

Chapter 411 Games

Catelyn focused on her breathing, calming down through meditation. She checked around herself in the dark cave, finding all her companions alive and breathing.

The elf was injured, deep wounds showing on his stomach.

She moved over, healing her own wounds before she extended one of her tails to the creature.

“What the fuck was that thing?” Maro exclaimed, wincing as he pressed his hands against the cuts on his legs.

“Stop quivering, human,” the elf spoke, forming barriers that pressed against the wounds, effectively stopping the bleeding.

“Worry about yourself, and keep an eye out. Is it following, Ilas?” Catelyn said.

“No,” he replied, crouching a couple meters away with his eyes focused on the entrance to their cave.

Catelyn continued her healing, extending the help to Maro as soon as the elf was stable. Ilas had remained undetected or perhaps the creature had simply not been interested in the lower leveled prey.

“Are you alright?” she asked him, seeing him remain crouched.

“I will recover,” he replied.

“There was a struggle here,” Ilas said after a while. “It seems the expedition had found this layer’s enemy a dangerous foe.”

“They were discovered,” Catelyn said. “What else do you see?” her eyes were focused on the sand covering a small part of the cave entrance. Whatever the creature was, it seemed to have no interest in moving through stone. *Let us hope there is simply no way for it to come here.*

“Some intended to go back... the struggle does not suggest involvement from the creature,” Ilas said and looked around, pointing at a scratch on the stone wall. “People attacked each other. I can smell dried blood.”

“Very little... not enough for someone to die,” Maro added. “We weren’t the only ones who couldn’t hide anymore.”

The elf hissed, a noise Catelyn had gotten used to by now. “It is becoming more dangerous for us to move. The Griffin felt us pass yet decided not to intervene.”

“Your theories are just that,” Maro retorted. “That thing had no clue we passed through. Don’t hiss again, It doesn’t matter anymore. Whatever that was, it pierced our veil, found us and attacked. I could barely locate it in the sand.”

“It was not corrupted,” Ilas said.

“Are you sure?” Catelyn asked. She trusted his nose more than her own and the corruption reeked.

“Certain,” he said, still remaining crouched.

“Half the beasts down here resisted it, why are we still here? If we struggle with one of those things, the expedition is wiped out,” Maro said.

He wasn't annoyed, Catelyn knew. These were the words of an experienced mage who had fought thousands of creatures. He had seen death. Understood it.

“I will not go until I have found their corpses. Or have turned their corrupted forms to ash,” she replied, leaving no room for discussion. “You are not bound to be here and I will not repeat myself.”

The man nodded, remaining silent as his wounds were healed.

“We should rest. For a while, before moving on. I agree that the circumstances have changed. If more creatures are able to bypass the shadows and attack from their own hiding, it will be a risk. The Griffin will destroy all corrupted that rise from below. The danger is not as vast as we had assumed,” the elf spoke.

“My words are for all of you, not just the human,” Catelyn said and rested her head on her paws. *I wish there was some cake. Dying here without another taste will be pointless. I shall prevail, if only for that goal.*

Terok frowned under his armor, his arms crossed to show the emotion. “Are ye sure, lad?”

“I know what I have seen, dwarf. The others may not believe an elf but do you take us for liars?” Neiphato said, barely containing his anger.

Didn't know that one to be so bloody loud, he thought and sighed. “It just seems unlikely, is all. The bodies are being burnt and few monsters have shown up since they left.”

“Not the whole layer was cleared,” Heranuur said, the red haired elf seeming a little bored.

I wish Ilea was here, or Elfie, or Maro... anyone but me, Terok thought, shaking his head as he started to understand the scope of this newfound information.

The Dark Protector had sent some troops, at the request of Catelyn and Elana. Now completely useless of course. Too late to clear the first layer and too late to defend the Veramath tunnel. The forces of Hallowfort had recovered and most had gained a couple levels from the brave battle that had taken place over a week ago.

By now the rotation was established and few dangerous creatures still emerged. Terok was sure there remained many corrupted down in this cursed fucking dungeon but they were too stupid and frenzied to find the way up. The terrain might even be in their favor at this point.

“They took corpses with them. I'm sure it is in none of our masters' interest for this curse to spread,” Neiphato commented.

A horn resounded in the distance. A request for help. “Ah fuck,” he said and turned towards the noise. “I don't know what to tell ya, lads. We wouldn't want to start a war on something a bunch of

elves have seen. Neiphato, if you must, report to Elana directly. She is in Hallowfort. If anyone will believe you, it is her.”

The elf seemed unsure but he nodded a moment later. “I will try to find her. Your presence would help my case however, you were involved in her rescue, were you not?”

