are you talking about arcane healers?” Ilea asked, not about to drop the Azarinth name to this unknown entity. Even though she was somewhat sure the name meant little to the current people of this realm.

They reached the crevice, Ilea spotting the flying elves in the distance.

“Ah, the Azarinth Order and their bolstered claims. No, you are far beyond what I have heard of them but others exist that have risen beyond their humanly comforts and security. In times long past and just as much today,” the elf spoke.

“You’re older than you look,” Ilea said with a smile. “I’m not part of the Order, if that’s what you assume.”

“A benefit of our corrupting power. To value a long life without knowing the fear of death and age, another challenge set upon us poor souls. Long has it been since last I’ve heard of the Azarinth. I suspect you stumbled right upon an ancient secret,” he said with an intrigued voice.

“What do you know of them?” Ilea asked.

He waved her off, obviously disinterested to continue with the topic. “A boring Order, rising like a bright star just to vanish quickly, as so many humans do. The times in which they rose to power in your lands are a far more interesting topic to discuss, however sparse our knowledge of such dark and troubling history remains.”

“The war,” Ilea said.

Feyrair looked between them with interest.

Asay grinned with wicked teeth. "You have certainly stumbled through more ancient ruins than I would've guessed, with eyes and ears open. More so than I had expected from someone as battle hungry as you are. Intriguing, yet we should not speak of such matters here. The will of the young wavers more than you might think. Our enemy remain the Taleen," he said and looked into her eyes.

*And not the Ascended who may or may not still have a stake? Or the humans who were stronger then?*

She didn't miss the subtle warning in his words. *The young? Or are there others who wouldn't want to speak of the war? Isalthar maybe? He's probably the oldest of the bunch.*

Ilea thought about the unifying enemy the elves shared. The unfeeling machines of the Taleen. She didn't know about the domains and the relationship between but the Cerithil Hunters at least, however small their numbers are, have united in this purpose.

"Who won?" Ben asked when he arrived. "Let me guess, the one dozens of levels higher?"

Feyrair hissed.

Farthorn glanced at her with a look she couldn't help but interpret as respect.

*Did he miss the level difference? Or does he just think I'm weaker because of my human shell. If only I had sharp teeth and pointy ears.*

Ilea smiled and summoned her map. "Just burn my legs, I need this thing," she murmured towards Feyrair, forming ashen projectiles to attack him. "Oh Seithir, if you could add some soul magic, It'd be greatly appreciated!"

She had a group of powerful elves around her. It only make sense to exploit their magic.

Ilea would've needed less than a day to get back to Elfie.

With the Elven group in tow however, they were barely halfway there after three full days.

She looked at her map, ignoring the sleeping elves close by. The first rest since their journey started in the south.

Their little camp had been set up on the slope of a mountain, where the mists didn't reach. Warm embers remained from the fire they had set up earlier but the moon provided more than enough light.

Asay sat close to the Miststalkers, meditating. The rest chose to sleep, not likely more than an hour or two.

Isalthar floated nearby, next to her the only one who didn't rest. He stared into the distance, the winds moving oddly around his form.

Ilea looked up from her map and glanced at him. *He's like a ghost or something.*

"What do you see with your elven eyes?" she asked.

He slightly turned towards her. “Few beasts to roam these lands. And yet the mists bring motion to this barren place.”

“What do you think they are?” Ilea asked. “Creatures from another realm? Spirits? A manifestation of pure mana?”

He floated closer and to her surprise sat down on a nearby rock, taking care not to get his white robe dirty.

“All beings are in part mana. Conditions allow us to live, to breathe. The tranquil nights here and the absence of the suns let these spirits wander. Be they from another realm or merely resting when they aren’t here,” he said.

Ilea considered his words, her eyes on a group of stalkers dancing near the resting Asay. *Not quite in range.*

“Why do you travel with this group? If your goal is to destroy the Taleen, wouldn’t they hold you back?” she asked.

“You overestimate my power,” he said.

“Maybe. But in the end you’re twice the level as Feyrair. If anything poses a challenge to you, he would likely be useless next to you. A liability to protect. The others could at least support you otherwise. We’ve lost days coming here. I simply won’t believe that you’re slower than me as a wind mage and nearly twice my level,” she said.

“The journey we have found ourselves on, one you only recently have come to share, is not merely one of warfare, resources, and destruction,” he said.

Ilea waited for more but it was all he shared.

*The Journey to stop the Taleen? To change the Elves? To overthrow the Oracles and the domains? Or what exactly?*

“You seek to know more and I’m sure, in time, you will learn,” he said.

Ilea smiled. “You sound like a monk. A spiritual journey then, one where brute force is not the key.”

He smirked ever so slightly. “I am grateful for your presence here.”

“Hey, I’m here for my own reasons. It’s not like I wouldn’t have jumped at the chance of destroying a Praetorian factory even before meeting any elves or learning about your little conflict,” she said.

The elf remained silent, glancing at her crude map of the continent.

Ilea made sure not to have specific landmarks on the thing, not quite sure about sharing Hallowfort’s location with this group. The hopefully soon to be alliance between the town and Ravenhall was difficult enough. Bringing elves into the mix would cause issues.

Elfie she trusted, but Isalthar, she could only guess at his intentions.

Not that she wouldn’t try to find out. “Do you think there could be peace between our species?”

“Can there be peace between those who think themselves wolves, and those they deem rabbits?” Isalthar asked in turn.

“I don’t see why not. If there are enough economic incentives, and a few bears to keep them both in check,” she said with a grin.

“Perhaps one day, young bear cub, when the young have forgotten that rabbits are prey to wolves. When humans have forgotten the death we have caused in our ignorance,” said Isalthar.

Ilea smiled. “Well, it’s not like we don’t have enough wars among our own. I assume it’s not quite the opposite between the various domains.”

“You would be right in your assumption. And while we have a unifying cause in the Taleen, it only furthers our stagnation and division,” he said.