

Chapter 456 Blood

Sophia couldn't stop herself anymore. She stepped to the side of the exit and puked. Whatever remained in her stomach came back out.

"Hey, do that somewhere else," the nearby guard said.

"Leave it, I don't want to explain a corpse to the guard," Sean said and handed a coin to the man.

"Fucking rookies, at least prepare before going in," he muttered to himself and resumed his post in silence.

Prepare? For that? Sophia thought and turned around, wiping her mouth as the surroundings grew colder.

Sean was already there, placating her with a gesture. "Calm down. He doesn't know. Nobody could know."

It would be so satisfying, to show that guard who was unprepared, powerless, weak. Sean was right. Jeopardizing themselves and their entry to this dungeon wasn't worth it.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

"I'm very far from alright, Sean," Sophia said and sighed, looking at her hands as she opened and closed them.

"What the hell was that?" she asked.

The man just shook his head. He hadn't been speechless many times, usually eager to offer some words of support. "Come on, let's have ourselves a drink."

"Good idea," Colt said as he joined them. "You think she'll come back tomorrow?"

"You are kidding, right?" Sophia said.

"What? Got more levels from this than the last year of adventuring," the warrior said. "It was pretty fucked up, I'll admit that much."

"Fucked up?" Sophia said. "I never want to see anything like those Abominations ever again. And that last part? I thought I was getting eaten... from the inside."

The warrior gulped. "It was crazy. And her healing just took care of it... Sean, I tell you, we really have to get us one of those healers. We could do what she said, lay traps and hunt creatures like that."

"I have fought with healers... she's not exactly a normal representation. I haven't ever met one who just stood there and took direct hits from level three hundred creatures," Sean said.

"Why are we talking here, come on. Let's go," Sophia said and walked towards the inn.

"Agreed," Colt said and followed. "Did you see her wings? I want some of those."

"Good luck with that. With your weight, you'd need ten times that size," Sophia said and winked his way.

"I'll show you something else ten times that size," the warrior said.

“That doesn’t make any sense, Colt,” Sean said.

Edgar sighed and shook his head. “What a night.”

‘ding’ ‘You have heard the challenge of a Specter of Rot – You resist its effect’

Ilea received the same message as earlier. She had dropped the group off near the exit of the dungeon, the flight quite simple with her Sentinel Huntress and sphere picking up where they had used their magic on the way.

The reward had come when she used the same skills to get back into the deep cavern.

‘ding’ ‘Sentinel Huntress reaches 3rd lvl 3’

She could feel it again, the blight damaging her from the inside. *Not blight*, she thought. It was less strong of an effect than the power she had experienced in the Karheim dungeon.

Enough to kill the others.

Her healing luckily canceled it out but fighting creatures while focusing on them wasn’t in the cards. Not if she wanted to guarantee their survival.

“Sooo, Specter of Rot... let’s see if this place manages to pose a challenge after all,” Ilea said as she hovered farther into the vast cavern.

The place was pitch black and silent. Nothing suggested the presence of a being other than herself. If only it hadn’t been for that screech.

If you had been quiet, I might have left you alone... to rot in this god forsaken hole in the ground.

Ilea didn’t know where the creature had come from, it might as well have been birthed out of the void itself.

Two swords made of bone slashed out, the weight, power and quality enough to cut through her ash and deep into her skin. According to Azarinth Fighting that was.

Ilea didn’t quite know enough yet to let the creature close.

It was flying, like her. Wings made of skin and bone. Two dead eyes set into a malformed skull. The creature was three meters in height, deadly talons on both hands and legs at the end of lean but muscular limbs. The swords were just over two meters long.

[Specter of Rot – lvl ???]

Way to make it interesting, Ilea thought with a smile, all her skills ready to answer whatever questions the being might ask.

The Specter did not have a mouth however, power emanating from its form as magic was released.

“Dancing? Oh, how did you know I just took some lessons?” she asked and twirled through the air as the being rushed her.

“I tell you, she just stood there. Level three hundred. She’s at least that high,” Colt repeated himself.

A group of five was listening to him near the bar, the innkeeper apparently quite interested too.

“What skills did she use?” one of them asked.

“Do you think this is a good idea?” Edgar asked Sean, the two of them sitting with Sophia at their usual table.

“She didn’t tell us to keep it to ourselves,” Sean said. “Besides. Everything he said so far is in the song.”

“We shouldn’t share anything else. About the healers she wants to train... and about how she helped us out.” Sophia said.

“She nearly got us killed,” Edgar said but waved her off before she could retort. “I know she helped. And I get it. She’s just a little off. Well a little lot.”

“I don’t think we were ever in any danger. Not from anything besides herself,” Sophia said. *They still don’t get what kind of a monster that woman was. Talking about Abominations instead of her. Just because she’s wearing a human body.*

“Doesn’t matter. I agree with you that we shouldn’t talk too much. Sean?” Edgar said and glanced at the man.

