

## Chapter 584 Gates

Ilea gently pushed him away, healing the slight scratches from his sharp teeth. She smiled as fire burst from his body, the elf jumping her in the next moment.

She used her body weight to catch and twirl him around, smashing him down on his back before she went down with him, holding his burning arms as she grinned.

“Now, what will I d-” her eyes widened when she felt one of her marks vanish.

*Assistance*, the thought burned bright in her mind, a formal request tinged with fury and pain.

“What is it?” Feyrair asked.

“Elfie. He’s in danger. We’ll continue this later. Try to keep up,” she said and vanished, her teleportation and wings pushing her through the tight corridors with increasing speed.

She burst out of the elevator shaft, hitting the ceiling before she bound down the corridor, Elfie’s location still visible in her mind, the magic fading very slowly.

Ilea reached a few dead ends before she finally appeared in the right place. A large hall in the upper parts of the facility. Burning machines littered the ground, a single Hunter Praetorian hanging from the opposite wall. The dim light barely managed to illuminate the place.

An arcane arrow crashed into a glowing white shield, etched runes visible on the cracking defense. It shattered when the magic exploded, destructive energy flowing into the two Elves standing behind.

Ilea appeared in front of them, her ash spreading out as she held up a hand towards the Hunter. Her sphere would make sure none of the arrows would hit her allies anymore. She detected movement to the right, seeing another Hunter near the ceiling.

Elfie stood with a hand to his throat, a large gash showing where something had ripped out his jugular. Behind him knelt Neiphato, his body half burnt and slowly recovering, his shaking hand touching Niivalyr’s back as he pushed healing into him.

“It’s alright, I’m here now,” Ilea said, her arcane healing taking over.

Neiphato slumped to the ground, unconscious when he hit the bed of ash, his wounds healing as he twitched slightly.

“What happened?” Ilea asked, taking care of the nasty wound on Elfie’s throat.

He coughed, trying to form a barrier when the next set of arrows slashed into Ilea’s ash, burning away her defense that quickly started to reform.

Elfie ground his teeth, blood dripping from his mouth as he glared at her with grief and anger in his eyes. “They left,” he said.

“They?” Ilea looked around, unable to find any Elven bodies.

“Seviir. Heranuur,” he supplied. “I don’t know what has poisoned their minds but they attacked us in the midst of battle, right before our planned retreat from these machines. Had you arrived a single minute later...,”

Ilea nodded and continued healing them. "You're safe now, so just heal up and we'll deal with them later."

*What the fuck did you do, you two absolute idiots.*

She let the arrows punch into her when Feyrair appeared close by, his form expanding immediately. A roar resounded as he rushed one of the Hunters, his white flame leaving a trail of heat and fire on the ground where he jumped off.

"I trusted them. I thought they would have changed by now..." Elfie said, looking at his hands.

Ilea turned around and grabbed his hands in hers. "It's okay. You're not responsible for their decisions. I saw you train them. You did well. And you're both still alive."

Neiphato woke up with a start, looking at the two of them and the rampaging dragonling behind.

"Did you call for Isalthar already?" Ilea asked.

"No... I... I didn't know what he would do," Elfie said, averting his gaze as he hissed.

"It's alright. I'll call them now so that we can figure out what to do. If they act up, I'll get you two out. I promise," she said and pulled on the soul magic clinging to her essence, easily destroying the binding.

"What did they do..." Neiphato murmured, standing up as he stared at the dragon. "He will kill them."

"I'd kill them too for what they've done," Ilea said, glaring at the elf.

He glared back. "They are Cerithil Hunters, just like we are. We fought and bled together!"

Elfie put a hand on his friend's shoulder, hissing in a low tone.

Isalthar and Seithir appeared in the hall a moment later, followed by Asay and Farthorn. The wind mage took a single glance at the group and fighting machines before he turned. "The gate."

Ilea's eyes opened wide. She glanced at Asay.

"I shall remain," he said and gave her a nod.

