

Chapter 566 Concerns

“This is delicious,” Ilea said, shoveling more food onto her place as she chewed.

“Thank you,” Briana said, a warm smile on her lips as she watched Ilea eat. “Quite a compliment coming from Lilith.”

“Mother... please,” Willa said in a quiet tone.

Briana smirked. “Oh? But you always go on and on about her. She’s the most powerful healer in all of Elos you said, the hero we needed, the savior of Riverwatch. Or was it Dawntree?”

The mother giggled as her daughter cringed.

Ilea glanced between the two of them and smiled, facing the father again.

He sat opposite her, bulky and nearly bald. His look was stern, his face betraying nothing as his eyes seized her up, arms crossed in front of him.

“Andres, you should eat something too,” Briana said, putting some food onto his plate.

His demeanor changed for a split second as he looked at her, his eyes much less hard. “It’s fine. I will eat later.”

“Oh come on, don’t be so hard on her. When’s the last time we had a guest over, let alone someone as prominent as her,” Briana said.

“She has no manners,” Andres said, looking back at Ilea.

“Apologies. I’ve been fighting a monster for what feels like days,” Ilea said, continuing to eat. She wasn’t exactly sure what she was supposed to be doing wrong. She was even using the fork.

“See, I’m sure someone as wild and powerful as her can be excused,” Briana said, glancing at Ilea with a warm smile.

I can feel your sarcasm, woman, Ilea thought and smiled back.

Andres sighed. “I don’t care about your name. You want to take away our daughter and I will not have it. She is safe here, taken care of. Here she has a future. Better than out there in a war torn and unstable world.”

Ilea chewed and swallowed, smiling slightly as she leaned back. She wasn’t covered in ash anymore of course. “Willa asked me to come. I’m here because of her.”

Andres glanced at his daughter. “You bothered her with your talks of adventure?”

Willa looked back at him but didn’t say a word.

“I wasn’t bothered. Otherwise I wouldn’t be here. She shows promise. Under the Sentinels, she can grow into the healer she wants to become,” Ilea said.

Andres frowned. “I know enough about healing orders to know where this leads. You won’t corrupt my daughter,” he said and stood up, his chair hitting the wall behind.

“It’s not a healing order. If she can’t keep up with the training, she can leave anytime. I’ll even have someone fly her back here,” Ilea said.

“Your songs may have swayed the fools in that tavern but I won’t believe these empty promises,” Andres said.

Ilea was impressed that he would go that far.

Monster Hunter charged and released with a low hum.

[Mage – lvl 42]

“I’m touched by your bravery. All for your daughter’s sake,” Ilea said, forming a small sphere of ash in front of her.

Andres lost some color in his face.

“But with all due respect. If I had wanted to take her, I would’ve done so,” Ilea said with a smile. “I can only offer you my promise. That she receives the same training the other Sentinels do. There’s no catch. I simply want there to be more healers around,” Ilea said. “Yes. There will be pain and danger, but that’s the price you have to pay for power.”

Andres looked at her, still defiant. He glanced at his daughter. “Willa. Is this truly what you want?”

She stood up and looked back with a determined gaze. “Yes. I want nothing more.”

Andres deflated a little, glancing at his wife.

Briana nodded with a slight smile.

“Then so be it,” Andres said before he leaned closer to Ilea. “But I tell you now, Lilith. If you have any ulterior motives. I will find you, and I will finish you.”

“I understand,” Ilea said, respecting the father’s concern but staying somewhat realistic. “Can we finish dinner now? It’s getting cold.”

Briana smiled and continued eating, so did Ilea.

Willa sat with a wide grin and Andres calmed down a little, his eyes opening wide when he glanced at Ilea again.

“I... I hope I didn’t offend,” he said in a whisper, after they had eaten for a minute or two.

“You didn’t,” Ilea said. “But maybe work on that temper a little. Could end badly with the wrong people.”

He nodded lightly. “I know.”

“Not the first time he’s done something stupid,” Briana said. “But this is most definitely the worst of all.” The woman seemed proud when she said it, a bright grin on her face.

“She’s going to make you proud, I’m sure of it,” Ilea said, winking at Willa who turned red as she tried to sink under the table.

Briana laughed and joined Willa, teasing her with a few more remarks.

“What were you doing here anyway?” Andres asked after a while.

“Came to fight Specters of Rot. They were monsters occupying the lower parts of the caverns,” she said.

He looked at her. “The monstrous abominations people whisper about?”

“Oh no, much worse than those. Turns out there was an ancient settlement down there, carved into the mountain itself. They had a Queen called Lumian,” she said.

“The lost regent,” Andres said. “She was here?”

Briana looked up from under the table.

“You know her?” Ilea asked. “It looked fucking ancient.”

“There are poems about her. A queen dedicated to her people. She’s a local hero... for some even a deity,” Briana explained.

“Any idea why she would retreat down into the mountain?” Ilea asked.

“Poems are poems. Doesn’t mean she was liked quite as much back then, nor that she could defend against invading forces,” Andres said. “Though I don’t know what would’ve driven her to hide inside that dungeon.”

“I see. Either way, she can rest now,” Ilea said.

Andres opened his eyes wide again.

“Thank you,” Briana said. “To some of us, this will mean more than you know.”

Ilea looked at her and summoned the crown. She glanced at the thing and moved it over on a bed of ash. “Maybe with that, someone might actually believe the story.”