The ranger rolled his eyes and stood up. “Okay, alright. Colt!”

“Ash!” the warrior said and spread his arms. “That’s all lads... keep away from the dark, or she will snatch you away.”

Some of them laughed, others talked amongst themselves.

“Sounds like that song. Lilith, was it?” a nearby patron said before changing the subject.

Colt brought four mugs to the table and sat down with a satisfied sigh. “There you go lads. Something to fill back up the water we lost by shitting ourselves. Or puking.” he added and winked to Sophia.

“And we survived another day,” Sean said and grabbed his mug. “To Lilith.”

“To my crush,” Colt said.

Edgar touched their mugs without a word.

“To the monster of Ravenhall,” Sophia said.

Sean laughed. “To get that title, with the Shadow’s Hand being located there.”

“Do you think she’s actually different from them? Or is she just a high level Shadow?” Colt asked.

“We never asked if she is one in the first place,” Sean said.

Sophia signaled to them that they had company.

The barkeeper had switched with someone else and was approaching their table.

“Sean, right?” he said and nodded to the man. “Couldn’t help but overhear your story. Mind if I join in?”

“Take a seat, Hudson. It has been an exciting night,” Sean said.

Sophia glanced at the man. She had seen him before and was pretty sure he owned the whole place. He wasn’t very tall but made up for it in sheer density. Hudson nearly reached Colt’s levels of muscle. He sported a short gray beard and hair of the same color bound in a bun, visible scars on both his face and arms telling of his time of adventuring or military, wrinkles added into the mix giving him a grizzled look.

[Warrior – lvl 82]

Not an overwhelming threat, Sophia thought. His influence in the area could be a problem, which is why Sean allowed him to sit down with them. After what they’ve been through, she was sure he wouldn’t easily welcome a stranger to join in conversation.

“What do you know?” Sean asked, getting straight to the point as he leaned in. He talked in a hushed tone.

Hudson leaned back, the chair groaning under his weight. “I heard the songs. More than that, I talked to someone who met her. Nearly a year ago.”

“Songs? There’s more than one?” Edgar asked.

Sophia was interested too.

“Yep. Pretty much the same thing however. One goes into more detail on why she is such a bloody good thing for Ravenhall and its people. Sounds to me like she has a cult following. Mind magic is an option,” the barkeeper said.

Sophia rolled her eyes.

“You disagree, lass?” he asked.

“Bards need money too. You pay them and they write a song,” she said.

“Well... you ain’t wrong. Songs are one thing but the man I talked to... he swore he had met her. The Shadow wielding ash. Apparently she paid people to attack her. To train resistances, people said. Just that the magic did very little to injure her at all. And if it did, she was healed back up in mere instants,” Hudson explained.

“Why I thought it was her. It sounded the same to me when the big guy over here talked about it. But three hundred? I’ve never heard of someone that high,” he said and shook his head.

Sean nodded. “I think she has to be there. At least that. With what she showed. They’re out there, you know? They have to be. People at that level. Higher even.”

“Nobles hiding in their estates and castles,” Edgar said and took a sip.

“Hiding won’t bring you to those levels. You can torture and kill slaves and captured pray all you want,” Sophia said.

“Aye. That one... she enjoyed it. Not a shred of fear in her. You saw it too,” Colt said and looked at Sean.

The ranger nodded absentmindedly.

“What do you think she found down there? You think she really went after it?” Colt asked and glanced at each of them in turn.

“She did,” Sophia stated.

Hudson was wise enough not to ask too many questions.

“Do you think she will make it?” Edgar asked.

Sophia turned her attention to the mug in front of her, lifting it towards her mouth. “I don’t fear for her. I fear for whatever stands in her way.”

Ilea felt the magic condense, choosing not to blink this time as it manifested.

The rupture went through her, her blood exploding in a flurry of heat and movement. Half her chest was ripped out.

She let it reform as she drifted backwards. *Having a hard time, are we?*

The creature had to focus on her for quite some time to manifest its spell. It changed up the pattern, where it attacked and how fast it manipulated her blood.

None of that mattered in the end as Ilea didn’t exactly want to dodge the attacks. Granted, she didn’t know exactly when they came but she was getting better.

So far, she hadn’t retaliated in any way, simply observing the creature as it attacked.

The Specter varied between a flurry of bladed attacks and blood magic in various forms. Projectiles, ruptures within her body, enhancement for its swords, and vine like blood shooting out from the ground.

Ilea only avoided the last variant, not about to get trapped if she had anything to say about it.

Here we go again, she thought when the creature vanished.

It appeared in a mist like state behind her, blades slashing through her armor and skin.

