

Chapter 586 The Grind

Isalthar sent a few waves of air at the remaining two Praetorians, breaking through their shields and nearly splitting them apart before their cores exploded.

Elfie and the rest joined the group. He gave her a sad smile and a questioning look.

“Heranuur and Seviir were there, kneeling before the Monarch. What was his name?” Ilea said.

“The Sanvaruun, monarch of Verleyrna and the domain of Sky,” Isalthar supplied.

“Then they betrayed us,” Neiphato said, his voice a murmur before he stepped away, his magic wavering a little before he left Ilea’s sphere.

Wasn’t that already obvious? Ilea thought but didn’t comment on it. “I was immediately attacked by the armored elf, apparently called Noro. Couldn’t even talk to the two and that one wasn’t particularly communicative either.”

Farthorn smirked. “You survived against the Noro? Why should we believe such stories?”

“Have you lost the function of your eyes?” Asay asked. “You have seen her battle the Executioner. How is your doubt still present?”

The elf looked at her but didn’t seem convinced.

“She has certain prerequisites that allow her to stand against such monsters,” Isalthar said. “Nor is the beast undying and all powerful. However I do assume, your escape has to do with a nearby dungeon.”

Ilea nodded. “Yeah. He didn’t come inside. But I could’ve escaped either way. My teleportation is faster.”

Isalthar smiled ever so slightly. “And even Sanvaruun cannot force his will onto a powerful master of space itself. Did you battle him?”

He’s enjoying this, isn’t he.

“Battle is an overstatement. He showed up after Noro left, tried to pull me out of the dungeon with space magic. When he failed to do that, he burned me with light magic,” she explained.

Asay started snickering again. “Didn’t work either. A human of all things... he will be losing his mind!”

Ilea glanced between him and Isalthar. “Will he come for human settlements?”

“No,” Isalthar said immediately. “He may send the Noro or others to deal with you directly. But attacking a settlement of humans is too far below his standing. He cares too much about his reputation. Or so it has been, last I knew the monarch.”

“He would not have changed. He has not changed for too long,” Asay said.

“But he could just wipe out a whole town,” Ilea said.

Ben shook his head. “It would be comparable to a human king dealing with a roach infestation in the village furthers from his capital.”

“Okay, wow,” Ilea said. “You guys really thing that low of humans?”

The group was silent, glancing at each other and hissing a few times.

“Even after you’ve met me?” she asked.

“The sentiment is important for your species’ survival,” Isalthar tried.

“That doesn’t make it better,” Ilea said, raising her brows.

Isalthar looked at her, contemplating his next words. “Apologies.”

Sorry your species sucks, Ilea thought and rolled her eyes. You’ll learn too, Isalthar. When I kick that monarch’s balls into a slushie.

“He told me to let you know that he wants to see you in Verleyna,” she said.

The group looked at Isalthar but he didn’t seem to mind. “Yes. He has demanded such for many centuries. And I shall face him in due time. Our purpose however, takes precedence.”

Ilea shook her head slightly. “Wait, so he came all the way up north just to tell you something you already know?”

“He demands. But a duel in the north serves his purpose just as much. I believe he had hoped to find me, not within a dungeon. Perhaps it speaks for the young to have waited with their betrayal until we had found this place,” he said, glancing at Elfie.

“Or it speaks for their incompetence,” Farthorn said.

Elfie hissed, and he hissed back.

“A request to duel must be answered, it is fundamental,” Ben explained to Ilea. “It’s possible that Sanvaruun believes his request has simply not yet been delivered.”

Ilea just stared at him. “What? After centuries?”

“I have not declined him directly,” Isalthar said.

That’s the stupidest shit I’ve ever heard, Ilea thought and looked at the group. “That’s the stupidest shit I’ve ever heard.”

“It’s what saved you today,” Ben said with a shrug. “Except if you think you could’ve ran from them even if they had entered the dungeon.”

