

Chapter 557 Contenders

“But maybe I shouldn’t brag about it before we actually succeed. Though I don’t see us failing with already existing gates and a being that could bridge two realms with space magic,” Ilea said.

“If it means vacation in distant cities, maybe even lands not governed by humans... count me intrigued,” Walter said.

“That would be cool, right?” Ilea said. “All that travel time... just gone.”

“Well it depends how it would work in practice. I’d assume people still have to pay a fee or something. And security would need to be tight, otherwise you have armies invading through those things, or worse, monsters,” he said.

“We’ll consider those issues. I don’t exactly plan to place teleportation gates within cities, no matter how safe they’re supposed to be. Maybe nearby, and underground or something,” Ilea said. “And locked in to one destination, if that is possible.”

“The way you talked about the north. I’d definitely like to see it some day, so don’t disappoint me,” Walter said and snickered, emptying his mug.

“I’ll fly you there if the gates turn out to be an impossibility. Or if they need to be charged by sacrifices or something,” she said.

“Sacrifices don’t need to kill the victim. You can also just sacrifice an arm and heal it again,” he said.

“Isn’t there some inherent thing in sacrificial rituals that would prevent healing?” Ilea asked.

Walter shrugged. “I’m not the healer here. But I think if that happens, it’s just a powerful hurdle. Just need to find an even more powerful healing spell.”

“Makes sense, I suppose,” Ilea said.

The two were silent for a little while, Walter giving both of them a refill. He didn’t seem quite as tired and annoyed anymore.

“How are things with Lucia?” she asked.

He swerved around his mug. “Good. I think we should make more time for each other. She’s been very focused on her work lately.”

“Hmm,” Ilea said.

Walter laughed, glancing at her. “What about you? Is the legendary Lilith engaged with someone? Perhaps a commoner at level twenty. That would sprout a few more songs, and stories.”

Ilea smiled. “No. Not at the moment. I quite enjoy the free life of an adventurer.”

“You’re a special kind of adventurer. Unique even, I’d say,” Walter said.

Ilea waved her hand slightly. “I wouldn’t say so. Was just unlucky enough to attract the attention of bards.”

The man chuckled. “I suppose that’s true.”

“Ah right, you’re a bard too,” Ilea said and laughed.

“I am. And every day I regret not being the first to write a song about your escapades,” he said.

“No you don’t,” Ilea said.

“Yeah, not really. Can you imagine, all that attention? At least you can just fly away or vanish,” he said.

“Not like you couldn’t, dark mage,” she said.

“Weeell, I’m not exactly at your level of power,” Walter said. “Are you hungry?”

“Always,” Ilea said. “You know it’s not that hard. You just get a healer class and go out there until you’re as strong as I am.”

He went to the kitchen while shaking his head. “I won’t honor that with a reply.”

“Fair enough,” Ilea murmured.

The man returned soon enough with a few platters filled with bread, cheese, cold cuts, fruits, and a few vegetables.

He sat down and put some of the food onto his plate. “So, now you’re getting involved with the elves again.”

“More the Taleen. They’ve been hunting elves for hundreds of years,” she said and started eating too. “Thanks for the food.”

“Don’t mention it. The machines? Ah yes, Ben mentioned it before. Cerithil Hunters, right?” he said.

“Mhm. Elfie, a friend, he found a working gate to a Praetorian manufacturing facility. At least he thinks so. Those things are level six hundred machines, strongest variant I’ve seen so far,” Ilea said.

“And he wants the help of the hunters here?” Walter asked.

Ilea nodded.

“Makes sense. Wouldn’t you be enough? I don’t know what level you’re at by now but it must be enough to deal with six hundred monsters,” he said.

“There are stronger variants too. And we don’t know how many there are. Even I can be overwhelmed with numbers,” Ilea said. “Not killed maybe, but overwhelmed.”

“What’s your level? Four hundred?” he asked.

“Four forty right now. Third Class is coming up on four hundred too,” she said.

“Space magic?” Walter said.

“A guess?” Ilea asked.

“No, you mentioned our defenses,” he said.

Ilea smiled. “Right. Yeah, it’s space magic and white fire? Flames of Creation. Not much of a clue what it actually is but it’s certainly powerful.”

“I can imagine. And no, I don’t want a bout against you. Level one hundred Ilea was quite enough to see,” he said.

“That’s fair,” she said.

“Got any plans for the two weeks until our meetup with the Hunters? I’m sure the others would be happy to see you. Lucia mentioned experiments that require a particularly resilient human,” he said.

“I do actually. It’s back to Ravenhall for me after the meal. Mostly gate related stuff, and I should show my face sometimes in my organization, maybe get some hunting in too if I find the time,” she said. “I won’t be bored, that’s for sure.”

“That we have in common,” Walter said. “It’s good to see you in high spirits. I knew the whole Baralia affair wouldn’t be something you’d particularly enjoy.”

“It is what it is. Can’t all be fun hunting of monstrous entities that want you dead,” Ilea said.