Fuck, he remembered, “I was. Let’s deal with whatever that signal was about first, afterwards the two of us move up to Hallowfort. The sound didn’t come from the tunnel so this is something different. Is that agreeable?”

The elf nodded and held onto the metal pole Terok extended to them.

He hovered up and moved the elves with him, eyes focused on the distant area where spells flashed up. *I hope the others come back soon, I’m not made to deal with affairs of war and deception. I just want my gear and some unknown caves to dig through.*

He grinned and sped up. *Perhaps this is what I pay for accepting her help. Ah well, let us survive another day.*

“Your requests are denied. The corruption will be destroyed and must not be spread further. It is not a weapon to be used by your lord but a poison that will eat you from within,” Elana said in the most diplomatic tone she could muster.

She really was at the end of her patience. *Worse than the bloody Nelaar*, she thought, glancing at the mage covered in black robes and a mask.

Nothing would suggest that he wasn’t a citizen of Hallowfort and just another dark one, except for the three purple stars sitting within an upside down triangle, proudly displayed on his chest.

“The Dark Protector has sent his strongest warriors to defend an ally from certain death. It is a small request, human,” the being said.

The arrogance wasn’t new to her and with what her sources told about the dark protector and his army, it wasn’t entirely unwarranted. They were pushing, finally having a reason to enter Hallowfort after Elana had convinced Catelyn to ask for help. The fox had debated it already but with a little push from her, the decision was final.

“The matter was taken care of before your proud troops have arrived. We will compensate you with resources or gold. I don’t have to remind you that had we not taken out these hordes, they would have found their way into your lands sooner or later,” Elana said, approving more building requests with a pen while she talked to the creature.

The corruption had lit a fire under the citizens of Hallowfort. Either to join the dark army or to build on their defenses. Catelyn had a massive pull and many knew her personally, had seen her fight. They had also seen the troops arrive, too late, too little. The choice was obvious to anyone worth their salt.

Those who had left were very much welcome to do so. It saved her the chore of weeding them out another way. *Let the Protector deal with them*, she thought.

The request for corrupted corpses was reasonable of course. Anyone would want to use it as a weapon. That's exactly why she had set it as a top priority to burn every corpse as fast as possible and to store a select few in a hastily built hidden vault below the first layer. Down the tunnel the massive worm creature had created, to make sure the defenders would take care of it if any of the corpses tried to rise again.

Elana wouldn't take any chances, not after having lived with a necromancer for so many years. She was of course very much aware that a monumental task like that needed time. Too much of it that was.

The representative apparently gave up, giving her a respectful nod before he departed with his two guards.

She didn't turn and continued her work. *Too easy*, she thought. *They already took what they came to get*.

These creatures came to sapience already powerful, didn't have to climb up through schemes and diplomacy. Elana knew what Catelyn would do and found herself quite joyous at the fox's current absence.

Let them have it, spread it amongst themselves and their enemies. Until nothing remains of their proud armies. Hallowfort will stand, the sole beacon of civilization in these wastelands. It was a risk of course but their positions were clear. If the Dark Protector or the Feynor wanted Hallowfort, they could take it. With heavy losses but they would succeed.

Elana would make sure the balance would tip in their favor. *Ilea will revel in the joy of slaughtering all the corrupted. As will others. Heroes to be born and forged in the fires of destruction.*

For the first time in many decades she felt joy. Rhyvor was gone and with it the people she had loved. Yet she would rather die than let arrogant monsters trample on her legacy.

Catelyn was a good leader, one that could turn this savage land into something more. If only she had some guidance.

Elana would make sure Hallowfort would flourish. Her debt was vast and she would repay it piece by piece. Ilea had found them, had finally freed them from this unending wait and Catelyn had freed her of the prison, had taken her in and given her power beyond what any reasonable leader should give to a stranger.

It was almost adorable. The heroes that trusted a buried necromancer king and his ancient wife. She would have had them removed from her court, had they been a part of it. Yet of course they weren't. They were powerful beyond compare. Beyond even Maro, who had looked tiny next to the healer.

If they survived this escapade and found some way to quell the hordes, both would return more powerful than they had ever been. Both in influence and sheer destructive force.

She liked Catelyn, she really did. The fox reminded her so much of herself, of what she could have been perhaps. With more time and wisdom. Someone that could trust easily and naturally held the power that Elana had so desperately grasped at. A good leader.

Elana would teach her, would pull strings where necessary but compared to Maro, the fox actually had the intellect and will to reach the heights of an empress.

Ilea on the other hand, she was a little bit of an enigma. Elana had been sure the woman was just another battle fanatic, seeking her next monster to fight. She had the best interests of people in mind that didn't directly oppose her but she also brought knowledge and morals from another time and realm.

Elana had underestimated her on their first meeting, only realizing later that the healer was very much ready to rip off her head if anything coming out of it wasn't to her liking.

