

“You still didn’t tell me what you are,” Ilea said, out loud this time.

She could see the detailed war paint now, red like blood, covering chests and faces, all of them adorned with tusks, black and brown manes of hair on their heads. Some of them had larger chests and broader hips, but all of them had defined muscles, hunters and warriors alike no matter the sex.

One of the females took a few steps towards her, wielding a single two handed sword, a slab of steel. “We are Orcs,” she said with a heavy accent, spitting at the ground with the last word. “If you do not claim our prey, what is it you want?”

Ilea smiled. “I’m just curious. I told Rahk that I’m looking for the Cursed Marshes. Am I going in the right direction?”

The orc scoffed. “It is customary, to show one’s strength before asking favors.”

“Is it now? I’m not from around here,” Ilea said and gave the orc her full attention. This one she saw only had two arms, her lion like tail swaying behind her, posture mostly relaxed but in a stance. The warrior was ready to fight, at level two twenty.

Staggering confidence, that much they have. I suppose the rifle demonstration was not show of strength enough.

“That was obvious. Would you honor me then?” the orc said and crouched, one hand to the ground and the other grasping the massive steel slab of a sword. Her clawed toes dug into the sand as she prepared to charge, muscles bulging under her gray skin.

Ilea grinned. “Try what you will,” she said and spread her arms wide, welcoming the orc to attack. She didn’t have to ask twice, watching blood magic emanate from the warrior’s body, the female vanishing and appearing next to Ilea.

She didn’t move, letting the metal sword crash into her back with its full force. The loud impact elicited a few excited grunts from the arrayed watchers, even though Ilea hadn’t moved an inch. Turning towards the orc, she raised her arm, watching the female dodge backwards before she grasped her with space manipulation. “I don’t think you’re quite ready to face me,” she said, and pushed her back, making sure not to send out a wave of magic but to simply throw the orc.

Still, the warrior impacted three dunes in a row, her weapon spinning aside after the first, a pained groan resounding when she finally came to a stop.

A little too much, hmm?

Ilea teleported closer and checked the female with her healing. She was alive, a few broken ribs and a splintered shoulder.

Still, she got up, coughing blood as she unsheathed a red blade with a bone handle.

“I’m not going to kill you,” Ilea said and healed the orc.

The warrior’s eyes were wide as her injuries recovered.

“You are... a healer,” the orc muttered before falling to one knee, her face towards the sand below. “I do not question your strength. Your goal lies to the north, as you have expected. We know routes below and around the marshes, for you to traverse.”

The other orcs now joined from behind, watching with varied expressions, all of them still alert and aware of their surroundings, in case of another monster attacking.

“I want to go into the marshes, not below or around them,” Ilea said.

Grunts resounded as the orcs talked to each other, quiet and fast.

“I am Fero.” the female orc spoke. She gestured to the others with one hand. “Untainted, what do you seek within the Marshes?”

“High level monsters to fight and kill,” Ilea said, smiling when she saw Fero’s eyes widening.

The orc focused and grinned, her mane moving in the wind. “You walk the path of the warrior. And you will find the monsters you seek, of that I am sure.”

Ilea smiled back. “Any legends about god like beings in there? Four marks, beings too powerful to even get close to?”

“Follow the Dread beasts, Untainted,” Fero spoke.

Snickers and howls came from the other orcs.

Ilea raised her brows and whistled using monster hunter. Only a few of them froze, but their mocking demeanor was washed away in an instant. “I will follow the Dread beasts, anything else?”

Fero did no longer grin. “The marshes are a place of madness, its inhabitants apt in finding those who dare enter their domain. You will not want for monsters.”

“Sounds like my kind of place,” Ilea said. “Rahk, where did you get that rifle?”

“A gift, from my mother, to me,” he spoke.

“Did she make it?”

He shook his head. “Bloodcoils come from the northern Courts. Valuable weapons.”

“The Vampire Courts?” Ilea asked.

He grunted, affirmative.

Ilea looked up to the sky. *Might go there after. Hmm. They’re a civilization though, not monsters.*

“Do you have a government, a queen, or some kind of leader?” she asked the orcs.

“I lead this hunting party,” Fero said.

“That’s it? Nobody above you? An elder or something?”

“Those who are strong, lead,” Fero said, the other orcs grunting in response. “If they choose to lead,” she added.

“Would you be interested in trading with an alliance in the east? Past the Elven Domains.”

“Some of us trade what we find. You speak of faraway lands, beyond the marshes, beyond the desert, beyond the storms of the north,” Fero said.

“There are ways, to travel,” Ilea said and opened a gate to Iz. *“Can you send me an Executioner? I encountered Orcs,”* she sent to Aki.

The hunting party growled and prepared their weapons when a silver machine stepped out from the distorted space in the sky.

“This is a friend of mine,” Ilea said. “Someone that might be interested in trade, depending on what your kind has to offer.”