“Probably not to be honest. But I would’ve had a shot at least,” she said with a smirk, cracking her neck right after. “Which means I have work to do, in case Noro shows up again. I do want to beat that fucker down. Any idea what his fucking pole is about?”

“The Blessing of Asseth. A divine artifact given to the Noro in his timeless devotion and purpose,” Asay informed. “It is said to be both weightless and... well not weightless.”

“How poetic,” Ilea mused. “That thing hit like an oil tanker.”

“You’re making up words again,” Ben said.

Asay quirked up an eyebrow and smiled brightly. “I see...,”

Ilea smiled back but didn’t say anything.

“What about Seviir and Heranuur? Will they be killed?” Elfie spoke up, looking at the ancient elf.

Isalthar looked at him. “It is possible. But their power is no challenge to him. I would not put it past Sanvaruun to hold his promises. However it is not him they will face, but the Oracles themselves. And their will is unknown. I know not of the fate that awaits those who return, seeking salvation.”

“If it becomes known that they’re Cursed, the two will be dead within the week,” Farthorn said.

Elfie nodded, cursing to himself in Elvish. “I had been sure.”

Isalthar stepped over and clasped his shoulder. “Do not blame yourself, Niivalyr Olanis. Our mark of birth is not easily overcome. It is a challenge we face each day. They are not the first to forsake this purpose but already, they have saved lives that would have otherwise been lost.”

Elfie hissed and stepped away, joining Neiphato who had sat down on a set of interlinked wooden branches.

“So what now?” Ilea asked, looking at the group.

“Nothing changes,” Asay said. “Except perhaps... for you.”

“She’s not the only one he now knows about,” Farthorn said with a sigh. “Just because you don’t care about Verleya doesn’t mean the rest can be so casual. I’ll try to avoid leaving a dungeon for the next few years.”

“They would’ve found you a long time ago, if they cared at all,” Ben said.

“They didn’t know we worked with the Val Akuun,” Farthorn replied.

“We all work with him, in one way or the other,” Ben said.

Ilea sighed. “Well I’ll better prepare for the next battle then,” she said. “Where’s Fey?”

Seithir pointed in a direction.

Could do with being in control for a change, she thought, glancing over at Elfie but deciding to let them be for now. She spread her wings and sped off into the corridors of Izta.

Their methodical clearing of the massive Praetorian facility continued. Ilea mostly worked together with Feyrair, the two of them splitting up the enemies in the various halls beforehand and mostly doing their own thing until they were forced to work together.

Ilea found them to be quite an effective team, her being able to use her space magic and shield destroying intrusion abilities and him basically just going ham with his fires. The Praetorians had a much weaker defense against his spells than she did after all.

As the dungeon extended more and more on their various maps, drawn with higher or lesser skill, their abilities slowly grew. Those closer to level three hundred showed the largest growth of course, but Ilea and Feyrair had the advantage of facing the machines alone, gaining quite a few levels with that far more dangerous approach.

A little more than seven weeks had passed and by now Ilea thought the dungeon was simply endless. Her previous estimate of ten to a hundred Praetorians a week were likely off by a very long shot. It was no wonder that the powerful Elven domains were slowly getting overwhelmed by these machines.

Especially considering that there was an unknown number of Taleen dungeons and production facilities out there in the wilds. Most likely hidden deep below ground or in other barely accessible territories. The best way to find more was to use their existing network of gates, something the Cerithil Hunters had been doing for centuries, many never to return, still fighting, or lying dead in a forgotten facility thousands of miles away from their birthplace.

“Our weekly return is coming up,” Feyrair said, stepping over and kissing her neck, hugging her from behind as he looked at the map hovering in front of her. “Still worried?” he asked with a light hiss.

Ilea looked at the various marks, able to pick out even minuscule changes by now. The cats in Ravenhall were more lively than she had thought at first, one of them exploring the underground of the city and another somewhere in the forest outside. None of the marks had vanished yet, which she deemed at success at least.

