

Double chapter – hard cliffhanger

Chapter 479 Reminiscing

“You wanted to talk?” Trian said, nodding to Claire as a greeting.

“Yes. I thought I’d share it with the late team. Kyrian is sadly still stuck somewhere, though I do hope he hasn’t eclipsed me in power,” Ilea said.

“That’d be surprising,” Claire murmured.

“I can see it,” Trian said and winked at her. “You’re wasting time with your Sentinels, training us, getting resistances. Meanwhile he is fighting monsters.”

Ilea squinted her eyes as she looked at him.

“Anyway,” she continued. “I believe I found out who Eve was.”

The man nodded, immediately serious.

Claire smiled. “You did,” she said and summoned a few glasses.

“Didn’t expect her to leave any traces,” Trian said.

“Don’t underestimate two librarians with a drive. The traces she left behind were people,” Ilea said.

“Her name was Olivia Sarken. She wasn’t much older than me, grew up in Farport with her parents and two siblings. Apparently she always had a knack for mind magic and hiding, got a class before most of her peers.”

She paused for a moment, taking the glass filled with ale from Claire. “Thanks.”

The woman waved her off.

“Her father fell ill just when the local lord increased taxes. The reasons are unknown at this point but many families in Farport couldn’t deal with the higher payments. Some left, others fell into poverty or died. Ev- Olivia didn’t quite take it as well as most others.”

“Killed the lord,” Trian said and brushed a hand through his hair.

Ilea looked at him. “Not exactly. Not yet at least. A few guards vanished mysteriously. Then an administrator, and finally the lord’s mansion was breached.”

“A large scale search was started and one of the hounds found blood in the nearby woods. It’s important to know that most of the people involved here were mercenaries. They didn’t give a shit about Farport or its internal squabbles.”

“Olivia was found in the woods and killed. The corpse was too mangled to identify but the mercenaries still reported the name. Some had apparently seen her in the inn a few times.”

“Of course our dear Olivia hadn’t died on that day. Nobody knows what she told the adventurers or did to them, or if she fooled them entirely. All we know is that the lord died a few weeks later in a hunting accident. Taxes were adjusted again by his replacement and that was that.”

“Are the parents still alive? And her siblings?” Trian asked.

“The father died a few years back. Lost at sea. Nothing mysterious there apparently, as most deaths in Farport happen like that,” she explained.

Claire chimed in, “Not monsters?”

“No... they have a weird plant that grows in the forest. Has a very strong smell. I think it keeps most beasts out,” Ilea said and summoned some of the herbs.

She couldn't identify the exact name.

[Medicinal Herb]

“That's Wyrmgrass,” Trian said, confusion apparent on his face. “It shouldn't grow in the plains.”

“How do you know? Didn't take you for an herbalist,” Claire said.

“I've read up on a lot of things lately. Part of the lessons for the Sentinels. The smell is very strong and many creatures dislike it. The reason why it's not been used is because it's hard to cultivate anywhere but in high altitudes. Higher than here even. And there are some species that are highly attracted to it. Whole villages have been wiped out because they had the grass growing nearby. Or at least that's the small anecdote mentioned in the book,” he explained.

“So why is it growing there?” Ilea asked.

The man shrugged. “No idea.”

“Hmm. Well. Her sister went to Damwell and apparently works as a tailor. The pride of the family. Her brother is a fisher and a drunk. He didn't have a lot to say about her when I found him at sea,” Ilea continued.

“Eve seemed to care a whole lot more about her family than they did for her. The mother talked about a curse being lifted from them when Olivia had died. With the taxes lowered and her husband getting healthy again. I thought at first that she didn't make the connection but then I looked around their place at night.”

“I found letters, and they were written by Eve. Not just the handwriting confirm it but the contents too.”

“She sent money to them every other month, supporting them when nobody else would. I... asked Missus Sarken about them. Maybe I wasn't being fair.”