There was potential there, surely. Under other circumstances, perhaps she would have made a cunning ruler. As it was, her path had diverged and even the Queen of Rhyvor thought herself unable to change her in major ways.

With her abilities and fast growth, there was a small chance she would actually survive all this. Already she was more powerful than most humans, able to walk into a kingdom and claim a title of nobility without many who would dare oppose her. Either she didn't realize such or she simply didn't care, living her life of adventure when there was so much influence she could have.

Her heart was true however and Elana would have to consider her plans carefully. Losing Ilea to some ploy of her own or anyone in Hallowfort would be more than just an annoying failure. She had learned quickly that a trusting friend was worth ten times more than a bought or blackmailed ally.

Ilea was the bridge to the south, should relationships ever be established. Elana was sure a figure like her had made powerful friends in many places. And friends of friends could be potential allies.

For now, Elana focused on the immediate problems. The defensive power of Hallowfort, trade and training amongst the citizens and the subtle and complete disassembly of potential enemies.

She allowed herself a subdued smile. It was a good day.

Ilea cleaned up once more, sitting down on a boulder amidst the carnage nearly five hours of battle had brought. A plethora of wounds were healing, corruption overcome.

The only thing that remained of hundreds of monsters were splatters of blood, bone and corruption. A true massacre. Not quite to the extent of the first layer, where thousands of corpses littered the battlefield but everything here was her work alone.

Hers and the little guy's.

She watched the Fae as it dodged and weaved through the attacks of the ashen form Ilea had conjured and controlled. An exact copy of the Fae and other than the missing white eyes, nearly of the same color as well.

"You can use magic, you know," she said, for the third time that day already.

No reaction came from the being so she tried something else. Small tendrils of ash came out of her ashen fae, with additional small spears forming above its head. They rushed out to attack the creature as it started to teleport in quick succession.

One spear simply vanished before it hit its head. A chunk of the ashen Fae suddenly quivered, its head imploding with a powerful force before it vanished entirely.

She had watched the entire thing in her sphere and smiled before she jumped up and clapped, nearly dropping her dinner. Two ashen limbs caught the plate before it fell.

The Fae looked dejected at first, turning its head before it realized Ilea seemed joyous.

A giggle reached her mind as well as a questioning thought.

She smiled and pointed at herself, forming a copy of her arm with ash before she made it implode in a similar way, the ash vanishing right after.

The Fae seemed to be thinking before it reached a conclusion, tapping a balled hand into the palm of the other. Not that there was more than a palm in the first place.

Certain?

“Yes, certain. You’ve seen me destroy those creatures. I doubt you could harm me in a major way,” Ilea said with a broad grin, her armor retracted to her back.

The bone set was regenerating nicely, each minute adding another chunk back to the defensive gear.

I’m really not giving it enough credit. The way I fight just leads to non regenerative armor being completely useless.

Ilea doubted there were a lot of materials in the world that could withstand the continuous abuse she put her own defenses under. Armor that regenerated more quickly or something like an energy shield would probably provide the best result for her but right now this is what she had.

“Do it,” she said with conviction, giving the Fae a look.

The thing had watched her get ripped apart, hundreds of monsters dying to her ash and all it ever sent was joy. It confused her why the being hesitated with attacking her.

The Fae looked at her before a familiar feeling of void magic started pressing into her arm.

She simply waited, her resistance skill active as well as her defenses.

Other than a somewhat powerful pressure, nothing else happened.

The magic ceased and the Fae hovered down a couple centimeters, head lowered.

Sad

Expected

Ilea laughed as soon as the thoughts reached her mind. She deactivated her armor and resistance before she tapped the Fae on its brow. “Once more,” she said in a quiet tone, an expectant look on her face.

The creature seemed to understand, focusing on its magic once more.

This time, there was a reaction.

Ilea smirked at the creature as she felt the attack with her precognition. “You little shit,” she murmured, her arm imploding with a sickening sound.

Her bone resisted the magic but the muscle and flesh above was smashed to a pulp.

She heard the giggle in her mind as the Fae twirled with an innocent aura.

“It’s healed already. Do it again,” she said, watching as the creature stopped and turned its head to the side.

Joy

“Yes, I know you like to see things ex- or implode,” Ilea said, feeling her arm once more squeezed together by an unnatural force.

The Fae attacked her five more times before it stopped, looking at her with its big white eyes. It lifted a hand and pointed at one of its eyes.

“I don’t mind,” Ilea said with a chuckle.

The following was quite literally an eye opening experience, perhaps for both of them. Eye popping was perhaps a more appropriate term.

Ilea added an ashen Fae to make it a little more interesting for the little creature.

She focused on her meal and ignored the constantly reforming eyes within their empty sockets.