Fero stepped forward. “It will depend on what You have to offer.”

“Quite a lot that could be of interest,” the Executioner spoke. “I greet you,” he said and landed on the ground. “I am the Sentinel of Akelion, Guardian of Iz, and the Accords.”

“Where are we?” he sent to Ilea.

“Northern Sava desert, I assume close to the Cursed Marshes, this party wouldn’t have traveled too far with their levels and abilities,” she answered.

“Can you travel a few kilometers away and open another gate? I will add a teleportation node to the network,” Aki said.

“Sure,” Ilea said. *“Try to find out where they trade with the vampire courts, that rifle one of them wields has apparently been made there.”*

She wasn’t too keen on making rifles widely available but a civilization capable of such craftsmanship certainly had plenty to offer.

She cracked her neck and fingers. “Have fun.”

“They will listen to you once you’ve proven your strength. Shouldn’t be a problem with an Executioner here,” she sent to the machine.

“I have learned some things about Orcs already. Perhaps allocating some resources to this will prove at least somewhat useful,” he replied.

“May we meet again,” Fero spoke. “In Traka.”

“Wherever that is, sure,” Ilea said and spread her wings, waving to the hunting party before she shot off.

Ilea landed again after flying for half a minute with charged wings. Opening another gate, she watched the Centurions and Guardians step onto the sands with the materials required to construct a teleportation gate. A taleen one.

One of the Centurions looked at her, green eyes shining in the dark desert. “Traka is where their warriors go after death.”

“Fitting,” Ilea said.

“You will tread into the Marshes?”

“I will,” Ilea said. “Will let you know what I find,” she added as her wings charged yet again.

“Enjoy your stay,” the machine said as they started moving towards a nearby stone plateau. “And try not to die.”

“Never taking a risk, you know me,” Ilea said right before shooting off, vaguely northwards.

Ilea soon started to see the surface of the ground changing in the distance. From dark sands to a darker color, twisted gnarled trees reaching out towards the sky. She slowed and flew the last stretch while keeping an eye out for any dangers.

Rocks and boulders still jutted out of the desert before the landscape changed. There was little to no transition as she would've expected. Sand, and then mud. More of the gnarled trees dotted the landscape ahead, murky ponds and lakes visible from where she flew. Mists obscured the deeper parts of the region but it was both too wide and far for her to see an end to the marshes.

She landed in the sands and looked each way. *This has to be unnatural in some way.*

Ilea couldn't help but think back to the Oasis of Virivyen, though she knew the landscape in the North wasn't exactly perfectly natural either. Knowing both, she felt a little apprehensive. Forming a clone of ash, she imbued it with her mana. *Go inside and come back out.*

She watched as the clone rushed in, flew past a few of the plants and trees before it came back out. Unharmed. The landscape undisturbed.

Ilea frowned. Now that she was on the ground, she could tell how horrendous the visibility was within the muddy landscape. Her dominion could see inside, and below the waters, but she still got a strange feeling from the entire area.

Never taking any risks, she thought and flew past the last sand covered stretch and into the cursed marshes. She hovered a few meters in, taking in a deep breath as she took in the change. The air itself felt heavy. Humid, hot, and downright humming with magical power. The wisps of the fabric seemed unaffected, the only thing that remained normal of what she could perceive.

There was magic in the earth, far more than usual. Ilea turned to look at the ancient trees, the feel of the wood reminding her of something the Meadow would create to throw at her. The moonlight remained visible but it almost seemed subdued, the shadows far reaching and darkness all around.

The mud itself felt dense and packed with ambient mana. The world around her was alive, pulsing with power. Ilea felt the hairs on her neck stand up, tense and ready for an attack.

But nothing came.

The bog remained mostly static, a few mosquito like creatures the size of her fists flying closer and immediately fleeing when they likely felt her magical presence. Bugs and little critters moved on and in the ground, none of them moving to attack her.

Ilea didn't trust it. It was difficult for her to discern all of the impressions she got through her perception, through all of her senses. The smells were intense, the air difficult to breathe, the magic palpable. None of it was an issue to her thanks to various resistances, but it remained noticeable, especially compared to the desert. She checked if she could leave, and passed the line of mud and sand once more.

She came out on the other end, the pressure gone immediately, the heat gone and replaced by a cool desert night.

Yeah, there is something seriously fucky going on with that swamp.

At the same time she thought the whole thing *very* intriguing. With ambient mana this high, she expected any creatures within to be formidable at least. Passing back inside, she spread her wings and slowly flew over the murky waters and mud, always keeping an eye out for monsters lurking below, both in the earth or in the waters. She wondered if there were more cursed artifacts here, made by the Sanguerrihn or perhaps someone else, but so far she couldn't discern any curse magic, despite the name of the place.

Ilea soon got used to the heavy mana within the entire landscape, her perception primed for any changes that occurred within.

