

Chapter 501<sup>st</sup> Ilea's Fist

Ilea had three more crates of valuables at the end of their short detour, and a hundred and ten more pieces of gold.

She checked her messages again with a bit of apprehension.

***'ding' 'The Azarinth Sentinel reaches lvl 359 – Five stat points awarded'***

***'ding' 'The Azarinth Sentinel reaches lvl 360 – Five stat points awarded – One Core skill point awarded'***

***'ding' 'Kin of Ash reaches lvl 358 – Five stat points awarded'***

***'ding' 'Kin of Ash reaches lvl 359 – Five stat points awarded'***

***'ding' 'Kin of Ash reaches lvl 360 – Five stat points awarded – One Core skill point awarded'***

***'ding' 'The Faen Valkyrie reaches lvl 105 – One stat point awarded'***

***'ding' 'The Faen Valkyrie reaches lvl 106 – One stat point awarded'***

...

***'ding' 'The Faen Valkyrie reaches lvl 114 – One stat point awarded'***

***'ding' 'Absolute Destruction reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 27'***

***'ding' 'Heart of Cinder reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 24'***

***'ding' 'Storm of Cinders reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 21'***

***'ding' 'Force reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 4'***

...

***'ding' 'Force reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 6'***

***'ding' 'Flare of Creation reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 7'***

***'ding' 'Flare of Creation reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 8'***

***'ding' 'Displacement reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 9'***

***'ding' 'Displacement reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 10'***

***'ding' 'Space Shift reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 3'***

***'ding' 'Space Awareness reaches lvl 16'***

***'ding' 'Space Awareness reaches lvl 17'***

***'ding' 'Monster Hunter reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 3'***

***'ding' 'Wood Magic Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 3'***

“Why the frown? You’re at three sixty, got a ton of wealth and surely a bunch of skill levels too,” Hector said.

“I’m blasting through the levels... that’s the issue. I should probably focus on my third Class skills more before leveling so much,” she said.

“Eh, maybe. I tried between two and three hundred, got all the skills to nearly the highest possible level and then... nothing. Not a single potential evolution. I doubt there will be one until four or even five hundred, as powerful and *unique* as they’re supposed to be,” he said. “You got Core skill points at three sixty?”

Ilea nodded. “We aren’t necessarily the same though,” she said.

“Oh, of course. I’m just one example. It might not be perfectly efficient but this is highly beneficial. You can hide inside a tomb and train your skills once we’re done here,” he said and laughed.

“You almost sound like you want me here. Is it maybe you who developed a crush?” she asked with a smile.

“I’m happy to invite you to dinner, Ilea. Right now I’m just glad to have another monster with me. We’re progressing quickly. I doubt Velamyr expected us to clear out a town in less than a day. Nor do I think the Order of Truth expected as much. Should have summoned more powerful creatures,” he said and laughed.

“Don’t jinx it,” Ilea said and looked at the map. “Mophis is mostly clear, except for a few hundred Cursed. Seyna or Nara?”

“Nara has likely not been touched by anybody. If we move now, we have the first pick for both wealth left behind and monsters infesting the city,” Hector said. “We’re also getting into stronghold territory of the Order and Baralia. I doubt many of the nobles in Nara were taken out by the ritual.”

Ilea considered it for a short while and finally nodded. “Then let’s get there before either army returns to claim what’s left.”

He laughed and grabbed on to one of her ashen limbs. “Spoken like a true pirate! You should really think about becoming one.”

“I’m not the biggest on hats, I’m afraid,” Ilea said and sped off.

Ilea put thirty stat points into Vitality, bringing her total health to a whopping 12991.

It didn’t sit perfectly right with her to level so quickly in her third Class, her skills somewhat falling behind. She had high second tier skills in her Azarinth Healer Class before even reaching level one hundred.

Hector was right of course, she wouldn’t hide away or slow their pace just because her skill development wasn’t perfectly optimal. If that even really was the case.

He told her that there had been no evolution for him, despite working on only his skills for quite some time. The man however had a motive to keep her around and fighting at her full capacity, which made her doubt his word somewhat.

Only somewhat though, she had a feeling he didn't exactly care. Even if she left, he would continue this on his own. Slower and perhaps a little annoyed but at the same time happy that he didn't have to share the spoils anymore.

Nara was quite different than Mophis, or really any city Ilea had seen so far in Elos.

The walls looked like the lowest fourth of a pyramid, reaching at least thirty meters in height before they opened up to reveal the high buildings and towers beyond.

She knew that few cities really built high in Elos because there was so much space available and building below ground was both easier and safer, with earth magic around.

When she saw the towers reaching hundreds of meters in height, punching into the gathering dark clouds above, she knew that there was only one explanation. A massive dick measuring contest.

"Fools I tell you," Hector said as they slowed down a few kilometers away from the city.

Ilea had flown low for the last ten minutes, just in case something spotted them in the sky.

"You think they're angering the Dragons?" she asked.

