

Chapter 457 Worthy Adversaries

Ilea was sure an hour or two had passed already. She would have to leave soon to join her resistance training. The only reason she even considered it was because the date was set. If she was too late or didn't show up, tomorrow there would be fewer people. Fewer potential skills and levels.

The Specters however, would remain down here.

She wondered if they could kill her. If she remained motionless or trapped. Their destructive power, swords and magic against her regeneration.

Her body would regenerate as long as she had mana and the creatures continued to provide it. Stick a sword into my brain, maybe two. Then I can't regenerate it. Secure the head and just keep going until I have no more mana. If that isn't possible, you can't kill me.

She went through the steps she herself would employ if her opponent had the same abilities as herself. Avoiding magic was a large part of potential success. Or magic as overwhelming as the Ascended had possessed.

Teleporting me away might be an option too. I doubt meddling with my mind is an option, considering Sentinel Reconstruction and my resistance to that magic type. Another option would be to trap me indefinitely. Bind or seal me away.

She didn't like that thought at all. If she went out, she would want to go out and not be trapped for a thousand years. *Hmm... well with meditation it might not even be that bad.*

The attacks kept coming and by now she had a good idea about their speed, range and magic. Even if they manipulated their blades with the help of blood magic.

Her Heart of Cinder had been charging for a while now. Longer even than in the core of the Descent. She chose one of the Specters at random and blinked in.

She dodged the blades and punched, all her limbs smashing into the creature. She ignored the blades cutting into her back and the blood magic ripping through her body.

Reversed healing mana flowed into the one Specter as her attacks kept going, culminating in the release of the stored energy.

The blast sent back the blades still stuck in her body, burning through the skin and muscle of the Specter she had chosen.

The others moved in again as she smashed down one last time, fire surging from hundreds of thin orange red veins where Storm of Cinders had accumulated.

A ding resounded in her mind and she blinked out, just as three blades got close to her once more.

Three more blinks brought her out of the cavern and another five farther up through the dungeon.

Ilea stopped and turned around, crossing her arms as she steadied her breathing. Her mana was at half, despite the constant blood magic attacks. It would regenerate.

If they follow, I'll have to kill them all.

She waited. A minute. Two. Five.

When twenty minutes had passed, her focus finally changed and she let out the air she was holding in her lungs.

They wouldn't come.

Defending their cave. Or they're the boss of the dungeon. Seems pretty ridiculous considering how weak the Abominations were before.

She checked the kill message and frowned.

'ding' 'You have defeated [Specter of Rot – lvl 621]'

Holy fuck they're strong for that level.

Ilea slowly flew backwards through the tunnels, once more following the traces of ice and earth magic. She could clearly feel the mark moving farther and farther away. It remained stationary and quickly waned in intensity.

They're as tough as Praetorians with their shields but have faster regeneration. Plus their movements are multiple times as quick. What a find... what a night!

She flew back with the occasional twirl and bob, giggling through the dark tunnels like the madwoman some thought she was.

Turns out the dungeons here are very much dangerous and interesting. If you just dig deep enough.

The rest of her notifications didn't let down either.

'ding' 'The Azarinth Sentinel reaches lvl 347 – Five stat points awarded'

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'ding' 'Kin of Ash reaches lvl 347 – Five stat points awarded'

'ding' 'Kin of Ash reaches lvl 348 – Five stat points awarded'

Ah fuck, can't kill another one or I'll reach three fifty.

She wondered if she shouldn't just get it over with already. On the other hand, she could gain a few more achievements beforehand.

Her skill advancements from the dangerous battle didn't let down either.

'ding' 'Absolute Destruction reaches 3rd lvl 23'

'ding' 'Blink reaches 3rd lvl 21'

'ding' 'Sentinel Sphere reaches 3rd lvl 14'

'ding' 'Sentinel Core reaches 3rd lvl 24'

'ding' 'Azarinth Fighting reaches 3rd lvl 27'

'ding' 'Azarinth Perception reaches 3rd lvl 13'

'ding' 'Armor of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 29'

'ding' 'Aspect of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 26'

'ding' 'True Ash Creation reaches 3rd lvl 24'

'ding' 'Heart of Cinder reaches 3rd lvl 17'

'ding' 'Storm of Cinders reaches 3rd lvl 17'

'ding' 'Ash and Ember Unity reaches 3rd lvl 22'

'ding' 'Ashen Wings reaches 3rd lvl 15'

'ding' 'Eyes of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 8'

'ding' 'Avatar of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 21'

'ding' 'Keeper of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 23'

'ding' 'Deviant of Humanity reaches lvl 2'

'ding' 'Meditation reaches 3rd lvl 4'

'ding' 'Monster Hunter reaches 2nd lvl 5'

'ding' 'Monster Hunter reaches 2nd lvl 6'

'ding' 'Veteran reaches 2nd lvl 18'

'ding' 'Blood Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 17'

'ding' 'Blood Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 18'

'ding' 'Bone Magic Resistance reaches lvl 5'

...