“That’s true,” Walter said.

The two shared a few more stories until the platters were empty.

Ilea said her goodbyes, charging her wings near the mountain of Karth, zeroing in on the mark she left on Claire.

Vienna finished the last few repetitions, pushing the heavy barbell up while keeping her balance and focusing on her breathing.

The exercise wouldn’t increase her strength stat but she found it helpful anyway, if only to be more in tune with her own capabilities. Most of her peers didn’t see the use in this kind of training.

Trian had nonetheless accepted her request for a room that held a variety of weights for this purpose. Even though she was one of the only ones using them.

“There she is!” Chana exclaimed as she glimpsed inside, the door slightly ajar. “Oh... I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

Vienna had only glanced over quickly. *Do I really look so aggressive all the time?*

She slowly let the barbell descend into the steel brackets, breathing out as she sat up. “You’re not interrupting.”

“Oh, great,” Chana said, opening the door. The girl was smaller than her, by quite a bit. The shirt she wore barely hid the muscle below. She had long brown hair and a kind smile, her tanned skin suggesting a life lived mostly outside.

If only I could become as strong as she is, Vienna thought and reminded herself that the woman had invested quite freely into her Strength stat. Not just that, her Earth magic related enhancements provided more than a little help in the department.

Elias was there too, waving at her with a slight smile. His physique, shaved head and thick beard suggested he was older than the eighteen years he claimed to be. He averted his gaze as soon as she met his eyes.

Vienna smirked to herself but didn't comment on it. She wouldn't get involved with her teammates. There were simply too many issues connected to that. The man would understand too, once he had a little more experience in the matter.

"What's the occasion?" Vienna asked. They didn't have a dungeon dive planned this week and neither did they have a class together.

"What are you talking about?" Chana said, pouting slightly. "Our Hunter exams!"

"Yes. They're in three hours. I'll meet you there," Vienna said.

Elias chuckled to himself. "We thought to have lunch together beforehand. As a team building exercise, if you will."

"Hmm. I don't see the worth in that," Vienna said.

"Come on, don't be so cold," Chana said.

I didn't eat in a few days.

She stood up and cracked her neck and knuckles. "Alright. I guess it wouldn't be the worst way to spend my time."

She couldn't say she wasn't nervous at all. They were the first Sentinel team to have their Hunter exams after all. They had no idea what to expect. Vienna wasn't worried. If they failed, it simply meant they weren't ready and had to work harder to meet expectations.

There was no indication that there would be a punishment or that they could only take the exam once. With their experience so far, she had little reason to believe they would fail in the first place.

Maybe they want to set an example with us, to show everyone that even a team like ours can and will fail. It may be demoralizing for the others to do so however.

She was sure that the faculty knew what they were doing, their classes, combat, skill, and magic evaluations had always been helpful.

Chana squealed in delight, hugging her with her thick arms.

Vienna felt her body squash together. *Internal bleeding and a cracked rib. Well done Chana.*

"You injured me," she said.

The woman looked up with a shocked expression, letting go immediately. "I'm so sorry Vi!"

"You need to learn to gauge the resilience of your counterparts. Not all of them can heal themselves," she said and took care of her own injuries. *You absolute monster.*

"But I can heal them too," Chana said with a smile.

"Pain is not something normal people can easily ignore," Vienna reminded. Sometimes it felt like she was talking to a child with her.

It was good that her initial request to have Chana placed in a different team had been rejected.

"I do enjoy seeing you two hug, so please don't stop," Elias teased, his arms crossed in front of him.

“That was close. But I can see the anxiety in your eyes,” Vienna said.

He smiled. “I’m getting better. Soon, you won’t be able to resist anymore.”

“Resist punching you? Yes, maybe you’re right,” Vienna said, the three stepping into the simple stone hallway far below Ravenhall.

Most of the training rooms had been built for efficiency. Anything beyond that wouldn’t have survived for particularly long anyway.

A swath of fire rushed out into the hallway from the doorway ahead, the cheap wooden door reduced to ash.

“Aw fuck... not again,” someone said, the voice quite far away.

Vienna picked it up easily, already placing it with the face of the Sentinel it belonged to. *Lack of control.*

She couldn’t fault him, knowing his weakness had saved his team more than once. He was simply too emotional. And as long as his team got into situations that demanded his outbursts, he wouldn’t get better either. That was her opinion on the matter. She didn’t care to inform them or the faculty about such, having learned her criticism was often deemed too harsh.

“Let them experience their weaknesses, learn from them on their own. Change comes from within, not without.” Trian had said to her after another Sentinel had asked her on an opinion during a bout.

She didn’t agree exactly but she was the student here, not the teacher. At least as long as it didn’t concern her own team. With them, she was as brutally honest as she could be, not just because she was older. Their survival and growth quite literally depended on it.

The group walked up the stairwell, teleportation outside the training halls only allowed with a good reason. People just bumped into each other too often, a testament to their lacking perception.

She stepped out into the mess hall, finding their table not quite empty.

