

Chapter 909 Memories

Ilea waited for the water to boil as she stood in the kitchen. Kyrian and Aliana were glued to the projection of a pub scene. Despite the significant language barrier, they were invested. She assumed her translations helped at least somewhat. *Forgot how slow the Fellowship was at the beginning.*

Looking down at the phone in her hands, she frowned.

There were a few texts, but really nothing that suggested she had vanished for so many years. She didn't have service anymore of course, but Mark had given her the wifi password. She went through her contacts, hardly feeling anything when she looked at the old acquaintances. Few of them she had even considered friends. Perhaps at Uni, she had told herself. She supposed there was a reason she didn't much mind staying in the Azarinth temple for so many months, entirely alone.

And now look at you. A magic tree and an elven soul copy put on a dagger. Moving up in the world.

She smiled to herself, stopping her scrolling when she reached the name of her dad. He hadn't texted her.

In seven years.

Her mom had, three of the texts asking for money and the fourth calling her an ungrateful daughter. There were two notifications suggesting she had blocked, then unblocked her again.

She opened the chat with her dad and saw the old messages. It felt strange. So much had happened, and yet it hurt that he hadn't even tried to reach her. She also knew she wouldn't have wanted it another way back then. She had wanted independence, and he had encouraged it. She would've claimed this was the way it should be.

But at the same time, she remembered Jennifer, how she had greeted Cless after all this time. Torben, who had gone to prison because he had fought to find his daughter.

She was her own person. And she had learned early that she could do whatever she wanted. On her own, or with others.

And still it hurt.

And by now, she could admit that.

A lot has happened, she thought and pressed the button to call.

She didn't even know if he had the same number, and if the app even still worked. She hadn't updated it. And yet it rang.

Three times. Five.

A click. Loud rock n roll music.

"Ilea! Ghosts do call! Let me get out of here. One minute!"

Her father's voice.

She gulped. *You're a fucking dragonslayer.* Ilea sighed and relaxed against the counter, hearing a crack from the metal lining. She smiled. *"Hey, dad. Been a while. How've you been?"*

“Busy! Well. Sometimes not well, you know how it goes,” he said, the background noise much quieter now. *“Had a gig on the weekend. Never seen a light show like that, it was downright magical. The crowd loved it, I tell you. Good thing I let Pucky stay at Ralf’s, she would’ve lost her mind.”* He laughed.

“Sounds exciting,” Ilea said.

“Ah, you should’ve been there. We’re off to Mexico next week, and then Brazil. Hey, listen, Jenny’s calling. I gotta take this. You know how she gets when I let her wait,” he said and laughed again. *“Call me later?”*

“Who knows,” Ilea said.

He laughed. *“All grown up. Love you!”*

Ilea didn’t answer. She waited and then heard a click. The water was done.

She prepared the coffees and sighed, drinking from the mug.

“You alright?” Kyrian asked. The movie was paused, the remote in his hand.

She smiled. “No. But it’s fine. Just need some time.”

He stood up and walked over. “Are you sure? I don’t think I’ve seen you like this since... you know.”

“Go sit down. And take these with you,” Ilea said and smiled, handing over the mugs. “I’m a grown woman.”

He nodded and took the mugs.

Ilea heard the keys in the door before Mark entered, nearly stumbling as he balanced the six bags he held.

She sipped from her coffee, knowing full well not to offer any help to the stubborn trainer.

He walked into the kitchen and set them down. “All in one go,” he said with a proud tone and looked at her. He changed into a stance and air boxed at her face, his fist stopping a few inches in front of her. “Ilea Spears. I can still tell when you’re in your head. Focus.”

She smiled at him. “Careful, old man. I can snap you in two. Like a twig.”

“But you won’t,” he said and grinned. “Need anything?”

“I’ll be fine.”

“I would suggest a bout, but I don’t think I qualify anymore,” he said. “Called someone?” he asked, glancing at the phone in her hand.

“Stephan,” she said.

“Oh, I see,” he said. “I did buy an assortment of spirits. But I’d wager you’d rather have some pizza.”

“Frozen oven pizza?” she asked with a brow raised.

“Yeah,” he said.

Ilea smiled. “I wouldn’t say no, old man.”

“Knew that would get you,” Mark said and punched her arm. “God. It’s like metal,” he said and turned on the oven. “Did you break the counter?”

“Sorry about that.”

“Don’t wear the ring!” Kyrian near shouted.

“Don’t worry about the counter, Ilea,” Mark said. “I think I’ve come to a decision.”

“And what is that?”

“You know. A gym is nice and all. But teleportation and healing magic? I do think I want some of that. As difficult a new start it’s going to be. Let alone leaving everything behind,” he said and sighed.

