

Chapter 579 Molten Steel

Asay was delighted with her *direct application*, despite the heavy damage to his face and body. He healed quite easily, the mana intrusion seemingly not having a massive effect on him either.

He IS the second highest leveled elf present. And not much lower than me. Definitely much older and more experienced, Ilea thought, eating a salad. A salad with bacon, eggs, and croutons.

As old as Asay likely was, she simply didn't see him as a fighter. He was interested in magic and likely leveled his Classes to the extent that was necessary for the purpose of research. The spells that sometimes floated around him felt downright intrinsic to her. Not magic summoned to fulfill a purpose but part of his very essence.

Feyrair handily beat Seviir and Heranuur in a bout against each to win the privilege of entering the Praetorian dungeon first. An entirely unnecessary waste of time but one all three of them had insisted on. None of the others had an issue with it, not even Ben speaking out.

Ilea deemed it another Elven thing. Or maybe just an Elven male thing.

She knew that if Isalthar or Asay had wished for the honor to be first, nobody would have argued. But neither of them seemed particularly interested.

"Won't we stand on the platform together anyway?" Ilea whispered to Ben.

He leaned over. "Yes. It's about who can take the first step once we're through."

"Ah. That makes perfect sense," she said, her voice laden with sarcasm.

"Are you questioning the superior species?" Ben asked in his royal voice.

"I wouldn't dare, sire," Ilea said and bowed deeply.

"Wretched plebeians. Go and work thine fields," he whispered.

"The mocking humor of the powerless," Feyrair said as he stepped over, a triumphant smile on his face.

Ilea cocked her head to the side. "You know, I'm not an elf but maybe I want to claim the first step for myself."

"Too late," Feyrair said.

"I could challenge that too, or we could just duel until one of us dies," she suggested with an innocent expression.

"I wouldn't stoop so low as to fight a human of all things," Feyrair said. "Surely you wouldn't want to be humiliated," he said and snickered, trying to hold back a laugh.

"Best stop now, dear, or I'll color these bleak walls with your Elven entrails," she said with a perfect smile.

"Preparations are complete," Isalthar said. "We go through as one."

Elven death ball, here we go, Ilea thought and stood up, stretching a little after the long pause.

“Finally,” she said.

“Agreed,” Feyrair added.

Heranuur gave the two an odd glance, the group now walking towards the indicated teleportation platform.

It remained active, despite a lack of gate key. “I thought you needed a key?” Ilea asked.

“Not always. Especially not when it’s a trap,” Ben said. “Let’s hope our enemy underestimates us, if they are indeed inviting us.”

“Do you know who they are? Taleen survivors? Some kind of machine brain? Or both at the same time?” Ilea asked.

“No,” Isalthar answered her. “And yet their actions would suggest control and not chaos.”

Yeah, otherwise they would just be a bunch of disconnected ruins throughout the lands, Ilea thought. Which is pretty much how humans view the Taleen and their creations.

She entertained the thought of a Taleen soul imparted into each machine but dismissed it. Seithir and other soul mages would’ve found out about that. And the machines would surely seek more individual actions.

The one without form, was it? she thought, remembering the journal entry Elfie had translated. The elf now stood next to her on the platform, his face hidden by the usual mask.

“Thank you,” he whispered to her. “Once more you did not disappoint.”

“Of course I didn’t,” Ilea said, hitting his shoulder with a light punch.

She felt the platform activate and disabled her space magic resistance to allow for an easier transmission.

White light and energy flowed around them before their surroundings shifted.

Ilea kept an eye on the space, seeing the wisps converge before they slowly flowed out again, the group now occupying another part of the fabric.

‘ding’ ‘You have entered the Izta dungeon’

Ilea looked around at the dull green light in the ancient hall. The place looked boring and rectangular, just like most of the Taleen dungeons she’s been to before.

The Huntress marks had shifted quite a bit, suggesting a position somewhere south even of Ravenhall. *Isanna desert maybe?*

The distance was difficult to gauge but if anything, Ilea was annoyed about all the travel time they had wasted going north and now south again. *If we are in the desert, then at least we avoided digging into the sand. Now that would have been a bloody nightmare. How did the taleen even get down here?*

She dismissed the thought, assuming they could just as well be beyond the desert or even in some kind of mountain. There would be plenty of rocky terrain in the area anyway.

“Far,” Seithir spoke.

“It is quite an expansive facility,” Elfie said, looking at the floating soul mage with interest.

“The platform has yet to be disabled,” Asay commented, staring at the ground. “Fascinating devices... truly an enemy worth their legend.”

“We have yet to be discovered,” Isalthar spoke as the group walked off the teleportation gate, Feyrair first of course.

“So what’s the plan, boss Hunter?” Ilea asked, glancing at the floating elf.

“The plan is to destroy the enemy machines, and to disable their facility,” he said.

“And you needed an hour to discuss that?” Ilea asked, rolling her eyes. “Do you plan to stay together?”

“Smaller groups are usually more effective,” Feyrair said. “Which is why I will fight alone.”