'ding' 'Bone Magic Resistance reaches lvl 10'

'ding' 'You have learned the General skill: Rot Resistance – lvl 1

Rot Resistance – lvl 1

With your regeneration and healing, it was unlikely that such a resistance would ever manifest. However you have found a powerful source of unnatural rot. Perhaps fueled by a curse or magic. Congratulations on yet another painful and horrific experience.

Hmm... maybe just a few more exciting nights with my new Specter friends. I have a source now for levels, class skill levels and resistances.

Ilea wondered if it even made sense to explore the other dungeons on her map. For training purposes, I'll have to. Especially the ones close by.

It wasn't just about her own resistances but about her students as well. They were progressing fast, even after a couple of days. She saw little reason for it to slow down considerably any time soon. Some combat experiences would help them get the right classes. Perhaps something a little less support oriented.

She herself had only one true healing skill and it was easily enough to take care of herself and everyone around her. A full support healer with a second class to reinforce such effects could maybe heal half a town's worth of people in instants but that wasn't exactly needed most of the time.

The question was also apparent of how to actually get someone to the required level. *Questions over questions. Can't say I'm not living an exciting life at least*, she thought and grinned, her wings retracting as she reached the upper part of the dungeon and with it the exit.

The suns weren't out yet but her flight would take some time as well. Not hours anymore, thanks to her third tier wings but enough to endanger her extended breakfast. Definitely her second breakfast.

Ah, forgot about one small thing.

Sophia turned in her bed. The benefit of joining an otherwise male party was usually getting her own room. It wasn't always possible but the last two years were good on her purse and her team respectively.

Sean sometimes got a room on his own too, the other two didn't care much. Edgar needed very little sleep and Colt was often found passed out in the common room. Most inn keepers either couldn't physically move him or didn't care to risk it.

Tonight, she would have preferred some company. Even with the annoying comments from the brute. She had been liberal with her drink but her Poison Resistance was just as high as that of her team members. Contrary to Colt, she wasn't about to spend her last coin to keep herself inebriated. *Maybe I should have.*

Sleep had come but only for an hour or two. Not quite enough for her. A nightmare had woken her up. A healer reaching out her hand, their face suddenly turning into an Abomination before she was swallowed.

It had been a while since an experience had shaken her this much. *Half a year maybe? The werewolf*, she thought and shuddered. It would take some time for her to recover fully. *It's weird really... this was much worse objectively and yet, I seem to be able to handle it much better. Maybe I'm imagining things. Or I've grown more resistant to it.*

She noticed her thoughts focusing back on the Abominations, their squeals. The ripped apart adventurers in that small cavern. Ilea getting slashed apart, coloring the ground and walls, the wet sound of bone hitting flesh.

She sat up and rubbed her eyes. *What a fucking nightmare.*

It wasn't worth some levels. Not in a thousand years.

A knock on her window made her yelp out and teleport to the opposite wall. Her heart rate accelerated but her breathing calmed. Ice formed around her as she prepared her spells.

The faint light of dawn shined into the room, barely illuminating a floating form outside her window. Blue eyes and black wings. A glowing smile and a wave.

She rubbed her eyes and relaxed. *I'm still dreaming.*

"Hello Sophia," a voice said, the presence now closer to her.

“No need to be afraid. Come on, it’s me. Ilea. Open your eyes,” the voice said.

No

Please

Something warm and relaxing entered her body and she yelped a little at the sudden sensation.

She opened her eyes and saw that the healer was here. Here in her room.

“Out,” she found herself saying, her voice steady and her eyes focused on the woman.

Ilea nodded and vanished, appearing once more outside the window.

What the fuck is this supposed to be?

She shook her head and walked to the window. *Let’s get this over with before she decides to slaughter this whole fucking town.*

The window slid open and she leaned out into the cool morning air. “What do you want?”

“Apologies for invading your room. You seemed scared and highly distressed. I thought I could help out,” the woman said, showing genuine concern on her face.

And she’s a good actress too, Sophia thought. What an absolute monster.

“You’re not human, are you?” she found herself asking.

“What? No of course I am!” Ilea replied, hovering outside a window with ashen wings on her back. Wisps of the element licked the air around her like an omen of death.

Sophia rubbed her temple and sighed. “Don’t just go around pushing your mana into people. It’s borderline rape.”

Her eyes opened wide and she hovered back a meter or two. “I... I’m sorry... I didn’t.”

She waved her off. “Don’t, it’s fine. You meant well. At least I think you did. Forget what I said. I don’t want people to die or go insane because you ask them for healing consent. What kind of world would that be?”

“One where you can sue doctors for treating you?” Ilea said, more to herself really.

“Sue? Whatever... what did you want? Why has the personification of pain and death come to my window?” Sophia sighed. She was tired and noticed it too. *You’re taking risks that you shouldn’t. Calm down. Choose your words carefully. You know what she is. Don’t offend her.*

Ilea laughed and floated a little closer again. “I thought I’d be seen as someone who brings life and recovery. Not pain and death. I suppose both are true.”

“Keep it fucking down you twats!” someone shouted out of an open window.

