

Ilea followed the elves into the underground. Broad roots grew into the claustrophobic depths. She jumped down a few drops and landed among the Hunters. A few more jumps before they passed through a small tunnel, coming out into a large cavern.

A few Elves glanced at the group, Cerithil Hunters all of them. Some Centurions were present. In the center of the cavern and embedded into the ground was a teleportation platform. One of the machines held a sphere in its hand, a three dimensional map of the Navali forest and surrounding territories visible in the air with the help of light magic enchantments. Various small figures within the map moved ever so slightly.

Isalthar turned to look at the group. He nodded toward Ilea.

“Welcome to our outpost,” he spoke, stepping away from the map and the other Hunters who were looking at it.

[Wind Healer – lvl 762]

Ilea couldn't help but smile. She had seen him not too long ago, and now she had moved past his power. At least when it came to levels.

The elf didn't react in a visible manner. Not that Ilea expected anything from Isalthar.

He was fighting the Oracles and the Domains, but she wasn't sure how he would take the news from the Marshes.

“So that's how you get them out?” She pointed at the gate.

“Yes. It's more efficient than calling upon you for every elf we find and capture. Other Hunters and the Meadow take over in the Descent,” he spoke and paused. “I assume you came for a reason? Do you wish to help our cause for a time? There are certainly beings that you could be interested in fighting, but perhaps the attention you would draw on yourself and humanity are not advisable.”

“I already found some. I went to the Cursed Marshes. I found two Oracles. One had conjured an ongoing mist that killed Dread Beasts and everything else that passed within. The other one was a lake of blood, the creator of the Dread Beasts as far as I understand. Both were beyond reason, unable or unwilling to communicate with me.”

He hissed and waited. The nearby Hunters turned to look at him, then her.

She didn't fear them.

“I fought and killed them. Or destroyed whatever magic that they were.”

The elf closed his eyes and whispered a few words in elvish. Then he bowed.

“So you too, are now branded Val Akuun. To you it may not mean a lot, but to us, it is the greatest curse that can be bestowed. A mark upon me, and now, a mark upon you. How many know?”

“I'm sure the Mava, Orcs, and Mind Weavers will come to conclusions. Some in the Accords know, Fey, Elfie and his group. And you,” she said.

“Even if they were mindless. Should the Domains find out about your actions, the males will mark you an enemy worth hunting to the very end of the world,” Isalthar spoke.

Ilea smiled. *“Maybe I can bash that light mage’s face in then. And find out what he did with Heranuur and Seviir.”*

“You have defeated an Oracle, but you should not underestimate the Domains. The beings you faced, you said they were mindless. The Monarchs are not. I do not doubt your strength, but you cannot be everywhere at once. Old Elves can be just as devious as any human. As to the young Hunters, little hope remains of their survival. They are lost.”

“They’re idiots, is what they are. And I won’t consider them dead until I’ve seen their corpses. As to my actions. I suppose we can try to keep it under wraps. It’s not like any elves would speak to a Mind Weaver or the Mava, let alone you. I just wanted to tell you first.”

“Your trust and consideration is appreciated, Val Akuun. The Cerithil Hunters should not take offense at your actions, though one cannot know for certain. You are human after all. I will not share this knowledge, and I will ask the others to do the same. Should you find trouble from any of ours, tell me, and I will deal with it.”

Ilea raised her brows. *“The great Val Akuun, offering his protection.”*

“It could lead to issues if you start fighting and killing Cerithil Hunters that chose to attack you, even with your reputation. Many of us tend to be... instinctual.”

“Fair. I’ll let you know. Or Aki will,” she said and looked at the tall elf. “I did wonder. After seeing one of the Oracles in the Still Valley. And after facing those in the Marshes. How did you do it?”

The elf looked toward her with his white eyes. He was silent for a time.

“It is a vow I cannot break. And that is all I will share with you, Ilea. Because you have learned of their power, have faced them.”

She considered his words for a moment, and simply nodded. He had sounded earnest, but with what he said, she could tell there was more than just a simple fight involved.

“So I take it you are focusing on your personal hunts?” he said.

Ilea smiled. *“For the time being. If you’re not desperate for my help.”*

He smiled ever so slightly. *“You have done more for our kind than most know. And more than the rest would admit. I would not ask of you, what we must try on our own.”*

Ilea hissed. *“I’ll be there, when you need me.”*

“As will I,” the Val Akuun spoke.

Isalthar hissed and resumed his talks with the other Hunters present, a new group arriving with a few angry captives.

Ilea glanced over to Feyrair. *“Care to have that bout?”*

“To the North?” Fey said, pointing at the gate.

“Good a place as any,” she answered.

“I will be back shortly,” the Dragonling said to Isalthar, receiving a hiss in return.

“Good hunting,” Elfie said before he turned to join his team, the others cutting into a roasted beast they had summoned from a storage device.