"You say that word quite lightly, not having met one," he said and glanced at her.

"How do you know I haven't met one?" Ilea said.

"Because you're still alive," he said. "Admittedly... it would be interesting to see. I wonder how you could be killed."

"Overwhelming force, I'd say," Ilea suggested.

"Which Dragons should have, according to the legends," he said.

"What could kill you then?" she asked.

He laughed. "I'm not exactly as durable as you are... very slippery though. A Leviathan nearly succeeded once. A Basilisk could do it too I suppose. Most four marks if they really set their minds to it, not that they care about a puny human enough to get their fat asses moving."

"Not all of them are huge," Ilea said.

"That sounds like a good story. Care to share?" he asked as they slowly moved towards the sprawling city.

Rain started falling, the first strikes of lightning flashing in the distance.

"Not really," Ilea said.

He didn't seem to mind, just nodding lightly. "The rain will be quite useful."

"For you," she said.

"How about a bet? The one who kills more gets sixty percent of the wealth we find," he suggested.

Ilea rolled her eyes. "I don't feel like keeping a count."

"So boring. You can just look through your messages afterwards," he said. "Just takes ten minutes or so to count."

"I don't feel like it," Ilea said. She knew the humans and monsters they were killing were either not themselves anymore or already entirely gone. Putting a number to it all felt too morbid. They had

all been living, breathing, and thinking people. She had a feeling at least part of that applied to the monsters that had come through the fractured or weakened space.

He grumbled a few curses but let it go after a few seconds, visibly excited to continue with the fighting.

“This is going to take a little longer than a day,” Ilea said as the real size of the city became clear.

“Not an issue,” he said. “It just means that there is more for us to gain.”

Ilea wondered how many people lived here.

“Don’t let it get to you. Focus your fury and fear at those responsible,” he suddenly said.

She looked at him, a little surprised. Only her eyes were visible after all. *Maybe something like my sphere?*

He didn’t say anything else, instead lifting up with a large wave of water that broke onto the walls of Nara.

The battle within was raging, screeches and spells audible as the Cursed fought against the summoned creatures. The walls of Nara were large, enchanted, and their gates remained shut. The slaughter was contained, an aftermath of the blood ritual that caused thousands of deaths.

Ilea silently crossed into the city, her wings moving in serene quiet before she dived down, and into battle.

Most of the monsters were the same as back in Mophis, their powers used against themselves with Displacement and sometimes even Force.

Ilea got quite a bit better with the latter skill, using it to deflect spells coming her way into the hordes of cursed humans prowling the streets below.

It became clear rather quickly that the high towers weren’t just a show of wealth, it was a quite literal disparity.

The lower levels on the ground and below were dirty and cramped. Apartments and stores were close to each other, side streets barely had enough space for two people to walk past each other.

While the cursed humans had a low level, there were so many down here that the monsters were quite literally ripped apart after engaging in close quarters combat.

Even a level four hundred Pear Mantis Sire would at some point die to sustained injuries.

The same wasn’t true for Ilea. Her Flare of Creation, Heart of Cinder, and ash shredded through the masses with ease, few of them even getting close to the flying monster, let alone through her defenses.

And even if they did, Ilea’s natural regeneration alone would be enough to deal with the damage.

She did use her Reconstruction but mostly on her mind, realizing that while she had made a similar experience back in Ravenhall and Virilya, the cursed weren’t changed as much by their affliction than the demonic spawn had.

She was slaughtering the diverse population of Nara. Rationally, she knew that this didn't mean much, that if anything, she was doing them a favor, but despite her life in Elos, Ilea hadn't turned entirely cold.

The experience wouldn't leave lasting damage to her psyche thanks to her healing spell and the Mental Resistance she possessed but it wasn't exactly a joyous occasion either.

She fought through whole sections of the lower levels for hours on end, hundreds and thousands of monsters dying in her wake. Ilea didn't shy away from invading the underground either, the lack of space, visibility, and even partial flooding not slowing her down in the slightest.

Dozens of Cursed waiting in ambush within dark rooms were slaughtered in less than a second as the ashen Shadow moved past, her sphere checking for any survivors or unaffected, her search unsuccessful.

Ilea hadn't found any signs of warped space in the five or six hours she had fought so far but she assumed the ritual had been the same.

*To think something like this can just wipe out the whole population... I hope Claire integrated anti blood and curse magic enchantments into the various walls of Ravenhall.*

She came out into a square close to the center of the city, finding a new creature currently in battle with a thirty meter long black eel whose mouth was about twice her body's size. Standing on a nearby building was Hector, winking her way when she noticed him.

The eel was half wrapped around a massive armored beetle that thrashed against the pure muscle, pushing back with summoned rock and debris from the surrounding buildings.

"Which one's yours?" Ilea asked when she appeared next to the man. She needed a break anyway.

"What do you think? Underwater beetle?" Hector asked with a smile. A sphere of water surrounded him entirely.

"Both are triple marks?" Ilea asked. Not because she didn't know but because she was surprised he could summon or control such a being.