“What did she say?” Trian asked, lightly touching her shoulder.

“That her daughter had died on that day. That she would have nothing to do with a murderous witch. She didn't care about anything I said, ushering me to leave and to never come back.”

“I'm sure the money was welcome either way. But it stopped coming, right about when we found her in Virilya,” Ilea finished.

“She kept the letters,” Claire said and took a sip of her drink. “In a way, she still cared.”

Ilea sighed. “Maybe. Or she was afraid no money would come if she burned them.”

“Do you have them?” Trian asked.

Ilea summoned the stack and handed them to him. She hadn't thought twice about stealing them.

“It’s mostly mundane. She never wrote about her targets, only where she had been, her training with the Hand, new restaurants she had discovered. She wrote about us too,” Ilea said.

Trian chuckled. *“A noble with a stick so far up his ass you could see the wood in his throat. I’m sure you would like him. At least he has guts but if he keeps talking the way he does I will end him.”*

“I didn’t even realize the danger I was in,” he said and smiled.

“Why are these marked with an x?” he asked, looking at a few of the letters.

“She had a relationship with a cook from the Golden Drake. I looked into it and he sadly passed in the demon invasion. The letters were mostly just her gushing about him,” Ilea explained.

“Did she risk more because of his death?” Claire asked.

“Maybe. Nothing was mentioned about that as I said. I’m sure she went to look for him prior to her escape. The letters after that were few, the paragraphs shorter, mechanical even,” Ilea said.

“She made her choice,” Claire said and grabbed her hand. “I’m glad you found her.”

“I know. The bloody idiot,” Ilea said. She could understand her a little better though. Unable to return home to the family she loved for fear of persecution or rejection. Taking on another name and building a new life before that too was ripped from her.

She hadn’t talked much, mostly seeing the team as a necessity to get her badge and the well paid missions, a place to hide. Eve must have confided in her lover, must have mistrusted even Ilea until the end.

“Uech, it just sucks. Don’t you two ever pull something like that on me. I swear to you, if you get killed somewhere, alone and without informing me!” she said.

Claire smiled and pointed to her mark.

Trian laughed. *“An absolute lunatic of a warrior healer. Can you believe it? Her skull is so thick I’m sure she could storm a castle on her own. I like her but she lacks subtlety and-”*

Ilea grabbed the letter from his hand. “Thank you very much,” she said.

“Apologies,” Trian said, the smile still on his lips.

“I’d like to read them too,” Claire said.

Ilea handed the letter to her. “Do with them what you like.”

The woman nodded and started reading through them. “Thank you,” she murmured before a smile tugged on her lips, getting to the section about Ilea.

Various scraps of food, plates, and empty bottles littered Claire’s usually immaculate table.

Trian relaxed in an ashen made hovering hammock, lifting a hand as the others laughed.

“No, but seriously. I could have taken her, easily. What could she do, turn invisible?” some of his old pride showed as he talked.

None of them were drunk, their bodies far beyond the weak influence of alcohol. The stuff they owned at least. Ilea was pretty sure even pure Ethanol wouldn't bring out a noticeable change.

"Not just that, you're forgetting about her mind magic," Claire said. "Again. We've been over this."

"No we haven't! Kyrian isn't the same. He couldn't just fry a whole area!" Trian retorted.

"Neither could you," Ilea said.

He leaned back and frowned. "Fuck that. I would have beaten her."

Eve had gone easy on them with her mind magic through most of the training bouts. Except for Ilea. But according to both of her currently available team mates, she didn't count. Her head being too thick to penetrate with any kind of magic.

"It's not a fair match up anyway," Ilea said. "She would have taken stealth into advantage. Try to start this fight with your mind already half taken out and a dagger in your throat."

"True, she was a killer, not a warrior like you," Claire said, pointing her glass at Ilea.

"You could fabricate a scenario, yes. But she wasn't invisible. We all had ways to spot her," Trian said.

