

Chapter 473 Practice

Trian tracked his target for the good part of the evening, listening to every conversation the warrior had with his peers.

He hoped the man didn't need a reminder about his contract.

I should really be mad at her for insisting on both an archery and hammer trainer. To let them come into the headquarters.

He understood of course, knew that Ilea didn't exactly enjoy spending every afternoon with the students and himself, using her ash and healing to help them train.

She had told him that both Gavin and Lauren could be trusted but he wouldn't just take her word for it.

Ilea was getting better but he remembered how naive she had been, how trusting. *Untainted by the world*, he thought and smirked. *How utterly idealistic.*

He wondered how much of it remained.

Her involvement in the affairs of Riverwatch made him think her heart had remained in the right place. He had absolute trust that she would protect those she considered friends but how far would she go?

Would she raze all of Baralia for their transgressions? Or was it enough to repel an attack? Would she choose to kill the whole family of those that wronged her, like he did? Or would she just kill the responsible people?

Maybe she would even forgive.

He made sure to talk to her regularly, to offer counsel where he thought it necessary. It was the least he could do for her. For everything she had done for him and the new purpose she had bestowed upon him. For the trust she had in him.

Gavin refused to answer a question about Lilith, coming from one of his friends. The sound of his voice suggested he regretted even telling them about his employment in the first place.

Rumors about Lilith's organization were spreading slowly, whispers from cooks who prepared meals, from leather workers and alchemists who sold equipment. Most of it could be contained but by now it was hard to completely subdue anything with the name of Lilith connected to it.

Most people liked her. Some loved and admired her. The worst respected her.

In Ravenhall that was.

Claire made it clear that the Sentinels should remain mostly secret until they could fight for themselves. If only to lift some weight off Ilea's shoulders.

Trian agreed and tried his best to help with the endeavors.

He smiled when the conversation shifted away from Gavin without one word coming out of his mouth.

The man was easier to handle than Lauren, Ilea's new archery trainer.

Despite her daring personality, short fuse and love for gold, the woman hadn't shared information with anyone so far.

A trusted Shadow more capable at this kind of work had observed her for an entire week and found no reason to doubt her loyalty to Lilith.

Lauren was smart.

Trian just hoped she didn't think herself too smart.

He disappeared, looking at the night sky as he rushed over the rooftops. *Almost time for the next mission*, he thought, hoping that their efforts would soon provide some results.

Morale was high, despite the dangers and pain. Trian just hoped they hadn't become what he hated most.

Sophia sighed as she looked at the dark clouds above. It didn't rain yet but she missed the good weather from the last week.

Venturing into the dungeon at night only provided them with quite a bit of free time in the mornings and afternoons.

Mostly, she just enjoyed it because she felt safe.

Both outside where the Abominations wouldn't reach and at a time where Ilea stayed away.

Lilith, the savior of Riverwatch, she thought. At first the stories had been interesting, frightening, and unbelievable.

To most.

She had believed them immediately. If it really was the same Lilith, and why would it be anybody else? That woman could take on a whole city, she was sure of it.

By now, the songs were just a reminder to her that she had made a deal with the mother of demons herself. *The deceiving shine of gold*.

She looked at the mark on the back of her hand. Still remaining, taunting her, reminding her of her lack of self control.

Ilea had told her the mark was left behind in case of Specters coming up into the settlement but Sophia asked herself sometimes who the more dangerous monster was.

Some mornings she thought she saw the demon fly out into the darkness. A speck of black ash that vanished into the night sky like a shooting star.

Cless finally finished the piece she had worked on all morning.

Somehow it was more difficult to paint Ilea than anybody else. Trian was easy, as was Claire. Only Kyrian provided a small challenge but even him she could see with clarity.

She stepped back with a smile on her face and paint on her white shirt. A small twirl of joy later, she inspected her creation.

Claire sadly wasn't here to tell her what a good job she did but she knew that this one was special.

It showed Ilea with a single wing, floating in mid air with three ghostly bone monsters attacking her with nasty looking swords.

Cless understood that Ilea and Kyrian were often fighting monsters. They were true heroes!

She would grow up to fight monsters too. Her spells were getting better but William and Claire haven't let her join the combat classes yet.

At least I can pain, she thought and giggled when a ding resounded in her mind.

She really liked those, excited to see which of her abilities had become stronger. Unlike homework back in school, her efforts here were always rewarded. And painting was so much more fun than math.

Cless stuck her tongue out at the thought of addition when Claire stepped into the room.

The two looked at each other. "I did it!"

"You did?" Claire asked and joined her. "That's her alright," she said and giggled. "So those are the Specters of Rot she mentioned."

"They look scary," Cless said and hugged the woman's leg.

The gesture always made Claire rub her head and this time too, it did not fail.

She had a smug smile on her face as she looked at the painting. The beings did look scary, but not to her. Ilea was strong. No monster could beat her.

"They do," Claire said. "Can't believe she's fighting them for hours every day..." she added in a murmur.