She could see it vanish within her sphere, forming again and continuing its attack. The being attacked four to five times per second, putting her blink to shame. She only avoided the thrusting attacks, just in case she would end up impaled and thus trapped.

Ilea didn't know yet if the swords would give her bone magic resistance levels but it was worth a shot. It was difficult enough to avoid them entirely already. She was glad they didn't cleave through her limbs as easily as the Ascended had taken her apart.

Alright, let's see how durable you are, shall we?

She twirled backwards, a blade slashing through the air below. Ilea sped up and used her wings to maneuver her around its moving blades. She took the hit from the blood sphere that surged out, burning a layer off of her armor right before her fist landed.

Absolute Destruction and Storm of Cinders rushed into the being as she pulled back, taking two slashes that drew blood. The thick red liquid flowed down and ignited, energy expanding as her wounds ripped open. And closed.

Didn't die yet. That's good, she thought with a smile. But you'll have to try harder than that, my friend.

She watched it vanish and turned to where she felt the newly available mark. Promptly using it against the creature seemed like a good way to further work on the skill. Ilea could feel its effect weaken as the seconds went by, another surge of magic

Talk?

She sent the thought towards the being floating in the dark but nothing answered her.

It teleported in and out of her sphere's range with its continuous attacks.

Quite convenient. Knowing where that thing is at all times.

Ilea continued to fight the creature, her body cut and ripped apart in the process, the woman getting more and more aggressive in her approach.

She found that her punches and skills had less of an effect as she had expected. Something was wrong. This one was regenerating too.

Perfect

Ilea could even see the creature now, the embers burning within its body and on its skin lit it up like a torch. The effects waned quickly but she reapplied them just as fast.

She added other skills to the mix, burning it with Heart of Cinder and finally whistling at it with Monster Hunter.

The creature stopped in its tracks and forced its magic into her blood.

No reaction? Guess my level just isn't high enough, Ilea thought with a smile, the echo of her whistle reaching her a moment later.

She dodged another two blades that slashed her way and to her surprise found the weapons doubling suddenly. Blood magic made her shoulder explode an instant later.

Ah yes, the increased range. Maybe I shouldn't have infused it.

There were five of them.

Ilea struggled to completely avoid all their attacks, finding their coordination striking. The constant blood magic posed more of a problem too, now that the more physical attacks didn't stop during the casting.

Her third tier healing was working extra shifts as whole sections of her were ripped out and splattered onto her ash or the ground.

Ashen wings maneuvered her up and into open space, allowing her enough wiggle room to avoid most of the enemy strikes. Finding openings proved difficult however and she wasn't focusing on a more suicidal tactic quite yet.

Ilea's limbs spread out from her back, interconnected with her wings, the tendrils lashed out and struck the beings, three at a time. All five when they were close enough.

The magic slamming into her was both there to level her resistance but just as much to recover mana, allowing her to keep up with the creatures even after nearly ten minutes of constant battle.

She was sure by now that these things were either close to level seven or eight hundred or they had some form of regeneration. *Or mana intrusion resistance. Doesn't feel that-* her thoughts were interrupted by a blade nearly slashing through her throat.

Ilea kept her head as the tissue reconnected. *The mana goes in. They just heal the damage. Quite tough.*

She wondered if they were on the Vampire's level but thought it too risky to go all out, sacrificing her movement, dodging and defense over pure attack.

Heart of Cinder charged to higher levels for now and she didn't hold anything else back either. At this point the playing had turned into serious training.

The danger wasn't anywhere close to the Ascended but she wondered if the Specters could actually take her down if they just managed to capture her with their blood vines.

It helped that they apparently had to connect to the ground, ceiling or walls. If she stayed mostly in the middle of the cavern's space, she should be mostly safe.

This would be quite a bit more brutal in a small corridor.

Blood vines were moving closer from above, Ilea finally letting go of the stored heat. A spherical wave of fire and energy expanded, momentarily illuminating the space.

Dead eyes stared back, their skin nearly as pale as the swords of bone they held.

Her released Heart of Cinder burned through the blood magic and parts of their bodies with ease. Not close to the power she had used against the steel barriers of the Ascended but nothing to take lightly either.

Ilea watched within her sphere as the burnt skin healed, missing parts reforming and the scorched sections shed away. Not a hint of fear or pain, just a single focus, a single goal. To cut down the unknown intruder in their midst.

She blinked back to avoid a thrust attack, jolting her head backwards as a chunk of her face exploded outwards and reformed. As long as her brain didn't go, she wouldn't be taken out of the action. Her third tier prevented her from dying but even a fraction of a second could mean being pinned down and potentially reduced to a continuously regenerating soon to be corpse.

She took a deep breath and focused on the fight. *The chance of them taking me down is low. Now, let's see if the same is true the other way around.*