She grinned. “You’ll rise up in no time.”

“Your Sentinels too. I don’t know everything you did back there, but they’re a fierce bunch. I think just seeing them lit something in me. As if I’m twenty years younger.”

“With the same frail old body,” she said.

“Hardly frail. And still, I hear that doesn’t matter with body enhancement spells.”

“I suppose that’s true,” she said and drank from her mug. “Already thinking like a Sentinel.”

“We all experience and inspire,” he said and nodded to the projection on the wall. “Lord of the Rings?” Mark said. “I’ll take care of the pizzas.”

Ilea smiled. “Thanks.” She took in a deep breath and drank from her coffee. *I suddenly feel ten years younger too. And twenty years older at the same time.*

She grabbed the bags and joined the others, starting to sort through everything, occasionally handing something to Kyrian and Aliana to try, the two entirely overstimulated from the movie coupled with Earthen sweets.

Ilea leaned back and smiled, still feeling a little surreal with her return to Earth. And now she was watching movies with Kyrian and Aliana. They found that Meditation helped with the twenty four frames per second issue considering their vastly improved perception.

Mark soon brought over the pizza. Not exactly what you’d get in Naples, but she more so enjoyed the dash of nostalgia that came with cheap oven pizza.

The large man sat down next to her and smiled. “Do body enhancements change caloric intake as well?”

“I’ve eaten a lot, if that answers your question,” Ilea said.

“Infinite magical cheat days?” he asked.

“That’s just a lean in to your monologue about discipline,” she countered.

He raised a piece of pizza. “You know me too well.”

She winked and opened a bottle of tequila. *Not quite the same level of poison anymore,* she thought and drank. She still preferred ale. And coffee.

Dale made his round, up the northern part of the walls, now lined with both guards and machines. He looked at the green eyes, taking in a deep breath as he kept walking. Equipment, armor, attentiveness. A word of encouragement here, a word of warning there. He liked his men, women, and the few new recruits from the North as well. And still, he had to keep a balance between being their superior in the chain of command, and being their friend.

Rain fell from dark clouds above. Strong winds made the drops prattle against the metal Guardians.

The machines hadn't made his job any easier, his authority put into question by their very existence. A rarely seen team of Shadows could now appear in Riverwatch at a moment's notice through a teleportation gate, and even they had respected the Taleen creations. Fewer had signed up to become guards, many looking for their luck instead as adventurers, the profession much safer due to the gates and cheaper healing services. That was at least the general opinion. He assumed it had more to do with purpose. Why train to defend a city when thousands of machines can do that job more efficiently? He struggled with the thought as well from time to time, but he knew there was more to it. People couldn't forget what it meant to protect something, to know that you're the one standing between the citizens of your home and the monsters of the wild.

There was value in that, though he found it difficult to articulate his thoughts from time to time. It helped to focus on his work instead. Things were changing so quickly, and at such a vast scope. Perhaps there would be no need for him in time, or living guards.

Right now. I am here, he thought, tapping the shoulder of a young man who joined just a year prior. He could tell when people were dozing off. "Eyes open," he said, his voice stern. He hoped his comment would keep the kid focused for the next hour or so. He would have to do another tour into the wilds soon enough. The machines made a lot of his guards slack off more than they usually had.

Maybe we'll all be adventurers soon, he thought when he glimpsed something strange in the forest. A feeling. He squinted his eyes, magic coming to life as he pointed. "Aki, something strange about the wind out there," he said. A moment passed in silence when he saw a bright flash of light appear. A fast step and he jumped off the wall, his back towards it when he heard and felt the explosion behind him.

Ringling in his ears, Dale coughed up blood and staggered up, his sword unsheathed and shield at the ready. Debris impacted a nearby house, bits and pieces of the walls falling down into the streets. Smoke rose from beyond as shouts and impacts sounded out nearby.

Ilea found herself engrossed in the battle of Helm's Deep when she received a message from Aki.

“Ilea. Elf sightings near Riverwatch. High level ones. I fear something big is happening. We could use you here.”

She set down her drink and stood up.

“What’s going on?” Mark asked.

Ilea cracked her neck. “Elves near Riverwatch,” she said and glanced at Kyrian and Aliana. “You could sit this one out.”

They both stood up. Kyrian gave her a nod. Aliana grinned.

“We’ll be back in no time,” Ilea said as she activated Teleportation, focused on her anchor near Riverwatch.

Mark raised his mug. “Godspeed.”