Since her meeting with the monarch, Ilea had been waiting for one of her friends to call. Knowing that there were creatures out there like the Ascended and now the Monarch didn't exactly comfort her. Either could destroy so much of the life she had built here in Elos, either could kill those she had come to love.

It made her pursuit more focused, her want to reach the heights of her Classes and magic not an issue just about herself but about all that she cared about. To think she had to adhere to the whims of ancient creatures without a single regard for her whole species. It made sense of course, the more she clashed with such forces, the more she would automatically endanger those around her.

She could wait and train but she wouldn't hide and adhere to such whims and structures. If it was necessary to become an intercontinental space nuke to make these people fuck off, then that is what she would become. Ilea knew she couldn't do it alone and neither would this approach work forever. The Sentinels were the first part, Meadow and the gates were the second, and she could always think of more.

With high level Sentinels, they could support and heal, let alone fight forces like invading demons or perhaps even Elves. With the gates they could evacuate everyone quickly, preferably into Hallowfort where even the Monarchs would find their abilities more than matched by a certain tree.

But in the end all Ilea could do directly, was get stronger herself. She would leave the defense of Ravenhall, Riverwatch, and Hallowfort to the respective leaders, the training of the Sentinels she already left to Trian and the faculty, the students most certainly in good hands.

She had already made a name for herself in the human plains, a mention alone enough to perhaps even dissuade a military act from one of the various countries. If she could teleport around more easily and get to her allies more quickly, that name would only grow. And for that, she needed more experience.

Her worries had helped train her Huntress spell in a way, a part of her mind focused on the many marks during most of her long days. The rest was spent fighting, or training her resistances. The latter mostly with Feyrair due to the proximity, although from time to time she would look for Seithir to get a bit of Soul training in, both for her resistance and perception skills. The elves were knowledgeable in their various magic schools if nothing else.

“Do you want to kill the Executioner now? Or once we're back?” Ilea asked, freeing herself out of his grasp as she stood up from her chair, her ash armor forming on her body.

Feyrair whipped his flowing red hair back and grinned. “We could do it now. The last one took just under twenty minutes.”

“Yes and you nearly died from the explosion,” Ilea said. “We need to get the timing down.”

Feyrair rolled his eyes. “You’re exaggerating. Just put up your portal spell and the blast won’t even reach me.”

“It’s too much of a risk. Don’t be stupid. Just transform back and teleport away. Even if you fuck up, what’s gonna happen? We can just kill it next time,” she said.

The elf hissed. “I know. But they learn and I’d rather make sure our first try is the one. I can’t have Isalthar come and save me again.”

Ilea didn’t retort, not about to have that discussion *again*. She liked the elf. He was passionate, beautiful, surprisingly thoughtful, and his magic was inspiring like few others she had seen. But he could just be such an elf.

She thought about their approach, quickly looking through the messages from the past weeks.

‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Hunter Praetorian – lvl 750]’

...

‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Taleen Praetorian – lvl 600]’

‘ding’ ‘The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 463 – Five stat points awarded’

...

‘ding’ ‘The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 471 – Five stat points awarded’

‘ding’ ‘Kin of Ash has reached lvl 458 – Five stat points awarded’

...

‘ding’ ‘Kin of Ash has reached lvl 465 – Five stat points awarded’

‘ding’ ‘The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 409 – One stat point awarded’

...

‘ding’ ‘The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 416 – One stat point awarded’

The high number of Hunters coupled with Praetorians and challenging compositions in the various halls provided a difficult fight most of the time, even as Ilea grew more familiar with the machines and their spells. Sometimes they even fled and regrouped with more machines in new locations, using the traps to their advantage and from time to time even setting up ambushes.

Ilea didn’t fall into the same trance she had when fighting the Astral Spirits in Erendar, each and every kill more or less the same. Trying to focus on her designated enemies without the fights counting as group battles proved to be an additional challenge as well, both her and Feyrair occasionally losing out on potential experience because either of them fucked up and hit something they shouldn’t have.