“*To you as well, friend,*” Ilea sent and teleported next to the Dragonling.

She deactivated her space magic resistance when the gate came to life, the device moving them through the fabric and into a Taleen facility far southeast of Hallowfort.

Praetorians watched the two as they stepped off the gate.

“You’ve used this location before?” she asked as they flew through the green lit Taleen corridors. Since the change in management, the light didn’t elicit quite the same feelings in Ilea as it had a few years back. She saw production facilities here, machines built to make more machines. There were piles of resources, crates, and even a few dwarves and Dark Ones, some of them glancing towards the two visitors.

“A few times, yes. I don’t think it’s quite the same as your space magic, but being able to use the gates makes looking for and hunting high level creatures quite a bit easier,” Fey said, as he led her along the corridors and then up towards a set of gates, protected by Centurion variants and a normal Praetorian.

“I know how useful it is for me, to have long range teleportation,” Ilea said. “Glad it’s available to most everyone now.”

He hissed. “And we have to thank the Taleen for spreading out their network.”

Passing into an underground cave system, the two soon reached the wracked surface of the North. Mists were pooling in the light of the two moons. Ilea watched the distant groups of dancing Miststalkers, as she had a long time back on her first arrival in the North.

A lot had changed since then.

The teleportation gates were just one of those things. Cities attacked by Elves, and now she was here with one of them, her involvement with the attack on Iz impacting both the Cerithil Hunters and the Domains themselves.

“Are you sure you can trust them?” Fey asked as he jumped up onto one half of a split boulder, the cracks suggesting arcane lightning.

“Who?” Ilea asked, taken out of her thoughts by his question. “The Taleen? Or Aki?”

“I’m less worried about your friend. They built all of this. They made the One without Form, created the Keys, created many of these facilities, ruins, they spread out the gates. They were a force capable of rivaling our kind,” he said.

“And they’ve had a lot of time thinking about their mistakes,” Ilea said. She did give it a thought. “I’m sure there are some, if not many, among their kind, who wish to retake what had once been theirs. If the Accords was just Hallowfort and Ravenhall, I’d certainly think circumstances would be different. But they have been imprisoned by the One without Form, for millennia. Aki wields the same power, if not more by now, and compared to what the One without Form was, he is more.

“Let alone the Meadow. They can’t rival it, nor many other of our allies,” she added.

Fey hissed and grinned. “Or you.”

Ilea smiled. "I suppose, but I'd rather not have it come to a conflict at all. They built a life in Io, and I'd imagine most of them would prefer to build something new, than to get back the ancient tech that led to their imprisonment. The Accords can offer a lot. Cooperation will benefit most."

"Not everyone will agree with that assessment."

"Not everyone has to. Just enough. And those with influence. I don't think the Taleen will become an issue, just as I don't think the Cerithil Hunters will become an issue. As long as the Accords can offer as much as we do."

He sighed and cracked his neck. "I do hope you're right, Ilea. I've learned in recent times that no matter what species, there are always people making stupid decisions. Out of emotion, out of pride, want, or for vengeance."

"I thought you were just out there, hunting. Elves and other." She turned to look at the expansive landscape.

"That too, but many of our kind are not receptive to the ideas of the Accords, nor cooperation in general. Might is all that matters. But I cannot change their ways with might. I can only control them." He paused for a long moment. "The Taleen are just one people. Once civilization. And yet there are thousands, with their own views, their own history. I can learn from them, just as I have learned from Isalthar, just as I have learned from you."

Ilea smiled and turned his way. "There was something I wanted to talk to you about. Before we have our little fight."

"There is only one thing I can think of, that you would want to talk to me about," he said with a hiss.

Ilea looked at his slit red eyes. "The Dragon."

He nodded slowly. "Did you not encounter one before? Audur was its name, I believe."

"I did," Ilea said. "But I don't know if I should get its attention, more than I already have."

"You don't think you're ready?"

She shook her head.

"What makes you think you're ready for Garonoth?"

"I'm not saying I am. I'm not saying I want to fight and kill a Dragon. But I want to see their power, want to see if they're all the same. Audur was intelligent. Audur talked. I don't want to invade the home of sapient creature, just to kill it for experience," she said.

Fey looked at her for a few seconds, before he turned his attention to the northern landscape.

"When I met him. He could talk. If he had been a mere monster, I don't think I would be here now. I tried to show my power, tried to challenge him," he grinned. "Foolish, I know."

"You would do it again in a heartbeat," Ilea said.

He hissed with joy. "Of course."

"So what happened?" she asked.

"There are many stories I have told of this. But to you, I'll tell the truth. It was coincidence that I found him at all. Far in the North, past the domain of the Meadow, past the lands of the Dark

Protector. I had traveled long, had fought prey I thought worthy, though many fights had left me near death. I had stumbled into his lair, as I had with other creatures. But I knew instantly that this one was different. The mana alone, was overwhelming.”