The world shifted and they appeared on a hill overlooking the city of Riverwatch. The smell of burning trees lay in the air despite the falling rain, plumes rising from the city and beyond. Explosions rattled the surroundings, interspersed by screams and shouts.

Ilea left her companions and teleported up and above the city, below the heavy clouds, lightning flashing in the distance. Wings spread, she surveilled for a split second, her Fourth Tier Meditation activating just as cosmic energies rushed through her veins and every cell of her body. Time slowed as her perception spiked, the activation willed by her.

Fires burned throughout the forests as far as she could see, Karth itself lit up with spells and flying beings, dark clouds pouring rain onto the battlefields. Hundreds of barriers were visible in the city below, the walls broken through in various sections, thousands of Guardians fighting off the invaders. Centurions, Praetorians, and their variants, with Executioners and Destroyers flying in the air, hundreds of each, most still approaching from the east. Void spells and beams of red light flashed up between the spells summoned by their enemies. Single elves that faced several Executioners, burning Destroyers crashing down towards the trees and city, hundreds of destroyed Guardians already littering the dirt roads and city streets as dozens of elves cut through them.

She saw Shadows and Sentinels, War machines and Dark Ones appearing near the city and beyond, many of them taking to the air. Mobile platforms near and inside of the city were protected by pockets of machines and mages, some still setting up with barriers flaring up and thousands rushing to be evacuated. There were more machines appearing on platforms farther out, with Watchers and Destroyers flying in, a sea of green eyes in the dark forests east of Riverwatch. This had just started.

She focused on her marks and felt Dale’s near the city wall.

One second had passed.

Ilea summoned her twenty five copies. *Defend the city. Don’t use the Primordial Flame.* She herself looked down as her newly formed copies started to move. Then she teleported above a square overflowing with fleeing people, the wall of Guardians broken through as a dozen elves rushed past the shrapnel and over the buildings, towards the screaming masses.

All of them were armored, enchantments glowing and steel reflecting the light of flames and spells nearby. They did not grin or laugh, but they were focused, powerful spells gathering and aimed at the fleeing humans.

Ilea saw them in her domain right when she appeared. She could feel the mana of their spells, and knew that three of them already felt her presence. Her aura had spread and she locked on to all of

them with True Reconstruction. Activating her reversal, she pushed ten thousand mana into each of the attackers. Only one of them managed to start and raise a shield of magic. All of them returned to nothing in the next moment. Two spells she saw, flying out towards the crowd. Ilea willed them to stop and absorbed their mana, teleporting up and above.

Two seconds had passed.

“Aki. I am here. Guide me as best you can,” she sent to an Executioner nearby. More machines arrived as she surveilled, focusing on a cluster of Elves dismantling two Praetorians above a destroyed set of houses. She teleported down and between the machines, one missing half its legs, the other’s torso near split in half. Corpses littered the ground. She focused on all the frameworks around her, pushed True Reconstruction into those injured, as well as the Praetorians.

Framework disruption activated and brought eight elves in front of her. Powerful mages, half of them three marks, all of them armored in enchanted gear, all of them with more than a few spells active.

Ilea flicked her wrist, sending out a wave of Cosmic Deconstruction. The street and half a building dissolved into mana, six of the eight Elves gone in an instant, their armor and weapons returned to mana. One of the survivors had lost much of his chest and legs, stumbling backwards. The second one fared a little better, only losing his outstretched hand and the staff he had held.

Her healing stabilized and recovered a few dozen people nearby, some of them caught below rubble, teleported out with another use of Framework Disruption. She focused on her Fabric Alteration and brought down a wave of space magic upon the two stumbling and injured elves. The first was flattened, his body splattered against the exploding stone ground, the other one vanishing with a teleportation spell just before her attack hit. She latched on and followed with Teleportation, holding onto the elf with her space magic as she closed in with her wings.

[Wind Mage – lvl 602]

His eyes were wide before two dozen ashen limbs spiked with black glass shredded through his armor and body, the wind magic he summoned crashing against an impenetrable armor of ash and black scales. Blood and bits of flesh, bone, and armor started falling towards the ground.

Three seconds had passed, and Ilea’s perception returned to what her Fourth Tier Meditation provided. Again, she teleported up, repeating her culling of the enemies while focusing on her cosmic spells to not kill any of the humans or her allies.

“Eastern wall, two hundred meters out in the forest,” Aki’s voice resounded in her mind, coming from an Executioner below her, the machine fighting off two elves, both of them injured.

She focused out to the east, eyeballed the distance, and vanished. An explosion of air blew away a dozen trees, Ilea’s hand raised to send a wall of space magic against the wave, stopping it from hitting the city walls. Bits and pieces of Taleen machines flew past, the forest before her split, a single Executioner with a broken shield standing against a single elf clad in radiant white armor, broad white feathered wings spread behind his back as he charged another spell.