She slowed and landed on a patch of mostly dry earth when she noticed the mists around her, not moving in but coming into existence without prior warning. Again, she was ready for a fight, but nothing came for her. The magic in the mist was dense, perhaps classifying it as mist magic wasn't out of the question, but there was no damage dealt, no intent. It seemed to her like normal mists, the only strange thing about it the sudden appearance. And the fact that the heavy mana partially obscured her dominion.

Getting lost in this region would not come as a surprise. It had already been difficult to see the stars but with the mists, it was downright impossible. Her marks however remained static, and she quickly tried to summon a gate, just to check. Everything worked as intended, her space magic unaffected by everything around her.

She waited in the mist for a few minutes before she decided to go on despite the visual difficulties. Her precognition would warn her of an attack, and if she was honest, she found the absence of monsters far more unnerving than an actual attack would likely be.

You're a fucking godslayer, stop being creeped out by a fucking swamp. Ilea took another step and immediately started sinking into the mud. She spread her wings to pull herself back out. *Fuck that.*

Why am I here again?

Just when she started to question her choice to come here instead of going to the far north, Ilea heard a howl from ahead. Distant. *Now if that didn't sound like an unhinged monster of insanity.* The pitch was high, surely using the entirety of whatever lung capacity the being had available to itself.

Ilea flew in the direction, choosing not to use Monster Hunter for the time being. She wanted to see it first. Another howl resounded, closer now, and followed by a third and fourth near simultaneously.

She came out of the mists and stopped herself in the air. The same gnarled trees were all around, a pond spreading out before her. Beyond she saw four figures running past the trees, cast in shadows, jumping and teleporting past sections of mud and water. Humanoids, two legs and two arms, all of them of varied sizes. None were carrying weapons.

She saw they were hunting something, and followed as silently as she could, teleporting over to the other side. Few trees were around when she saw their prey. A crocodile four meters long, turning at a leisurely pace, its reptilian eyes taking in the attackers.

She froze when she saw the long ears of the hunters, the open mouths with sharp teeth, the claws of differing length on their fingers, and the hissing.

Elves. Here? I thought even they avoided this place.

She noted now that they were not wearing any clothing, bleeding wounds on their bodies, their hisses sounding unhinged, primal, even more aggressive than what she had heard from the young elves attacking Salia. She already saw them shred apart the crocodile like creature, the elves fast moving, enhanced with powerful magic.

Instead the crocodile suddenly rushed forward, its maw opening wide before it snapped shut around the leg of an elf. It twirled around its entire length, ripping away the leg after the second turn, the rest of the injured elf thrown aside as the others surrounded the creature, two digging claws into its scale armor while the last tried to bite into its tail.

None of them are using spells. Ilea could feel blood magic below their bulging muscles but the elves did not use any projectiles, nor were they throwing out any insults. *They're like animals.*

She slowly moved around a tree and watched as the crocodile slapped one of the elves away with its tail, body checking another one before it gulped down the leg still within its jaws. It jumped up and caught the last elf still close to it, biting down around his waist.

Ilea heard bones breaking near instantly, two halves of the elf falling on either side as the scaled creature chewed on the hip bone and flesh. The elf left only with his torso clawed closer, still hissing.

This is fucking insane.

She looked at the trees and found a section closer to the fighting creatures, teleporting there to identify them all.

First she checked the dazed elf getting up from the tail strike of the reptile.

[Dread Beast – lvl 355] – [Aggressive]

A monster, not an elf at all.

[Dread Beast – lvl 283] – [Hungry]

The one body checked had changed his target, now biting down into the one legged elf, both of them digging their claws into each other as the crocodile turned to address the moving torso.

It opened its jaws and lunged forward, biting down with enough force to instantly pierce flesh and crush bones. It stayed where it was, munching on the corpse before it gulped down the chunks that remained.

[Crocodile – lvl 618] – [Full]

Just a crocodile. Level six hundred?

Ilea shook her head ever so slightly. The scene was just confusing. The elves were entirely crazed, the last two hissing at each other with both of them injured. She squinted her eyes at the leg stump and found it slowly healing. *Regenerating missing limbs.* She looked with her dominion but found something strange. There was healing magic present, all around. Weak but more dense around the injured elf. All of their wounds were slowly healing, more added with the continued battle.

Ten seconds passed before the elves hissed once more, separating before one of them turned and ran at the reptile, only to be killed a second later.

She still watched, the crocodile walking away before it swam into a pond and quickly vanished below the murky waters. The last remaining elf stood up, his leg healed as he hissed, eyes blood

shot before his long ears twitched slightly. Ilea half expected him to run at her but instead the elf ran in the other direction, vanishing in the mists beyond.

Well.

She crouched behind the tree trunk and took in a deep breath. *That was something.*

Guess I'll try and follow the Dread Beasts, or elven monsters, whatever they are.