

Chapter 573 Royal Reception

“You’re nervous,” Ilea said.

Walter hadn’t spoken much in the last half hour, the man constantly looking over his shoulder to make sure nobody was following them.

“Of course I’m nervous,” he muttered.

The two were walking through the forests near Karth, now decidedly north of Riverwatch.

“This is no man’s land. As in, monsters and Elves. Not men,” Walter said.

“Good thing I’m not a man then,” Ilea mused.

“Smartass,” he said.

“Do you come here alone usually?” she asked, looking around the thick forest. It was early morning and a mostly cloudless day but little light managed to penetrate through the thicket.

“Of course. It’s the safest,” he said.

“You mean that you wouldn’t blame yourself if only you died?” Ilea asked.

“Since when is this an interrogation?” Walter asked, glancing at her with menacing black eyes.

“Calm down there witch boy,” Ilea said with a smile.

“I remember when you weren’t the monster you are now. Ah the good old times, when things in the world still made sense. No Shadows in my den, no Elves to meet, and no demons roaming the countryside,” the man spoke.

“There are still demons around?” she asked.

“There are occasional reports. Not much of a problem because those that remain are normally quite a low level. More importantly, they target monsters too, which means the problem takes care of itself,” he explained.

“Except when it’s one that is strong enough to start a horde,” she said.

“Well then I’m sure your valiant Hand will take care of it,” Walter said.

Ilea rolled her eyes. “Hey it wasn’t me who summoned them.”

“I know, I know. These forests were quiet once, you know,” he said.

Ilea groaned.

The man started laughing. “Ah come on. I thought you’d have a thicker skin. What with all your enhancement abilities?”

“You’re less annoying in your little den,” she said with a glare.

“Which is precisely why I remain there. It’s my happy place. Here? There’s only death and danger. Puts a man on edge,” he said, dark energy crackling around him.

“Maybe you’ve just been holed up for too long. I quite like it here,” Ilea said.

“Death and danger, as I said. No wonder you like it,” Walter said with a smile, whistling a tune to himself.

Ilea growled.

“You’re more grumpy than usual. I know it’s early but you hardly need sleep anymore, don’t you?” he said.

“Doesn’t mean I wouldn’t like a good night’s rest,” she said. “But I need to keep track of these cats.”

“The map. I was wondering what you were doing. Always training. Racing for the next evolution, the next rush. Maybe you should settle down for a while, get a hobby, like brewing,” Walter suggested.

Ilea looked at him for a moment before she shook her head. “Maybe once I’m strong enough to reliably fight four marks. Until then, there’s too much I’d like to improve. And I wouldn’t go into brewing. A cooking apprenticeship though, that sounds interesting.”

“At least you have plans,” he said with a chuckle.

“Hey, look at you. The banter helped calm you down,” Ilea said.

“Yeah not really. It’s just that we’re here,” Walter said and pointed to a decrepit stone ruin.

It really wasn’t much to look at. Once a shrine perhaps, or the start of a building that was abandoned long before it could be finished. Moss had long overtaken the stone, only glimpses of the pale color sticking out amongst the surrounding greens and browns.

In the middle of the four largest ruin pieces sat a well dressed Elf, his short blue hair slicked back. The chair he sat on was just as out of place as the rest of his look. Black dress pants with a shirt and jacket both immaculate in presentation and cleanliness.

Ben smiled when he saw them, sipping on his cup of tea like some lost aristocrat waiting for his entourage.

“Lord Ben,” Walter said and bowed lightly.

Ilea’s eyes widened as she glanced between the two of them. “Lord? Lord fucking Ben?” she asked, dumbfounded as she glared at the elf.

He winked at her, covering his smirk with the tea cup in his hand.

“Greetings, Ethinu. And greetings Ilea, a face I had not expected to see today,” he said and put his cup down.

“What’s with the weird tone and overdressed getup?” Ilea asked, forming two ashen chairs for herself and her companion.

“Oh that?” Ben asked, as if she had just given him permission to share the homebrew worldbuilding he’s been working on since turning fourteen. “You see... nobility... royalty... power through titles and heritage, not only appointed by Oracles or taken by force. It’s quite intriguing. Like some adorable game played by children!”

Ilea was reminded of the way Meadow talked about humans but while the creature definitely just wanted to irritate her, Ben here sounded entirely authentic. He didn’t belittle humans, no quite the

opposite. Her initial impression of him was that of a historian interested in some new species they discovered but it turned out it was just a teenage girl discovering puppies.

A level three hundred ice mage who may or may not eat people kind of teenage girl.

[Mage – lvl 323]

“So now you’re a lord?” she asked. “The lack of level gains speaks for that title, to be fair.”

“Your insults are meaningless to me, peasant. It is merely a role I choose to play. While barbarians like yourself and Feyrair enjoy the meaningless slaughter and battle with machines and monsters of the wild, I take to more meaningful endeavors,” he said.

“Such as?” Ilea asked with a smile.

The elf made an exaggerated gesture towards Walter.

He frowned and held out his hand, several items appearing on a quickly appearing table of ice.