She followed the wind mage, trying to keep up with his teleportation spells, latching on to his longer range ability with her blinks.

They arrived just a few seconds later. Ilea immediately knew that the gate had been destroyed.

"Fuck."

Isalthar checked with his magic but came to the same conclusion. It looked intact on their side but the two Cerithil Hunters must've disabled the other side.

"Peculiar," he murmured.

"Peculiar? That's what you have to say?" Ilea snapped.

"It's not the first time, we find ourselves trapped within the network of Taleen facilities. This would've come to pass either way. With their premature intervention or without," he said. "Though it is a pity. I had high hopes for their spirit."

*Goliath*, Ilea thought and rushed back to Elfie. She grabbed his hand. "New mark, I have to check on Goliath."

He hissed, remembering the smith who had remained in the northern facility.

“I’ll be back. I’ll find you,” Ilea said and stepped back, her third tier blink activating as the space around her started to distort.

The first Hunter core detonated as Feyrair turned to the second, his large form regenerating the arcane damage they had dealt as his large maw opened, an ear splitting roar resounding through the facility.

Ilea watched him charge and take down the large Hunter, the two of them turning in the air before they crashed to the ground with flickering shield and fire. Bright flame burned into the floor, Feyrair’s head pushed aside by the Praetorian’s large arm.

Isalthar returned a few seconds later and informed the others.

“Will you return?” he asked, taking in the spell forming around Ilea.

“I will,” she said.

“Be careful,” Neiphato said.

She locked eyes with Elfie right before the space around her changed, Ilea appearing in her home south of Ravenhall.

A blink brought her outside, her wings pushing upwards before they charged. Her form vanished towards Ravenhall, teleportation and flying leading the small ashen form to her target.

It was nighttime. Raindrops from dark clouds above clashed against Ilea’s armor as she passed the dim lights of the city. She blinked down and into the hidden facility, displacing herself onto the gate before she charged it with her mana, her space magic resistance disabled. Familiar white light enveloped her as the wisps of space twirled, only to return to normalcy when she appeared far in the north.

*“Meadow. Don’t let any Elves into Hallowfort,”* she said immediately.

*“Welcome back. You seem in slight distress. Where to?”* it asked.

*“No Elves nearby? They have long ears and sharp teeth,”* she said.

*“I have been taught about the various known species of this realm. And no, there are no Elves here, nor have I seen any pass in the surrounding lands,”* Meadow said.

*“Can you teleport me to the same place as last time? As far as you can,”* she said.

Iana glanced at her, just now noticing the healer. The two had set up an impromptu lab a few hundred meters away from the tree and its high mana density.

*“Of course. Do be careful, Ilea. Calm your mind and act with thought,”* Meadow said and made her vanish.

Ilea appeared in the air flying, her wings charging as she aimed in the direction of the Centurion facility.

The mists had pooled, an eerie quiet swallowing the northern lands as she sped up.

Ilea decided to check on Goliath first and foremost, slowing down near the dungeon and blinking inside. A few seconds later, she came into the hall where he usually stayed, using her Huntress ability to check the surroundings.

She teleported around, finally seeing the dark creature hiding within a heated forge.

“Goliath,” she said and jumped into the molten steel, wading through the heavy liquid as her ash extended into the forge.

“The Elves are looking for me,” he said. “Be quiet or they shall find us.”

“They’re not here,” Ilea said. “And if they were, you’re not the one who would have to hide,” she said and held out her hand. “Come, I think it’s best you return to Hallowfort for the time being.”

The smith slowly moved out of the small forge opening, his form deflating before it expanded once more, golden eyes scanning for danger in the surroundings.

“I’m glad you’re safe,” she said, hugging the massive creature as it flailed with confusion.

“I am joyous to see you unharmed as well,” he said and gingerly patted her armored head.

“Just Heranuur and Seviir were here right? The rest are still with us. They trapped us in a dungeon far south of here,” she explained.