They were usually far enough away from each other or in entirely different halls or corridors to make the issue a rare occurrence at least.

‘ding’ ‘Sentinel Huntress reaches 3rd lvl 26’

...

‘ding’ ‘Sentinel Huntress reaches 3rd lvl 29’

The skill progressed rather quickly as Ilea found new ways to use the marks in a challenging way. It was fortunate as well that the third tier had given her this option. She wasn't sure a simple application of the first or second tier would've yielded the same results, let alone the requirements she would have needed to even challenge herself there.

‘ding’ ‘Phaseshift reaches 3rd lvl 15’

...

‘ding’ ‘Phaseshift reaches 3rd lvl 17’

‘ding’ ‘Flare of Creation reaches 3rd lvl 21’

‘ding’ ‘Flare of Creation reaches 3rd lvl 22’

‘ding’ ‘Displacement reaches 3rd lvl 16’

...

‘ding’ ‘Displacement reaches 3rd lvl 18’

‘ding’ ‘Space Shift reaches 3rd lvl 13’

‘ding’ ‘Space Shift reaches 3rd lvl 14’

‘ding’ ‘Body of the Valkyrie reaches 3rd lvl 18’

Her rather normal advancement in third Class skills was a testament to the effectiveness of her map training. Or perhaps she found the results for Huntress to be higher because it wasn't exactly a combat skill. Not that she refrained in any way from focusing on her marks during battles.

‘ding’ ‘Identify reaches lvl 19’

‘ding’ ‘Monster Hunter reaches 3rd lvl 12’

‘ding’ ‘Soul Perception reaches lvl 6’

‘ding’ ‘Soul Perception reaches lvl 7’

‘ding’ ‘Soul Perception reaches lvl 8’

‘ding’ ‘Arcane Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 19’

‘ding’ ‘Blast Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 2’

‘ding’ ‘Divination Magic Resistance reaches lvl 9’

'ding' 'Heat Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 10'
'ding' 'Heat Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 11'
'ding' 'Heat Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 12'

'ding' 'Soul Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 12'
'ding' 'Soul Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 13'

'ding' 'Void Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 6'

Ilea spent fifty stat points in Vitality, fifty in Wisdom, and ten in Intelligence. She quickly checked her status, quite happy with the advancements she'd made in the short time in Izta.

Name: *Ilea Spears*

Unspent statpoints: 6

Unspent Core skill points: 67

Unspent 3rd tier General skill points [2030 Total skill levels]: 2

Class 1: The Azarinth Sentinel – lvl 471

- **Active: Absolute Destruction – 3rd lvl 30**
- **Active: Sentinel Reconstruction – 3rd lvl 30**
- **Active: Azarinth Awakening – 3rd lvl 30**
- **Active: Blink – 3rd lvl 30**
- **Active: Sentinel Sphere – 3rd lvl 30**
- **Passive: Sentinel Core – 3rd lvl 30**
- **Passive: Azarinth Fighting – 3rd lvl 30**
- **Passive: Sentinel Huntress – 3rd lvl 29**
- **Passive: Azarinth Perception – 3rd lvl 30**
- **Passive: Azarinth Reversal – 3rd lvl 30**

Class 2: Kin of Ash – lvl 465

- **Active: Armor of Ash – 3rd lvl 30**
- **Active: Aspect of Ash – 3rd lvl 30**
- **Active: True Ash Creation – 3rd lvl 30**
- **Active: Heart of Cinder – 3rd lvl 30**
- **Active: Storm of Cinders – 3rd lvl 30**
- **Passive: Ash and Ember Unity – 3rd lvl 30**
- **Passive: Ashen Wings – 3rd lvl 30**
- **Passive: Eyes of Ash – 3rd lvl 30**
- **Passive: Avatar of Ash – 3rd lvl 30**
- **Passive: Keeper of Ash – 3rd lvl 30**