“Why were you there to being with?”

“It was safe. Far away from most Elves, and shortly after I had become a Hunter. I had betrayed everything. And I no longer knew who I was. Why I was. Isalthar suggested it to me. To go hunt. To go see, what few had seen before.

“Garonoth was there. Atop his mountain. His massive form could flatten half a human city, his head alone the size of a large building,” he retold.

“And you challenged him?” Ilea asked.

“Large creatures like that are usually quite slow, and I had several ways nearby to get into the underground. Also, he was asleep. I’ve made up stories before, but you have fought creatures of legend before. He didn’t even wake up from my spells.”

“Not surprising. You must’ve been at a rather low level.”

“I don’t think I could wake him even now,” he said. “But I decided to stay for a while, to watch the creature, and maybe follow it when it decided to go hunt. I was sure to see something interesting at least. It took days until he woke, and when he did, he immediately noticed me. There was no spell that struck me down, no anger at my trespassing, and no apparent wish to go and hunt. He simply talked to me. In my own tongue.

“I was brazen, and decided to meet his challenge. Arrogant of me, I know that now, but the Dragon saw something in me, or perhaps he was just amused, at the young elf who had forsaken his Domain. The time I spent with Garonoth had not been long. Half a day perhaps, after he had woken. But the value of the experience would show upon my evolutions.”

“He sounds a little more reasonable than Audur,” Ilea said.

“Perhaps. Or perhaps that was simply because I posed no challenge to him, or because I hadn’t managed to offend him.” Fey shook his head. “I do believe he is old. Ancient. The way you have told me of Audur, I do not think he is similar in any way. Other than perhaps his species.”

“Sounds like I’d at least want to meet him, but if he is the way you describe, I don’t think I’d want to seriously fight him, let alone kill him,” Ilea said.

Fey smiled. “I would ridicule you for that statement, but I won’t make the mistake of underestimating you again.”

“Can you tell me where he can be found?” Ilea asked.

He looked at her for a long moment. “You actually think you can fight one of their kind.” He grinned. “But then you are Val Akuun.” He stood from his boulder and jumped down. “I did not keep a map, Ilea. But Aki does. I can invest some time to work with him, perhaps find some landmarks I remember. If you really want to meet him.”

“I would love to,” Ilea said. “As I said, my last encounter with one of their kind wasn’t particularly productive.”

Fey hissed his affirmation. "So then, Ilea," he said and flew back, his magic surging as fire spread around his form, scale armor growing on his skin. "Show me why you think you can challenge a Dragon of the North."

Ilea smiled. She respected Fey, and they had rarely held back in their bouts. *He might even get inspired.*

Blue runes came to life on her quickly spreading mantle, her wings raising her into the air before she activated her Third Tier Origin of Ash and Embers. Her mana was full, and regenerating at a fast pace.

"*Ready?*" she sent.

Fey exploded with magic, his form expanding into that of a winged red dragon. White flame spread out. He didn't answer and instead flew up and opened his maw. Fire came from within, like an endless flood of burning heat.

Ilea watched his magic and smiled. Perhaps she would've once been impressed by the sight. Terrified even.

But not now. Not anymore.

A wall of ash and embers flowed into existence, burning white flame flaring to life atop its surface. It spread without pause as Feyrair's roaring breath slammed into her creation, and was drowned by the growing wave of burning ash and embers. She waited, until his spell ended, and then spread out her burning ash, much of it alight with her own fires of creation. Ilea willed her magic into chunks, uncaring for their form but focusing on density.

Seeing the dragon form spread its wide wings, she sent the first burning ashen boulder flying at the elf. Ilea felt her control on the speed of her simple but massive projectiles. The faster, the less she could control the trajectory, but that had been the same with her spears. She let go of control at all, and simply let the ash shoot forward.

As if a burning meteorite cast in white flame, the ash flew with a bright trail and impacted the dragon form with an explosion of ash and fire. A shock wave expanded, air and heat reaching Ilea who remained flying behind a dozen chunks of ash. She could feel the goosebumps on her skin, could feel the arcane power flowing through her veins, and the unlimited potential of her ash and embers, from deep within her very core.

Feyrair tumbled down towards the ground with his left wing mangled by the heavy impact. Blood flowed from broken scales, much of his own white flame stripped away by the overwhelming mass of burning ash.

He landed with a crash, on his four legs, looking up towards her flying form.

Ilea couldn't help but smile as she sent four more meteors of ash down towards the dragonling. She didn't aim for him, but let the ash impact close enough to his form.

The four impacts resounded in quick succession and she saw his form revert to that of a humanoid. Teleporting down towards her friend. She spread her wings to protect him from the remaining heat and shock waves.

He looked at her squinting eyes and hissed when the debris had mostly cleared. He glanced past her and up towards the falling ash, the fire gone as the creations lost their fight to gravity.

Fey crossed his arms and showed his teeth. "I wasn't ready."