"Are you angry at her?" Cless asked and looked up.

"Angry? No, not really. Just sometimes worried," the woman said.

Cless giggled. "Silly Claire," she said and stepped away, brushing off her shirt like she had seen some of the Shadowguards do. "Nothing can beat Ilea."

Claire laughed and ruffled the girl's hair. "I hope you're right, Cless."

"It's not a matter of right or wrong, Head Administrator. It's a fact," Cless said, trying to imitate William as best she could.

“You’re learning a little too much lately,” Claire said and lifted her up. “Can you draw Kyrian again next? I wonder if he’s still climbing that mountain.”

Cless rolled her eyes. “Aw, it’s been so boring to draw him. Drawing Ilea gives me more points!”

“More points... shouldn’t Kyrian give you points as well?”

“Some. Not as many,” Cless said.

“Because you always draw Ilea,” Claire said.

The girl understood the basics of skills and knew that the woman was right. She furrowed her brow and pouted. “Okay.”

“Are you going out again?” she asked to change the subject.

“Probably. If Trian has time. Ilea said she would show us a new dungeon,” Claire said with a smile.

“I’ll paint that!”

“First Kyrian,” the woman said. Her tone was final.

Damn metal man, climbing stupid mountains! she thought and placed a new canvas onto the wooden base.

Mana flowed and her magic activated, her sight changing as the canvas became everything she saw. A drop of pain splashed against the white, Cless focusing on the far away man, the feelings and thoughts she connected with him.

Her hand started moving and the paint followed.

I’ve put this off for way to long, Ilea thought as she summoned the bulk steel construction that was Goliath’s gift to her.

The Armaments of Trials.

She decided to train with it for at least half an hour each day. It would cut into something else but the weeks of constant fighting and training were taking a toll on her.

Could sleep in it too, she thought, assuming it to be a rather safe place to hide.

Her healing mana flowed into the steel, enchantments lighting up within her sphere. As time passed, Ilea added ash into the mix, simply letting it flow around her. Heart of Cinder spread from time to time, the heat and energy absorbed into the enchantments.

After a week of daily sessions, she started noticing heat forming in the set of armor itself, slowly flowing back to her, in turn fueling Heart of Cinder to charge up faster.

Ilea understood that some of the enchantments used her mana to create heat. The energy was moved back to her and increased over time. This would ultimately just damage her but with her Heat Resistance in the third tier, she used it to her advantage.

Could just have Iana get a look at this thing, unravel its secrets. How did Goliath make something like this in the first place? Didn't he say he's not the best with enchantments?

She decided it was hers to find out what purpose the armor had.

In addition to using many of her skills inside the armor, observing them and the reactions, she started using her enhanced strength to try and move it.

There were no seams at the joints, no fingers on the hands, and nothing else that indicated the thing was made for anything but stationary training. Ilea just didn't believe that the legendary smith made this whole thing without the intent to make it move.

It was ancient in quality and she doubted a simple hunk of training metal would reach that rarity.

A few days later her suspicions were confirmed. When she entered the armor, many of the enchantments were still active from her last session. She had fed it enough mana.

Her sphere could now pierce whatever had blocked it initially, the area around her as clear as if she wasn't inside of the steel contraption.

Storm and Heart of Cinder spread within the armor but this time, heat remained. Only a part of it flowed back to her. The rest remained.

Ilea heard the shifting of steel but couldn't see anything happening to the surface of the armor.

Well... let's continue and see where this is going, she thought with a smile.

She increased her time in the armor to one or two hours per day. Her arcane sight was somewhat limited but everything she saw pointed to a gradual and continuous change in the way her mana flowed through the armor.

Now that more of her magic remained in the enchantments, she started to notice the paths and circuits. It was as if Goliath had tried to imitate a living being. Mana flowed through every part of Ilea's body, not just through her veins or other specific channels. She assumed the smith had to simplify a little, unable to have the whole armor resonate with magic.

The intent became more clear as time passed, Ilea unraveling more of the armor each day.

She let Iana have a look at it at one point, telling her not to reveal anything to her but instead try and improve on Goliath's work if possible.

The enchantress had obliged, giggling as she inspected the thing. She assured Ilea that whatever enchantments had been placed inside were simple but efficient. Any tampering would undermine the genius that went into the set. She was genuinely impressed with the work, telling Ilea to show it to Balduur.

Ilea deemed that a very bad idea, knowing that the smith already wanted to meet Goliath. If this thing really was as advanced as Iana had suggested, the man would start his own expedition north to meet the legendary Dark One.

She simply kept her training up, the first changes to the armor's surface starting to show. Perhaps Goliath had intended it to be an exercise in patience added to everything else it had taught her. By

now she was invested, only focusing on her other daily tasks thanks to the more immediate results they provided.

“Ah come on, it’s barely a scratch,” Ilea said and healed her friend.