“Tea? Or drugs?” she asked, taking in the exotic scents.

“Mostly tea. Sadly I’m too resilient for most substances humans consider to be drugs,” the elf said.

“Hence the fighting, it’s quite enjoyable,” Ilea said. “Maybe you should try.”

“I have,” Ben said simply, moving a few of the dried leaves and spice mixes towards himself.

“Wonderful. Truly,” he whispered, taking in the smells with eyes closed and a look of bliss on his perfect visage.

Ilea didn’t mind the situation, enjoying the bizarre experience.

Sitting in the middle of the wilderness with an elf gushing over his love for tea. Is this how the negotiations with the British took place? Before their ravenous monsters slaughtered everyone in the colonies for a lack of quality in their tea?

While the Elves did eat people and destroyed the occasional cities, at least they didn’t seem to possess deep imperialistic tendencies. Not yet at least, or not anymore because of the Taleen.

Now I want to go to Earth with Ben to show him our history. Maybe he could dress in a bunch of eighteenth century war attire.

She smiled at him when the elf finally turned towards her, his blue eyes just as piercing as his hair and ice.

“So, what brings you here? I doubt someone as obsessed with battle would choose to visit old acquaintances for nothing but chat,” he said.

“Hey, I do that,” Ilea said. “Not right now, but I do that. Right Walter?”

The man seemed beyond caring, now that both of their attention was on him. “She does visit occasionally.”

Ben smiled, showing his canine teeth. “Perhaps I’m not considered an old acquaintance then, and I misinterpreted our relationship.”

Ilea smiled back. “Nah, it’s just that he stays in his den while you apparently set up tea parties in the middle of fuck all forest.”

“This is an important holy site, I’ll have you know,” Ben said, hissing lightly.

Walter tensed up but Ilea knew their hisses well enough.

“Oh? What kind of deity? The goddess of moss and ruins?” she asked, leaning a little closer.

“Precisely,” Ben whispered with the confidence of a noble.

“You’re really playing that part well,” she said.

His body language changed immediately, the elf relaxing in his chair as he crossed his arms. “You think so? That makes me very happy! I studied them for years.”

“I can tell. You should borrow some of the arrogance I’ve seen in younger Elves. Many of the nobles I’ve met think themselves higher than others,” Ilea said.

He nodded enthusiastically. “I know, I know. I tend to overdo it, which is why I felt a more subdued approach might be more efficient. An older member of the nobility, not one corrupted by power but one entirely in control of it.”

“You should join a theater group,” Ilea said and laughed.

Ben smiled warily, stirring his tea absentmindedly.

“Ah, you’re cursed, exiled and all that. Sorry,” Ilea said.

He waved her off. “Few of our kind have interest in such activities in the first place. I’ve sneaked into human groups from time to time but they have a way of telling. More perceptive than other folk,” he said.

A skill maybe? In the theater Class? Or maybe they’re just used to people pretending to be someone else.

“Maybe we can work something out in the future. My influence grows by the day,” Ilea said, mimicking his previous posture and summoning a mug of ale.

Ben quite literally winced.

“That bad?” Ilea asked.

He took a sip of tea before he smiled. “Perhaps it’s better you stick to fighting.”

“I’m sure I’d be okay if I had decades to train,” she said.

“Adequate, perhaps,” Ben said. “So why are you here?”

“Elfie, the Cerithil Hunter friend I met before meeting you discovered something your group might be interested in,” she said.

“Do tell,” Ben said, smirking with the perfect impression of a Princess waiting for gossip.

Why are they all so goddamn fucking beautiful.

Ilea took a second to gather her thoughts before she quickly explained Elfie’s findings in the Centurion dungeon.

Ben sat back, decidedly his normal self as he pondered the implications. “We have yet to find a manufacturing plant for Praetorians. Most production facilities are remote and well defended. They’re rare enough as it is, even for Guardians. I believe Isalthar may be interested, despite the long distance and its location in the North.”

“Why would the location matter? Plus the Praetorian facility may not be in the north at all,” Ilea said.

“We hunters are few and far between. Efforts are made to destroy dungeons and to cut the machines off but their numbers are such that we can normally only react. Especially in the last two hundred years,” he explained.

“What changed?” Ilea asked.

“Nothing. It’s merely the natural progression. More machines keep appearing with every passing year. Our kind is low in number as it is, fewer still willing to join our cause,” he said.

“How are you not extinct yet?” Walter asked. “Pardon if I’m being offensive... but hundreds of years? Any human civilization would’ve been removed from the maps long ago.”

“Farmers and guards die in every war. People succumb to illness and old age all the same but what about your Shadow’s Hand? Or the nobility of Lys? What about you, Ethinu?” Ben said.

“You guys have farmers?” Ilea asked with a smile.

“No. Not farmers. But Young. Reckless warriors that either die by the hand of another elf or in the claws of wild beasts. However since many centuries past, the main cause of death to elven kind are not our own people, or the whims of powerful entities. They’re machines, designed to hunt and kill. Never stopping, never ending. Had I any faith left in the capabilities of our Oracles, I would deem it a stroke of genius,” he explained.