Goliath glanced at her. “It is as thou say. They sent magic towards my location before I managed to hide. However it seems they got bored with their search.”

Ilea nodded. “I’m glad they’re Elves after all. Your obelisk, is it working still?”

“Only you know of its purpose,” Goliath said, floating away and towards the artifact. “It was too far away when they came. I dared not take the risk.”

“I understand. Can you inform Catelyn of what happened here? Meadow already knows,” she said.

“I shall do as thou asked,” Goliath said. “Who is Meadow?”

Ilea smiled. “You’ll like it. I’m sure. Maybe your mind is strong enough to talk to it. I’m sure it can help with procuring metals and other materials for you as well.”

“I see, a friend that you have brought to Hallowfort. I shall welcome them. Do tread with care, Ilea. They were driven by purpose,” Goliath said as his spell activated.

“I will. You take care as well,” she said and watched his form vanish.

Her smile disappeared as she looked around, seeing the scorched ground, displaced tools and destroyed creations.

Sentinel Huntress took in the surroundings, her skill quickly locating the magical trail left behind by the two creatures. A few teleports brought her out of the dungeon, her wings spreading as she ascended.

She strained her eyes to find the two Elves she was looking for. It hadn’t been long at all and she doubted they could match her speed. If they were going south, she would find them during the day storms.

Ilea moved her wings lazily, the night sky and long distances not bothering her enhanced sight and magical tracking as she slowly followed the faint trail. She was prepared to hunt all night but her expectations weren’t met.

She already found the two Elves a few minutes later, their distant forms kneeling in front of two more figures. *That’s not quite as planned*, she thought and advanced.

The two figures were Elves too, one of them standing prominently while the other crouched to the side.

She looked at their features as she slowed down. The one standing wore a comfortable looking set of baggy black pants and a black long sleeved shirt, both lined with silver runes. Starlight reflected off the chain of silver hanging around his neck, various glittering white stones had been set within. He had long flowing hair, blond and near white. His eyes were golden, with a tinge of a dark fiery red, and they were looking right back at her.

Ilea slowed to a stop, unsure if he really was looking at her. *If I can see him, there's a chance he sees me too.*

The elf cocked his head to the side a little, a curious expression on his face before he turned to the crouching one and said something.

She looked at the second one, his whole body covered in formfitting black steel armor. He had no discerning features, two tiny slits in his helmet the only thing that would reveal anything about what hid below.

He stood up and held out his right arm. A perfect silver pole appeared, shimmering in the moonlight before he vanished.

Ilea wasn't sure what to expect, tracking his movements as he appeared closer. Another teleport brought him close to her, thin platforms of dull red magic appearing in the air as he rushed forward, using them as steps.

"Hello-" Ilea said with a wave, watching the pole come at her with an incredibly quick move.

She held up her arm to block, her precognition suggesting the damage would be minimal at best. Magic rippled through the weapon right before it connected, the pole slamming into her with the weight of a freight train, breaking her arm and sending her flying through the air.

Ilea watched the elf keep pace, running through the air as he brought his weapon down with another fast strike.

This time, she teleported, healing her arm in the process. She barely got a fraction of a second when the elf appeared in her sphere, his weapon striking out yet again.

*You fuck.*

She dodged the pole as her ash fanned out, finding his weapon stopping entirely mid swing, redirecting itself at her yet again. Ilea displaced herself and the elf followed.

**[Warrior – lvl ???]**

*Eight hundred*, she gauged and decided that this wasn't a fight she wanted to get stuck in.

Ilea kept flying backwards and towards the dungeon, her ashen limbs slashing into the elf without a discernible result, his eyes blood red behind the dark helmet. She glanced back at the other Elves but could only see the shrinking forms in the distance, right where she had seen them before.

"Do you n-" she said, forced to dodge his attacks, the pole moving erratically before she had to teleport again.

The elf followed, continuing his flurry of physically impossible attacks before a blow glanced her shoulder.