“Oh nooo,” Chana exclaimed silently.

“He doesn’t bite,” Elias said and went to get a plate of food from the counter.

Vienna locked eyes with the man sitting at their spot, neither of them relenting for a moment before she went to the counter too.

They sat down a few minutes later, Vienna sitting across the man.

Gael, likely the highest level Sentinel besides the faculty. He wore his short dirty pants and stained shirt, if only to abide by the rules. Outside of common areas, the man was always covered in ashen armor. He had deep brown eyes, sometimes shifting towards an autumn crimson, long black matted hair reached down his back. He stood nearly two meters tall and was broader than most.

His massive steel pole rested on the wall behind him. The plate in front of him had a mountain of meat piled on it, much of it raw.

“Greetings,” he said.

“Hey there, Gael,” Elias said and patted the man’s back.

Always taking unnecessary risks, Vienna thought. She did encourage her teammates fight dangerous enemies and train with powerful peers but Gael was a little different.

He simply didn't know when to stop. That was, if you annoyed him.

It would likely not be an issue during a bout but he simply did not do those.

"Is it a problem that I sit here? I know it isn't my assigned spot but the others annoy me," he said.

Vienna started eating. "No. But Chana is uncomfortable around you. You could simply ask the faculty for a separate room or table."

"They refused that request. Saying I should interact more with the others," he said.

"What do you think?" Elias asked.

The man looked over. "I don't mind the three of you. Though if I make you uncomfortable, I shall find another spot."

"Before you nearly kill them again for a stupid question they asked?" Chana asked. "No, you better stay here and don't hurt anybody."

"It's not my fault if they provoke me," the man hissed.

Chana stared at him.

"Stop it, both of you. We're having lunch," Vienna said in a cold voice. "Childish squabbles is beyond anybody that sits at this table. That applies to you too, Gael."

The man looked at her, biting into a chunk of meat as he held eye contact. He chewed and swallowed, blood dripping down his chin. "Agreed."

"He should apologize," Chana said.

"Don't be unreasonable," Vienna chastised.

The woman gave her a look of betrayal.

"Do you expect a monster to apologize for its instincts?" Vienna asked.

"He's human. Like the rest of us," she said.

"Are you?" Vienna asked the man.

He shrugged, continuing his feast. He did seem slightly amused.

"You can fight him later, Chana. We have to focus on the exam first," Vienna said before the woman could escalate the situation.

It wasn't protection. Neither of the two knew how to hold back but if anybody could challenge Gael in a direct brawl and remain standing for more than minute, it was Chana.

The nearby tables had quieted down, the tension in the air obvious to anybody that wasn't entirely blind to their senses.

[Warrior – lvl 232]

He was five levels lower last time.

"Did you have your Hunter exam already?" she asked the man, happy to gain any advantage they could.

"No. Don't care," he said.

“You can go on missions alone once you’re considered a Hunter,” Vienna said. Level two hundred was the main requirement, and the exam that nobody knew anything about.

Most of the people who had joined the Sentinels initially were Medics by now, after an exam they took at level one hundred or slightly above. It hadn’t differed much from the weekly written tests and combat evaluations. The only thing different about the Hunter exam that they knew about was that their group had to work together.

Gael didn’t have a group. He fought alone. Even if he had the exam, it would likely look different than theirs.

Or perhaps not. Just because he chooses to fight alone doesn’t mean he will face different threats. He just has to deal with them all on his own.

“What’s the big deal? They put me into a dungeon and I can kill monsters,” he said between bites.

“But you can choose which monsters to fight. You can actually help settlements, heal people, or protect a team of Shadows,” Elias said. “Though I think if I can choose, I’d rather stay in this team.”

Vienna agreed. They had become quite efficient together. She wouldn’t want to join some noble boy or inexperienced adventurer who simply happened to be at level two hundred. Most of them had reached it by killing monsters with traps or their magic, not facing much of any danger directly.

She knew her Classes and this opportunity had all been due to Lilith but in the end she had to be able to trust her team fully. Just because she was lucky in getting here didn’t mean she had to become a charity.

“I don’t care. I’ll kill them no matter where they are,” Gael said.

“Why become a Sentinel then at all? You could’ve just become an adventurer,” Chana said.

“Better training, better Classes. Why would I refuse? If they want me to kill monsters near a city or help defend against an attacking horde, I’ll gladly do it,” he said.

What the fuck happened to you?

Vienna had never asked, nor would she ask now. The man’s past was his own. As long as he didn’t stand in their way or betrayed the Sentinels, she didn’t have a problem with him.

“Lilith can just throw you into an approaching monster horde from above,” Elias said with a smile.

“If that is what she wishes to do,” Gael said.

“So no info on the exam. What do you think is going to happen?” Chana said, smiling again.

“A combat evaluation is likely. And I would think they’d put us into a situation where we get to our limits, both physically and mentally. I have a difficult time imagining what that would be, considering we’ve been to various dungeons so many times already. Not even Trian could push us that far,” Vienna said.