“I forgot your were Elves. Same for me then, best experience that way,” she said and cracked her knuckles.

“Seithir?” Isalthar said.

The soul mage had remained on the platform, magic emanating from him. “Ready,” he said, a wave of power flaring out.

Ilea felt something in her very essence, magic clinging to her core. She felt like she could remove it if she wanted to but decided not to resist.

“We meet back here after every half hour. I shall protect the gate and Seithir,” Isalthar spoke. “If you find yourself overwhelmed, tug on the spell clasp at your essence. I will be there.”

Now if that isn't reassuring, Ilea thought with a wide smile, glancing over to Feyrair.

“Normal versions give one point, special ones reward five,” he said, white flame bursting from his scale armor.

“Are you sure you two didn’t have the same father?” Elfie asked, motioning to his group.

“He’s all hissing,” she said and winked at them before she vanished.

Ilea didn’t much care in what teams the others worked. She had traveled for so long, it was getting seriously boring.

Pen and notebook in hand, she blinked through a few corridors and started sketching a new map. *Shit artistic talent, fuck you man.*

Her sphere allowed for detailed perception as she blinked and displaced herself through the facility, adding a few strokes with each use of the spells. She hummed a tune to herself, enjoying the relative quiet after so much talking. The constant hum of power, hissing steam, and turning gears was something she could easily tune out by now, the sounds a part of every Taleen dungeon.

Half a minute was enough for her to realize the sheer size of the facility. *Izta, meaning we're one removed from Iz?*

She appeared inside of an expansive hall, so large it resembled a cavern more than anything else. Hundreds of machines and forges littered the ground for nearly a kilometer, interlinked and very much active. Fires and magical lights flickered and blinked, lending life to the otherwise dark hall. Various eyes already settled on her, the first to react the distant archers clinging to the high reaching walls.

The light was dim but her eyes didn't miss a thing.

That's a lot of fucking Praetorians. And the archers must be the Hunters, she thought, looking at three of them as they took aim with arcane powered greatbows. Blue energy burst from their hands as their arrows formed.

I did learn a thing or two since last time, she thought, heat already charging within her as she cracked her neck, a smile on her face.

A dozen scythe and mace Praetorians slowly stepped out from the maze of delicate machinery, their green eyes shimmering in the darkness.

Alright, let's see how effective I've become, she thought and blinked into the complex sea of steel. *That all looks very intricate. Would be a shame if some crazed healer decided to go on a rampage.*

Arcane arrows homed in on her from the distant Hunters. This time Displacement did its job, the powerful spells appearing next to the close by Praetorians and machinery, exploding on impact with strong waves of expanding energy.

How do you like that? she thought, the power washing over her armored and burning form.

She chose one of the machines at random, her spells punching into it as she blinked through their attacks, moving past the scythes as she displaced projectiles right into their production line.

A mark was set on the first Praetorian, its menacing eyes staring at her as it moved its mace. So very slowly.

Ilea felt its spell manifest, the space around her constricted as the weapon advanced. Two arrows came at her, displaced right into the shielded machine in front of her. She blinked up, ignoring the simple set of its restrictions, hearing the mace collide with stone. Another arrow came and this one she let pass.

Energy flowed through her, not quite comparable with the northern lightning, but perhaps inspired by it. Her armor took a light hit, Ilea already back at her Praetorian. She was like an all seeing fly, teleporting past the massive machines that got in each others' way, constantly bombarded by the arcane spells she displaced or simply brought between herself and the many enemies.

Each punch slammed into the powerful shields, destructive healing flowing into them. Each second added more ash to her surroundings, the flame of creation burning away at both their shields and steel.

Her precognition, sphere, and teleports allowed her to remain amidst the war machines, her high resilience hardly ever finding use as she dodged and weaved through the sea of knives and maces. Nothing could interrupt her, nothing could pin her down. The first Praetorian showed dents in its chest, ashen limbs tearing through the thick metal. Her fist slammed into its eye, the glass breaking before the light flickered out.

She smiled when the Praetorian turned and ran towards the tunnel she had come from, its core already heating up. *Oh no you won't,* Ilea thought with a smirk, failing to grasp the massive being with Displacement. Instead she set the destination above the delicate machinery and group of beings, blinking right in front of the fleeing creature.

It ignored her as she continued to add destructive mana to its demise. Somehow it must have prioritized the protection of the facility and other machines to the destruction of its enemy. But in the end it didn't matter.

Ilea displaced the two incoming arrows into the ground below her, her arm outstretched towards the damaged and running creature. The second part of her gate formed, swallowing the unstable war machine.

She turned with a smile, Phaseshift activating as more arrows slammed into her, refueling her with mana as they burned away her health.

The damaged Praetorian fell out of her third tier Displacement gate, back to where it had started and unable to get away.

Ilea spread her arms as the beings scrambled, her eyes focused on the glowing light of the core explosion. She laughed as the wave of energy spread through the facility, destroying everything in its path. Even some of the fleeing beings were caught within, unable to retreat past the walls of the cavern. Their shields flickered in green light as the energy moved over them.