Ilea appeared in front of Aki, the Pyroclastic Flow summoned into existence, the broad wave of heated smoke, ash, and volcanic glass crashing into an explosion of air as she pushed her magic forward and upwards. She could see the elf through her summoned creation. His defenses were broken before he was burned alive, teleporting up and out of her storm.

She raised her arm and with it the storm, catching the fleeing elf before she sent a wave of Scorching Intrusion through the smoke and ash, nothing left of the invader but glowing bits of melting armor.

‘ding’ ‘Your group has defeated [Storm of Verleya – lvl 732 / Winged Warrior of the Skies – lvl 728]

“North. Eight hundred meters and in the air,” the damaged Executioner sent, its shield still gone.

Ilea vanished upwards and charged the heat within her, looking down to find her targets. Three elves flew around a group of Destroyers, red beams of arcane energy dodged as they cut through the thick hull and metal with their spells, two of the large fliers already grounded. She teleported down and released her heat through Volcanic Source, catching two of the Elves and disintegrating both in an instant.

The third turned to flee.

Ilea followed, charged her space magic for a mere moment and then focused on the single framework. She gripped his form and squeezed, the three mark elf squelching into a chunk of armor and flesh, blood splattering towards the needle trees as Ilea teleported back to the city.

More machines were present now, Sentinels and Shadows rushing through the streets and flying far above. Ilea teleported through the streets and healed those heavily injured within her domain. True Reconstruction did not change who they were, she assessed, seeing an old burn scar in the face of a man vanish with her usage of the spell.

“A group of flying Elves coming from the north west. Three kilometers out, one kilometer up,” Aki sent, his network of Watchers now spread throughout the skies above the city, dozens of Destroyers flying at different altitudes with Executioners running on the air between.

She teleported up and charged her wings, turning towards the indicated direction. She received two kill notifications from her copies. Flying out, she soon saw the glinting armor of the flying group. Eighteen elves. She slowed down a hundred meters before them and used monster hunter, infusing her voice with a questioning thought and a warning.

None of them were frozen, continuing onward as their magic flared up.

“Stop this!” Ilea sent to all of them, their spells already sent out to strike her, the elves not slowing down. *“You will die!”*

Magic exploded against the walls of ash she summoned, rattling through her defenses before she let her Pyroclastic Flow explode in a cloud spanning hundreds of meters in each direction. She sent out Scorching Intrusion until all but one of them fell. Ilea teleported close and grabbed the injured elf, his bright spell of light magic stopped with a golden and blue shield that appeared in front of her.

[Light Mage – lvl 459]

“Why are you here?” she shouted past the rain and magic, ignoring his repeated spells. She slapped his arm aside when he tried to strike her.

The elf grinned and spat at her. *“You fight well, human!”* He closed his eyes and shone bright once more with a charging spell of light magic, before a wave of cosmic magic dissolved all that remained of his form.

Ilea saw fewer spells lighting up in the distance, the skies and burning forests swarming with machines and fighters of all kinds. Her wings charged once more, she returned and hovered above the city and among the armies of the Accords.

The battle was won.

“What the hell was that?” she sent to one of the Watchers.

“Elves of the Sky domain. They came hidden and through the forests, attacking with purpose. We do not know why they are here, but Isalthar suspects the Sanvaruun is losing control of Verleya. They have captured many of their young, and they tell of strife within the flying fortress. We prepare for more to come. This is no simple raid, but all out war.”

Ilea took a single breath in, all the information processing as her Fourth Tiers deactivated, shields appearing around her as True Reconstruction waned.

“Riverwatch is in control. Receiving reports of heavy strikes against Dawntree. Their leadership is requesting help from the Accords.”

“Anyone in the vicinity?” Ilea sent.

“Gates destroyed or full of refugees,” came the answer.

She charged her wings. *“Fuck it. I’ll fly.”*

A moment later, she shot off into the distance. She had not arrived longer than a minute past, her mind racing as she thought through what had just happened. A coordinated strike of high level elves against Riverwatch. Against the Accords? Or humanity as a whole? She didn’t know if Isalthar’s theory was sound, but what she knew was that three mark elves had aimed their magic against throngs of fleeing humans, dwarves, and Dark Ones residing in Riverwatch.

Aki wasn’t right. This was no war. This was supposed to be an extermination. She ground her teeth as the winds and rain rushed past, the forests flying by as she sped towards Dawntree. Memories from the raids of the western cities came to her as she prepared.

And she swore that this time, it would be different.