"Burning down your own house because you have a hunch doesn't compare to my spherical perception," Ilea mentioned.

He just waved her off.

"We'll see who will win between you and Kyrian. Maybe I'll be competition too as soon as I reach three hundred," the man said and quirked up his eyebrows.

"You wish," Ilea said with a smile.

"She can literally regenerate from losing her head, or most of her body," Claire said and cupped her face with both hands.

"What about both, if you're just a burnt crisp," Trian suggested.

Ilea shrugged. "I should be fine. My mana remains and I can regenerate. If I lose consciousness, my healing just does its job."

"There are abilities to damage mana or slow regeneration," he said.

"Maybe, but do you have them?" Claire asked.

"Not yet. I mean I do have a drain but she can cancel that out too," Trian said and rolled his eyes.

"I can't cancel it, yours is just too weak," Ilea said with a smirk. "Plus, once I get my third class you'll be left in the dust."

"Wait till I get mine, Medic Sentinel or something. Same playing field then," Trian said.

"I'll be here when you get there," Ilea said with a smirk.

"What about you?" Claire asked. "It's been a few months."

"I suppose I've trained long enough. My skills aren't maxed out yet though," she said.

"You won't manage that anyway. Destruction won't level if you don't kill stuff. At least not fast enough. And I don't think you want to wait another year or ten," Trian said.

“You just want me to be ill prepared so I get a shit class,” Ilea said and threw a ball of ash at him. He zapped it with lightning and smiled.

“He’s not entirely wrong though. Your hunter skill will likely take a long while too. And the yields for fighting the Specters have been slowing down rapidly, haven’t they?” Claire asked.

“They have. I could get it at this point honestly. I mean all I even have to go on is the word of an ancient Fae hivemind,” she said.

“Better than most sources,” Trian commented. “I feel like you’ve accrued enough achievements. You even fought four mark creatures, defeated one even.”

“I hope it’s enough,” Ilea said.

“If something like a third class exists and if it gets unlocked at level three hundred and fifty, chances are you would be the one to get it,” Claire said.

“And if you don’t, you can just level your skills until you reach four, or even five hundred. Not like you will ever stop looking for stronger monsters,” Trian said.

“Until I find the one that will kill me,” Ilea said and smiled.

Trian lifted both arms. “And what a battle that will be!”

“You can still escape, and your resilience is already incredible. Don’t do anything stupid, Ilea,” Claire said seriously.

“I’d say I won’t but I’ve done some very risky stuff. The Ascended would have killed me if it hadn’t been for the Fae,” she said, thinking back on that monster. Just one of many powerful creatures out there.

One of many battles she had lost.

“So go get stronger. You’ve been hanging out here long enough and I can tell you’re getting bored,” Trian suggested.

“How would you know?” Ilea asked.

“You skipped my speech today, to go explore Farport,” he said, feigning hurt.

Claire snorted while Ilea rolled her eyes.

“You haven’t been there. The students were moved, I tell you,” he added.

“Of course they were. Well, what do you need, two levels? Can you kill a few of those Specters and be back in an hour? I’d be interested in what happens,” Claire said.

Ilea shrugged and stood up. “Guess I’ve stalled for long enough. Let’s see if it was all for nothing,” she said.

That’s be funny, she thought with a smile. The skill levels were still welcome either way, even if nothing happened. She would however have to have a word with a certain ancient creature.

“Go forth! Lilith of Ravenhall, slay the fooooees of humaanity!” Trian sung right before his hammock disintegrated. He teleported and landed safely, chuckling as he watched Ilea’s wings expand.

“You’ve got holes in there. Is your ash sick?” he asked.

“Something I’ve been working on,” Ilea said and closed the intentional imperfections.

The flight to Kroll and its Caverns of Rot was quick, despite the burden.

“You’re too slow,” Ilea said as she looked back at the flying mage.

“What are you talking about, you’re carrying Claire!” Trian said. “Carry me too!”