Ilea felt herself twirl from the weight, the impact having shattered her shoulder to a thousand pieces, everything on top turned to bloody squash. She displaced herself before another blow could land on her. “Who the fuck are you!?”

The elf didn’t speak, a glancing strike shattering her left thigh, her wing clipped by a direct hit before she twirled down towards the ground.

Ilea managed to blink away, displacement letting her escape the elf who followed. He couldn’t quite keep up with her frequency but he was damn close, using at least two different abilities to hunt her.

When she got close to the dungeon entrance, Ilea stood and held her ground. She watched the elf appear, Heart of Cinder releasing right when two of his teleportation abilities had been used.

She saw the silver pole move through the expanding flames, hitting her arm in a direct horizontal swipe. The bone gave, her arm punching into her chest as her ribs were destroyed, organs squashed before the pole finally came to a halt.

The elf didn’t stop either, fire still clinging to him as he walked over to her regenerating form, the pole coming down as her third tier healing made her bones bend back into place.

*That thing isn’t following any laws of physics*, she thought with gritted teeth, her ashen limbs simply ignored as Storm of Cinders flared up on the elf with bright burning lines and spreading embers.

Her precognition worked against her, unable to detect any danger or feints from the warrior. Any way she dodged, his pole weapon followed, as if it was weightless. Another hit mangled her legs, a second one breaking her spine, and a third one coming for her skull.

Ilea blinked away before her brain could be squashed, appearing inside the dungeon itself. She watched as the elf appeared right in front of the entrance, looking past her and at the cavern before his eyes turned to her.

He didn’t even hiss, just vanishing without a word.

Ilea felt her bones crack back into place, connected once again by her magical healing. “What the fuck is that pole...,” she murmured. *And he straight up ignored all the damage and intrusion.*

A ripple formed in space a few meters in front of the entrance, the golden eyed elf stepping out with casual grace, one of his hands going through his hair. Heranuur and Seviir were nowhere to be seen.

**[Mage – lvl ????]**

She felt he was close to one thousand. At least not higher than the Ascended had been. And still, she felt herself press up against the cavern wall slightly.

He bowed a little closer to have a good look, a curious smirk on his lips. “Human. A filthy human,” he said with a laugh, looking around as if it was the most unbelievable thing he had ever heard. “Why don’t you join us out here, where the air is untainted.” His voice was smooth and calm, almost bored.

Ilea saw the space around her change, magic trying to grip her just like Meadow had used to do. She resisted, taking a step back when she felt her body move forward. She could see the confusion in his eyes, one of his brows twitching ever so slightly. His expression turned to cold calculation when night turned to day.

She couldn't even scream, the bright burning light melting away her eyes and throat as her ash was washed away. Her body resisted, healing against the bright energy as her resistance started to absorb both heat and mana.

Ilea stumbled back, her skin reforming before her eyes regained their light. She stared at the elf with all the defiance she could muster, her aura expanding outwards. "Who the fuck are you?" she asked, more heat still gathering within her core.

"Not a human, no. A Deviant, child of death and ash. You do not comprehend the weight of my presence here, creature. You know of the Val Akuun, cursed hunter of the damned?" he demanded, a slight smile still on his lips, accompanied by what seemed like a look of pity.

Ilea didn't reply.

He sighed, taking a deep breath. "If you find him again, crawling around in the filthy birth places of dark creatures, tell him that I demand his presence in Verleya."

The elf looked away for a moment, giving a slight nod before he turned back to Ilea. "Now leave my sight and return to the filth where you were made," he said, his form bursting into light and fire, like a flare of pure heat and energy.

Ilea staggered back, releasing Heart of Cinder in a cone towards him, her spell blocked by an invisible barrier. She tried to remain but his light had already reached her bone. Before her brain could be cooked, she vanished, teleporting back into the depths of the Centurion factory.

Her heart hammered away in her chest, a message looming within her mind.

***'ding' 'You have survived an encounter with an Elven Monarch – One Core skill point awarded'***