Class 3: The Faen Valkyrie – lvl 408

- **Active: Phaseshift – 3rd lvl 17**
- **Active: Flare of Creation – 3rd lvl 22**
- **Active: Displacement – 3rd lvl 18**
- **Passive: Space Shift – 3rd lvl 14**

- **Passive: Body of the Valkyrie – 3rd lvl 18**
- **Passive: Space Awareness – 3rd lvl 3**

General Skills:

- **Dancing – lvl 3**
- **Deviant of Humanity – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Elos Standard language - lvl 6**
- **English Language – lvl 15**
- **Gourmet – lvl 5**
- **Harmony of the Drowned – lvl 9**
- **Heavy Archery – lvl 11**
- **Identify - lvl 19**
- **Meditation – 3rd lvl 12**
- **Monster Hunter – 3rd lvl 12**
- **Oxygen Repository – 2nd lvl 1**
- **Sage of Torment – 2nd lvl 7**
- **Soul Perception – lvl 8**
- **Teaching – lvl 6**
- **Veteran – 3rd lvl 16**
- **Warhammer Mastery – lvl 9**

- **Arcane Magic Resistance – 3rd lvl 19**
- **Ash Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 2**
- **Astral Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Blast Resistance – 3rd lvl 2**
- **Blight Resistance – 2nd lvl 1**
- **Blood Magic Resistance – 3rd lvl 18**
- **Blood Manipulation Resistance – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Bone Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 16**
- **Corrosion Resistance – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Crystal Resistance – 2nd lvl 14**
- **Curse Resistance - 2nd lvl 20**
- **Dark Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 6**
- **Death Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Devour Resistance – 2nd lvl 6**
- **Diamond Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 3**
- **Divination Magic Resistance – lvl 9**
- **Dust Magic Resistance – lvl 6**
- **Earth Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Emerald Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 1**
- **Fear Resistance – lvl 13**
- **Flesh Magic Resistance – lvl 9**
- **Gold Magic Resistance – lvl 1**
- **Gravity Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Health Drain Resistance – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Heat Resistance – 3rd lvl 12**
- **Ice Resistance – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Lava Magic Resistance – 3rd lvl 1**
- **Light Magic Resistance – 3rd lvl 1**

- *Lightning Resistance* – 3rd lvl 9
- *Mana Drain Resistance* – 3rd lvl 7
- *Mental Resistance* – 3rd lvl 15
- *Mist Magic Resistance* – 2nd lvl 20
- *Obsidian Magic Resistance* – lvl 3
- *Pain Tolerance* – 3rd lvl 3
- *Poison Resistance* – 3rd lvl 2
- *Rot Resistance* – 3rd lvl 4
- *Ruby Magic Resistance* – lvl 14
- *Sand Magic Resistance* – 2nd lvl 20
- *Sapphire Magic Resistance* – lvl 13
- *Silver Magic Resistance* – lvl 1
- *Smoke Magic Resistance* – 2nd lvl 3
- *Soul Magic Resistance* – 2nd lvl 13
- *Sound Magic Resistance* – lvl 18
- *Space Magic Resistance* – 3rd lvl 5
- *Stamina Drain Resistance* – 2nd lvl 20
- *Time Magic Resistance* – 2nd lvl 20
- *Topaz Magic Resistance* – lvl 18
- *Vine Magic Resistance* – lvl 14
- *Void Magic Resistance* – 3rd lvl 6
- *Water Resistance* – 3rd lvl 1
- *Wind Resistance* – 3rd lvl 2
- *Wood Magic Resistance* – 2nd lvl 20

Status:

Vitality: 1400
Endurance: 450
Strength: 515
Dexterity: 450
Intelligence: 1420
Wisdom: 1450

Health: 23296/23296
Stamina: 4203/4500
Mana: 28832/29000

“Alright then, let’s go,” Ilea said, ashen wings forming on her back.