“How will you level your flying skill?” she asked and pushed ahead.

“I can’t, it’s at level twenty you dunce!” he said, his voice growing distant as she increased her speed.

Claire just laughed uncontrollably.

The prospect of a dungeon crawl where they don’t have to fight and kill the monster really excites them, huh?

Ilea just rolled her eyes and swerved back, grabbing Trian before she activated her third tier wings. With them, she didn’t bother forming ashen cocoons.

If they die, they die.

Shadow badges opened many doors. This night too, the guard on the low wall let them in without question, too scared to offend a member of the powerful organization.

“Where’s Sophie?” Ilea said as she looked around.

“Wasn’t it Sophia?” Claire asked as she dusted off her armored skirt.

Both were wearing their full gear, their storage items allowing for a quick change at all times.

“Sohpie, Sophia, the girl from the rot caverns,” Ilea said.

Trian patted her shoulder. “Leave her out of it. I’m sure you’ve scared them enough,” he said.

“Alright, just thought it might be interesting for them too,” Ilea said and strolled towards the dungeon entrance.

“They would be in danger. As will we,” Claire said.

“We have defenses too. Both against blood and bone magic,” Trian said, a little more serious as they entered the dungeon.

Ilea led the way into the darkness, knowing the tunnels rather well by now.

“Just get the fuck out if it gets dicey,” Ilea said.

“You’re charging your fire skill?” Claire asked, feeling the mana and heat build.

Ilea nodded. “I can absorb the heat now, invested a third tier point into Lava Magic Resistance.”

“Convenient,” Trian said.

“You get thirty resistances to the second tier and then we talk about convenient,” Ilea retorted.

He snickered. “I’m working on it, okay?”

“We’re getting deeper,” Claire said, the others nodding in response as their conversation died out.

Neither of the two, nor Ilea were perfectly safe in a largely unknown dungeon. The Specters had proven to be manageable for her at least but more could be an issue, as were potentially unknown entities.

Nothing showed up until they reached the familiar space far below. The rotten presence all around them started to affect her companions, both of them retching up blood.

Ah, yes.

“Guys, if you can’t even handle that, you’re not going to like what’s coming,” Ilea whispered.

“What in the name of Lilith is this?” Trian asked as he stepped backwards and out of the aura.

“It’s called Rot. There’s a rot resistance, but you’ll have to sit in there for a while,” she said.

He nodded, glancing at Claire who had started to place various enchanted plates in a spacious circle. She was still coughing blood but the effect wasn’t enough to take her out or even overwhelm her natural regeneration. Not with the Vitality her level provided.

A shimmering dim gray barrier flared to life a few seconds later.

Ilea barely felt a difference but she watched Claire take a deep breath.

“Much better,” she said and placed more enchantments. “We can watch you from here, I suppose.”

“I can’t see-” Trian started, coughing up a sizable splatter of blood. “Can’t see shit from here,” he said.

“Should have invested in some perception skills,” the enchantress said and chuckled. “Come on, you can train that resistance later. I wouldn’t have thought her influence would taint you so quickly. Your old self would be revolted.”

“My old self was an idiot,” Trian said, his voice sounding contemplative above all else. He coughed again.

“Listen to the woman, stay behind the shield. I’m sure you’ll see some fire at least,” Ilea said, the heat now slowly eating away at her health. Her regeneration still overwhelmed the damage but it wouldn’t be long until third tier healing would become necessary. Not something she planned to do for now.

Another barrier flared to life behind the first one as soon as the Vampyr had stepped inside. A brighter variant, one that would hold against most everything the Specters could dish out.

Ilea wondered how long either of them would last against the creatures. Knowing that Claire had gotten a teleportation ability made her a little more confident. In their ability to flee of course. Either would get slaughtered in a few seconds. And all of them knew as much.

These weren’t monsters meant to be fought by humans at their level.

She cracked her neck and smiled. “Alright, here we go.”