Ilea rejoiced as the energy flowed through her, eating at her health and recharging a large portion of her mana. Her third tier healing made her instantly recover as she returned to normal space. "Ah, if that isn't one massive design flaw," she said with a wide grin, looking at the few Praetorians that hadn't been able to avoid the blast. *You're next.*

The facility was in flames, a massive chunk of the small tech city already destroyed from a single core explosion. But Ilea wouldn't leave until each and every thing in this hall was reduced to scraps.

She was in their midst again a moment later, her next target already marked, its shields barely half reformed. Flare of Creation burned away the rest, her ashen limbs and fists slamming into the machine as she landed on its chest. The dull sounds of ash covered fists slamming into metal resounded as the flames crackled in the background.

Scythes of green steel failed to penetrate her armor, scratching past and cutting into other machines instead.

Ilea blinked to avoid an arcane arrow, waiting until three of them were homing in on her. She displaced them all next to her mark, turning them to face the creature. The blue explosions of light and energy rushed through the vicinity, shrapnel and brittle stone flying past as she already worked on the next one.

She grinned when the core of her first mark started glowing lightly, this machine not fleeing but running towards her as the rest of the Praetorians retreated.

Ilea followed one of them, cackling as she swirled past the homing arrows, arcane energy searing her burning ash as they rushed past her flying form. "Come back here!" she shouted, appearing in front of the fleeing giant. Her spells crashed into it, her sphere telling her that the unstable machine had already caught up.

"Enjoy this one," she said, feeling a powerful arcane arrow burn into her back as Phaseshift activated.

A scythe moved through her without impact, the Praetorian trying to protect its unshielded body against its scrambling half destroyed brother.

Ilea watched with joyful glee as the energies exploded, the first machine bursting into shrapnel and molten steel as the second one was brought to the same state, its core exploding just a second later.

Her health dipped below half for a moment, arcane arrows still hitting her phased form, a part of the energy burning into her. But all it did was fuel her mana, health returned near instantly with her powerful reconstruction.

Phaseshift deactivated, the massive hall now half covered in flames and molten steel, its previous luster gone entirely. Just another battlefield of the Taleen. The machines that had once slaughtered through her expedition, had terrified her to the core, were now falling one by one. To her hands, ash, and fire. And the self destruction that had once been the only thing that could've stopped her.

But it wasn't quite enough. Not anymore. Her eyes shined blue, the flames around her a harsh contrast against the near black ash that covered her. *Three down*, she thought and glanced at the distant archers, the machines unperturbed by the massive display of destruction. Their time would come soon enough, and she felt they knew it too. Area spells were now raining down on her, arcane explosions digging into the many large machines and the ground below.

Ilea's fire and ash were blasted away time and time again, her armor whittled away before she vanished once again, her defenses reforming behind the shields of the machines. Once again, their numbers worked against them.

She rushed towards a Hunter when the heat within her could no longer be contained. Her arm reached out as the being formed a rain of spells that cut deep into her ash. Health went into her auras before the heat released, a flare of white flame and blue light visible where her ash had been stripped away.

The fiery blast of energy burned through the creature's shield, blue near transparent light flickered as the wall behind it melted. The shields cracked as it fell, the machine unable to hold onto the molten rock.

Ilea followed with a manic grin.

[Hunter Praetorian – lvl ???]

Seven fifty, she surmised, Veteran informing her about the enemy. *I've killed many in your league, and you will fall like they did.*

The machine landed, its arrow releasing just before.

Ilea blinked through the projectile, landing on its chest as her attacks burned into its remaining shield. Her burning ash spread over it as her fists and limbs slammed downward.

Machines rushed towards them from all around, arcane arrows crashing into the nearby walls and ground, displaced by her will.

A sphere of arcane energy exploded outward, barely moving her as a layer of her ash was stripped away, her innards resisting most of the damage as she healed and continued her assault.

One tough motherfucker, she thought when the shield finally shattered. The steel below was the same as that of any Praetorian, her limbs shredding into it with relative ease. Ash screeched against steel as her fists dented in the plating. She noted that the Hunter's wasn't quite as thick as that of the normal variants, each impact bending steel.

A direct hit of a mace made her reel back before she blinked and focused back on the damaged machine, now retreating into the horde of Praetorians. *Oh really?*

She moved her wings and followed, teleporting past projectiles, scythes, and maces, twirling past the mass of beings until she once again clung to her mark. "You won't get away," she murmured,

ashen limbs digging into the plating. Heart of Cinder released into it from her arm held right in front of an opened slit.

Its core cracked, a burst of bright blue light shooting out before it shattered.

Ilea felt the power wash over her, concentrated arcane energy released from the machine's core in an instant. The sphere rushed out, burning away shields and steel as it pushed away the Praetorians. Ilea was sent flying, wings and ash burned away in an instant as her bloodied body slapped against the burning ground.

She rolled onto wobbly legs, holding up a shaking arm to displace the arcane arrows as her muscle and skin reformed. Ash covered her in the next moment, her wings spreading out as she watched the damaged war machines find their bearings, her eyes already focused on the next mark.