"The Class doesn't have a restriction when it comes to levels. As long as the requirements are met and I manage to dominate and bond with a creature," he said. "I like her a lot. The regenerating powers are quite fascinating too."

"What's her name?" Ilea asked.

"Neely," he answered.

"I see. Eel, Neely," Ilea said. "Sure you don't want to help? She seems to be struggling."

"It's actually just based on the name of a long past lover. She had a personality that very much fit with this beast. The pun is just coincidence. And no, she would get pissed off if I got between her and her prey," he explained.

Ilea doubted the pun was a coincidence but she would let him have his way.

The battle caused two large buildings to partially collapse. Neely had difficulties piercing the stone armor of the Rock Beetle despite her ridiculously large teeth. A few of them even broke upon the defenses, her body cut, pierced, and bludgeoned by earth magic spells in the meantime.

She did regenerate quite quickly however, making the fight much more even than it would have otherwise been.

“Can eels survive outside of water?” Ilea asked.

“She can but yes, the ocean is her preferred hunting ground. Just as it is mine,” Hector said.

“Why not help out with some water then?” she said.

“Neely would notice it was mine,” he said and shrugged. “How is your side of the battle going?”

“Good, I guess. It’s not easy slaughtering so many people,” she said.

He nodded. “Use ranged attacks. Takes away from the trauma. I just drown them,” Hector said. “If you need a break, I’ve found a few sealed off vaults already.”

“I’d appreciate that,” Ilea said, sighing.

“No luck finding the ritual site?” he asked.

“Probably higher up,” Ilea said. “If the nobles lived in these towers then the Order must have had some quarters there too.”

“Are you sure there’s no way to turn them back?” she asked after they watched Neely fight for a little while.

Hector glanced at her. “You’re the healer.”

“But no. No, I don’t think that’s possible. They’re dead,” he said. “There’s a reason many countries keep a close watch of blood mages, necromancers, and curse mages. It’s often still allowed but this is exactly the kind of thing they want to prevent.”

“If Michael gets his hands on this ritual, he’s going to be even more annoying,” he said.

“He’s a blood mage?” Ilea asked.

“Blood and gold. I doubt he would actually use this spell but the knowledge alone could be used as a tool to pressure whole nations, let alone the other members,” Hector said.

“You seem to have a great deal of respect for the man. He’s not even at three hundred,” Ilea commented.

“He isn’t, no. And I don’t want to think of the day when he reaches it. I think it has to do with his duplicate spell. The slow leveling that is, not that I think he fights very often. That’s the only good part, he’s mostly focused on his research,” he said.

“Duplicate spell?” she asked, looking at him.

“Michael has a way to create duplicates of himself. I believe they think and feel the same as the original, though with only a fraction of the mana pool. If he manages to defeat something, it’s not counted as a solo kill. That’s the going theory at least. He’s the opposite of open about his capabilities,” Hector explained.

*Copies, I like that. Ten Ileas beating the shit out of some monsters,* she thought with a smile. “Do you think he’s a threat?”

“To me? No. I can defend myself, even if he was at the same level. He wouldn’t fight the Lily but he’s a driven man and his views differ from mine in some fundamental ways. If he got his hands on too much power however, the collateral damage would be quite extensive. I just hope the other members can keep him in check.”

Ilea nodded lightly. She had no clue what each member did or where they even had the majority of their influence. “I assume you think the same way about everyone else too?”

Hector chuckled. “Of course. Each member is dangerous in their own right. That’s why we’re not at war. Even an assassination would be disastrous for hundreds of thousands of people. Doesn’t stop me from entertaining the thought.”

“Have there been members who killed each other?” Ilea asked.

The man nodded. “Many times, but the last few centuries were somewhat quiet in that regard. Arthur died but I’d argue he left the Redleaf House in disarray anyway. If anything, it will be beneficial that somebody else takes over. The same isn’t true for everyone else. Except for me, maybe. If I died, barely anything would change,” he mused and chuckled.

“You think yourself invincible?” Ilea asked.

“Invincible? No. But those who would try to kill me? They’d find it a difficult task to say the least. Such an act would moreover give me all the support I needed to murder them myself. That would change things,” he said and looked at her. “It means resources would be offered to take care of the problems that would arise from the sudden disappearance of say, Lilith. Your assets would need to be distributed, people close to you would need to be informed, bribed, or killed.”

“You think I’d want to kill you?” Ilea said.

“More so than others,” he shrugged. “I can empathize with your qualms, Ilea, but they are not mine. If this city had been responsible for even just the injury of a crew member, I’d do the same that we’re doing now, cursed or not.”

Ilea had a hard time believing that. “You’d drown a whole city’s population to get revenge?”

“I would destroy all of human life, if I had the power to do so,” Hector said, his expression serious. “Of course that doesn’t make any sense. No, I know that those responsible would sit hidden within these towers but they won’t exactly come out and admit what they did. And I’m hardly an investigator.”