The woman hovered closer. “Should we continue inside?”

“Sure,” Sophia said and closed the window, finding Ilea sitting on a chair made of ash.

“I’ll keep it short. You are obviously in dire need of sleep,” the woman said. A statement of fact, neither insult nor taunt. “I found something in that cavern you saw at the end. Well you heard it too. The Specters of Rot,” she said.

Sophia opened her eyes wide. “There’s more than one? It’s unusual for anything below triple mark to paralyze me for that long.”

“Well, they are triple mark. Around level six hundred actually,” Ilea said and scratched her chin.

“Six hundred? Wow... your identify skill is that high?” Sophia asked.

“Ah no, It’s just at level twelve. I killed one of them. Six twenty. They regenerate and use blood magic as well as bone swords. Quite dangerous. Some of the most powerful creatures in the six hundreds I’ve fought,” the healer said, nodding as if to confirm her own assumption. “The Wyverns might be close... if they had regeneration... maybe.”

“I...,” Sophia started and stumbled backwards. “I need to... sit down.”

Her bed was still miles away but she felt something form behind and under her, catching her stumbling form before she found herself in a chair. A black one, made of ash. It warmed up as she sat there. *Comfortable*, she thought as it shaped itself around her bum and back. *No, focus.*

“You, killed? Killed one of them? Six hundred? Alone? What?” she said.

“Yes. I have quite a few skills that make me a good match for them. Regeneration and high defense as well as Blood Magic Resistance in the second tier. Perception helps too of course, otherwise it would be difficult to keep up with the teleporting creatures. Especially in complete darkness,” she explained.

“Okay,” Sophia managed to say. The words were still processing in her mind. “How does this relate to me?”

Did she just come to gloat? Or is her game still ongoing... oh gods... she’s still playing with us, just another form of torture.

“Ah, yes. Of course. Sorry, lost track again. Well, I waited for a while and they didn’t follow but I would say this little village is fucked if one comes up to the surface,” she said.

“Six hundred? Yes... we would be,” Sophia said and gulped.

“That’s why... I have a skill to give people a mark, to let them call for me in case of emergency. I thought about the others but you seem just the right mix of apprehensive and smart. Colt would just call me for a laugh or because he’d think it an advance on my part. Edgar hates my guts and wouldn’t use it even if his life depended on it and Sean. Well it was between him and you but you seem a little less scared of me,” the monster explained.

“You wish... to mark me?” Sophia asked. *No... never make a deal with a monster or demon. It never comes out well.*

“Yes. I tested it with several of my friends and it’s safe. I’ll know where to find you in case you call for me. Just a precaution. I think if nothing shows up this week, we’re in the clear. I’ll be back tomorrow night anyway but I just wanted to be sure,” she said and continued in a murmur. “I hope that undead didn’t break out of that blight cathedral... ah well, might check in quickly before going back.”

Blight cathedral... undead? Wait a minute.

“I don’t exactly have a choice here, do I?” Sophia gathered her courage.

“You do. You just say no. I know it’s scary to see someone powerful show up out of nowhere and show interest in you in some way. Trust me, I do. However, even though I know the training was

nothing for you, did I actually do anything to put you in harm's way? Did I break my word even once? Was I hostile towards you or is there any reason why you would mistrust me?" Ilea said.

Sophia calmed herself and again marveled at how comfortable the ashen chair was. She thought back on everything and had to agree. They were never in danger, not really. If she could beat a level six hundred creature, the Abominations were nothing to her. It could be a lie but she had seen her fight the beings. As much as she believed the healer, in the end it did not matter if she killed one or not. She had healed Edgar without asking anything in return.

Ilea had rushed to help that adventurer, saved him even. She had helped them get stronger... in her twisted and horrific way... and she had protected them, even brought them back out after. Despite her interest to go deeper.

If she was Lilith, and there was little reason to doubt it at this point, then the songs supported her too. *If she didn't pay for them. Everything just to get this mark on her.*

She shook her head and sighed. This woman could just force her to accept anyway. And yet she was giving her a choice here. Her words rang true.

"I accept. Under some conditions," Sophia said.

Ilea smiled. "Oho... how daring of you," she said and leaned forward in her own ashen chair. "What do you want?"

"Gold!" Sophia blurted out. *Ah, that's so stupid. Why ask for gold? She doesn't even carry a pouch or backpack.*

"Sure, how does five pieces sound? That would be equivalent to quite a few jobs at your level. For a full team that is," Ilea said.

What?! Five! Is she nuts?

Sophia watched in disbelief as five pieces of gold appeared out of nowhere and floated towards her on a small circular ashen tablet. *A storage item, of course! Why did I not think of that? Because she doesn't dress like a noble, doesn't talk like them.*

"Anything else? I don't want to be annoying but I should leave soon," the healer said and looked out into the morning sky.

That's it, the sunlight will hurt her! She's a witch after all. Or something more sinister. Every argument the more cautious side of her came up with was dulled and dismissed by the golden shine in her hands. This would cover her expenses for a year if she was conservative in her spending. *Or I could buy new equipment.*