Trian grit his teeth against the pain, watching his shoulder reform, followed by his left arm. Right until he made a fist with his new fingers. The man didn’t have the luxury of a regenerating set of armor but he did have a storage ring, summoning another set.

“Trian, I need you over here!” Claire shouted, her shields cracking as a blinding explosion spread over their enemy, the shock wave and sound expanding before they hit her prepared sound canceling enchantments placed at the two exits of the cave.

Ilea watched the monster recoil before it started its assault once more.

Energy sparked to life next to her, Trian back in action as he appeared above, his red lightning wings spreading before bolts of energy lashed downwards and into the massive creature.

[Torn Brute Reaver – lvl ??]

Ilea had found them deeper in the Vile Grotto, one of the nearby dungeons that was generally avoided by adventurers and the Hand.

Despite the name, the reavers remained within the dungeon tunnels, mainly because it was a ridiculous maze that dug deep into the mountains. She assumed the chances of one ever finding daylight was incredibly slim.

The high level of three to five hundred suggested that the creatures preferred the higher mana density inside the dungeon more so than outside.

Her testing with Sophia and her team would suggest that she should be the one taking the enemy attacks but she planned to wait with reaching level three fifty until certain thresholds had been met.

She only intervened if either Trian or Claire were about to die. Without injuring the creatures and no intent from her side to fight them, the magic governing levels and skills assigned her the uninvolved healer part.

Most of the creatures were at or below level four hundred, meaning quite a few accidents would be necessary for her to even level once.

She crossed her arms and watched as the three meter high monster of flesh and muscle crashed through Claire’s shields.

The woman jumped back as the air ignited, explosions ripping through the legs of the monster as its extended spike like arm scratched against a hastily created shield.

Trian didn’t let up, his lightning precise and unrelenting. Eyes, tongue and nose were destroyed, the monster’s health and regeneration slowly overwhelmed by the two high level Shadows.

Both would have died ten times over in their training without Ilea's assistance but she admitted that they learned quickly. They hadn't been as rusty as she had expected at the beginning.

Trian screamed as sparks burst from his body, the man rushing at the creature's malformed head, dodging a swing before his hand slammed into one of its empty eye sockets, a burst of energy channeled into its brain before its head exploded in a shower of brains and bone.

He panted and landed next to Claire, checking on the woman who held a bleeding hand.

"You're infected," he said.

Claire could hardly speak but nodded, looking to Ilea with regret.

"You did well this time," she said, complimenting their first takedown of a Torn Brute Reaver, one of the more dangerous versions of the monsters in this dungeon. Then again, all this place offered was dangerous creatures.

She knew that the two would progress faster if she wasn't there at all but their skills were rising steadily, as was their experience.

Ilea smiled and shook her head. Both of them had a much more extensive training to back up their power she should really not be the one to think about them in such a way.

And yet she did. And she could too. The last year was filled with dangerous experiences and tangible increases in power.

The team they once were wasn't the same anymore.

"Thanks," Claire said and adjusted her shoulder piece.

Ilea nodded, grabbing the piece and bending it back into shape.

"I'm still not used to it," Trian said with a smile.

"It's no wonder, with living in the north for so long, fighting monsters all day. I just wish I had a few healing skills too so that we could do this without her," Claire said.

"Focus on a teleportation skill first, your shields are helpful but you'll need more than that," Trian said.

The woman grinned.

"What?" Trian asked and looked between the two of them.

Ilea shrugged. "She just hit two fifty."

"That, I did. And I just replaced one of my skills," Claire said, vanishing as a pocked of mana formed where she just stood, heat and fire expanding in an explosion that washed over Ilea.

Trian had vanished beforehand.

"Well, congratulations," Ilea said with a smile.

"Hmm, that won't be very useful in the city," the man said.

Claire shrugged. "It's useful if someone tries to assassinate me," she said and twirled.

It's like they're more alive out here, Ilea thought, enjoying the two of them bickering about whose teleportation ability was better.

She sighed.

“We have another hour, come on. Let’s put it to good use,” she said.

They stopped arguing, immediately focused again and ready to fight.

It will be difficult to get Walter and his crew to do this. Dale though... maybe. A family trip perhaps?

“I don’t like that look on your face. We’re seeing enough action, don’t make it even harder,” Trian said and winked at her.

“We should use first aid more while down here,” Claire said.

“It’s less effective for our levels. She can patch us up much faster,” the man replied.

“I wasn’t thinking about you. She’s right though. Some random healing or regeneration ability will be more useful for the future than pure levels,” Ilea said.

“But we have you! And I can already heal myself,” Trian said, his arms opened wide as lightning sparked around him.

“You can only heal yourself. And only if there is something around to drain from. Come on, we’ve wasted enough time,” Ilea replied.

“Yes, lady Lilith,” the man said, imitating some of the Sentinel students.

Ilea didn’t comment, glad the two could relieve some of the stress from their demanding jobs, with the side effect of making them stronger and more resilient.