“They keep their power while the young fight amongst each other and the machines. Nobody would ascend to challenge them with the constant barrage of Taleen,” Walter said.

“Wouldn’t they quickly rise in power? Even more so than without the machines?” Ilea asked.

“They would, and then they would be disposed of, should they prove to challenge the status quo,” Ben said.

“But you said you didn’t trust the Oracles’ capabilities?” Walter said.

He closed his eyes for a moment. “No. I do not. The situation is slightly more complicated than the previous interpretation. However the end result remains the same. Those who gained power long ago retain it still. Not Oracles but powerful males. Most are very traditional, their views and reign unchallenged for millennia. The Oracles... are separate from the hierarchical structures of our societies. Their law is absolute and their power unquestioned, however few of their interests coincide with political matters or even the lives of our kind. One of the few things they seem to agree on is that the current situation is beneficial, or at the very least acceptable,” the elf explained.

“Sounds tough for young Elves,” Ilea said. “No reason to come and slaughter humans though.”

“An understandable sentiment,” Ben said. “However given the chance to grow, perhaps in a less rigid environment, characters of such grandeur as myself may emerge. I believe it a just cause to hope for such a chance.”

“Fair enough,” Ilea said. “Stopping the murder robots does sound like a good idea. We just have to have a plan in place for what happens after. Wouldn’t want your kind slaughtering every human in Elos just because.”

“You are talking about stopping a war that has been going on for millennia. Entertaining the prospects, you may perhaps find solace in the fact that our kind would gladly slaughter each other

before thinking of visiting your lands. We are quite similar in that, you and us,” Ben said with a toothy smile.

“At least we don’t eat our own,” Ilea said.

“A waste of good meat, I say. But alas, such cultural differences shall not be breached in a single day. Stopping a single production facility won’t end this conflict, of that I’m sure you’re aware,” Ben said.

“Sure, but it’s not like your kind really tried to end the robots. A few hundred or however many hunters you have don’t come close to the resources I can bring to the table,” Ilea said.

Ben smiled. “You have grown in power. At a fast rate, Ilea. Perhaps you shall reach power enough to challenge even the Oracles or the Domains themselves but this war is not won with power. Every day the machines build new gates, every day hundreds of them are created. You cannot fight the tide.”

“We’ll figure something out. I just came back from another realm where four marks came down from the bloody heavens. A few machines don’t sound like much of a challenge anymore,” she said with a smirk.

Ben laughed. “Your enthusiasm is exciting. Perhaps I’ve been in this war for too long to see the light. In any case your help is greatly appreciated, even if we can only slow the endless waves for a single day. The resources of a connected human would surely mean a lot. It takes most of our efforts to remain undetected by those who deem us cursed.”

“Where are the others anyway?” Ilea asked.

“West of here, beyond the Karthian gulf and deep within what you call the Navali forest. A recently constructed Taleen facility has kept us busy for the past few days,” Ben explained.

“I can join you, help out with the cleanup before we go north,” Ilea said.

“Are you sure? The danger you would face is not limited to the Taleen. It’s a risk for me to come here in the first place,” he said.

“I’ve fought Elves before, and I’m interested in seeing some of the West. Plus I’m quite excited for a spar with Feyrair,” she said.

“Of course you are,” Ben murmured. “Very well, we shall leave together.”

“Also, just saying... maybe you shouldn’t take these kind of risks for tea,” Ilea whispered before patting his shoulder.

“You of all people should know the challenges of fighting for months on end without distractions,” he said.

“And tea is not the only thing they requested,” Walter added and started summoning crates.

Wine, ale, meats, even potatoes. Books too? Is that a blanket?

“Yeah alright,” she said, choosing not to comment on the Elf’s few levels gained since they met last. If anything, fighting low level machines for months would be even more daunting.

Neither enjoyable nor beneficial to one’s personal power. Almost like a chore or something. Horrible really.

What other reason than more levels could there ever be to fight something? Ilea mused sarcastically, glad she hadn't been caught up in a recent war or something.

Ben went to store the crates, checking each for its contents with various excited squeals and comments.

Walter smiled and nodded, as obviously uncomfortable with the situation as one could get.

"You could talk to Alistair, maybe someone else could do this instead," Ilea said, stepping up to him. "Can't say I don't feel a little bad for dropping this on you."

"And let them cause an international incident between our species? No, I think one morning every month or so is a sacrifice I can make. The bard in me isn't averse to the stories I hear either. There's just not much interest in Elvish songs," he said. "So keep your pity. But know that I do blame you."

"As you should. And I'm sure your songs will become popular soon enough, much like this Lilith person I keep hearing about," Ilea said.

"Her fame is certainly confusing. I could just sing them in Riverwatch. It's not like anybody will know the language," Walter said.

"I wouldn't be so sure. Plenty of veterans who've dealt with Elves in the past," Ben commented from the side, closing up one of the last crates.

"I was kidding, Ben," Walter said.

"She shows up and my title is stripped away instantly. Truly, an enemy of the crown," the elven Lord murmured with a haughty tone. He added a few choice words in elvish that sounded decidedly like curses.