Briana glanced between the artifact and Ilea, hesitating to touch the thing. “It’s... real... the iron crown.”

She had tears in her eyes. “Are you sure? This is a priceless artifact.”

“Returned to where it belongs,” Ilea said. “Just don’t get killed by some thief who wants it.”

The woman looked at her before she gingerly touched the crown. “Thank you.”

Willa looked on with confusion, her parents now admiring the artifact together.

Hope that shit isn’t cursed.

Ilea frowned before she displaced the crown into her hands. “Sorry, just to make sure I’m not fucking you over,” she said and placed it onto her head.

Nothing happened.

Hmm.

Seems like the description is accurate.

“Okay it seems fine,” she said and displaced it back to the parents.

“I can’t believe she wore it,” Andres said before he started laughing.

“It doesn’t suit you,” Willa said.

“I know,” Ilea said. “Horns are better.”

“I agree,” the girl said with a wicked smile. “Will I get armor too?”

“All in its due time, dear child. First you need to go through some harrowing training,” Ilea said.

“Understood,” Willa said seriously.

They finished their meal and exchanged a few more pleasantries before Ilea left with Willa in tow.

The flight back to Ravenhall taxed the girl somewhat but with Ilea’s healing and cocoon of ash, she survived it.

Ilea crossed her arms in front of her, letting the four students attack without retaliation. Spears of ash grazed her skin.

Gael rushed her again, his ash armor not complete in some parts, revealing the wicked and bloodied grin on his face. His ashen claws extended and cut into her, leaving bloody gashes in her skin.

[Warrior – lvl 232]

The man looked a little younger than her but not by much. He was much broader in any case, honed muscle and powerful spells enhancing his body and every move.

She had deactivated her own ashen armor and various resistances to make sure the Sentinels had a chance to inflict some damage.

Gael roared as his attacks increased in both speed, tenacity, and sheer brutality. He ripped into her face and chest, her limbs and stomach, even targeting specific organs with his claws.

The students had mandatory combat evaluations but by now, some were good enough to challenge even the instructors. Gael would still lose in a battle against someone like Trian but the latter had to actually try. Bouts like that were still helpful but the Sentinels had been trained to take on monsters more powerful than themselves. Providing a safe environment to do so was getting difficult within the headquarters. For some of the students at least.

Ilea slapped his face, the man’s large body flying to the side before he hit the ground and bounced back up. A few bones had broken, the ash wiped away from his face and blood dripping down.

He had his Class mostly under control, even when he was low on resources and severely injured, he wouldn’t attack allies. The problem that remained was his over extension when he attacked something. Normally he could out heal even higher leveled monsters but soon he would find himself in similar situations as Ilea had with the Vampire and more recently the Queen.

A cool head and precise evaluation were necessary in those scenarios. And right now, she was trying to beat that into him.

The pain he inflicted with his blood and flesh magic were irrelevant to her, the damage he managed to cause was insignificant.

Ilea blinked towards him and kicked. Her boot slammed into his stomach, pushing him back a few meters. She displaced him towards herself and punched his face.

Gael slapped to the ground hard, his body paralyzed.

Ilea ignored the projectiles cutting into her back and knelt down, a bit of ash connected to him to prevent teleportation. Her fist slammed into his face a few times in quick succession, leaving most of it mushed, the bones broken. She grabbed his leg and threw him into a nearby wall.

The other three Sentinels didn't blink an eye at that. It wasn't the first time after all.

Ilea shot a few projectiles at them, watching as they dodged or deflected. *Not bad.*

Gael pried himself out of the wall, his large form regenerating as he stumbled a few steps forward.

She saw his eyes had gained some focus again.

"Too long," he said.

He retained some awareness in his frenzy like state but he had to learn to control it.

"Again," Ilea said. Five attacks was the goal for now. At ten she would strike back.

The Sentinels attacking from a distance had the goal of injuring her while staying vigilant for counterattacks and teleportation.

Gael appeared next to her, his claws slashing her arm three times before he jumped back.

She allowed herself a smile but realized he did that same.

There he goes again.

The man closed the distance and started cutting her up, each strike going deeper. He reached blood with the tenth strike.

Four ashen limbs pierced through him, one ripping off an arm before he was thrown at one of the other Sentinels.

The woman dodged to the left, her eyes focused on Ilea as her next spell formed.

Trian appeared in the hall, glancing at the blood and the groaning Gael. "They're ready."

Ilea nodded. "We're done for today," she said. "Gael, you train with a few monsters you find, try to get it under control. I'm sure your next evolutions will be promising if you do."

The man went to one knee, his arm reforming slowly. "Yes ma'am."

He's stronger than a lot of mid two hundreds I've fought, Ilea thought and followed Trian out.

"How is your training going?" the man asked.

"It's going. I'm glad there are a few students that can injure me with their ash magic," she said.

"Their progress is quite frightening. If I didn't know you as well as I do, I'd have second thoughts about this organization," Trian said.

"You do keep an eye on them. And not just everybody is allowed to join," Ilea said.

Trian glanced at her when they reached the entrance to another training hall. "We do our best. But people can be deceiving. We already have a much higher demand and it's not going to become any less as time goes on. There will be those who slip through the cracks."

"The two you mentioned," she said.

“Yes. But not just them. Gael himself has become more uncontrollable. If he has a shift of conviction after reaching level three hundred, there will be little we can do to stop him,” he said.

“I don’t really care if he just goes out there and hunts monsters. And if he starts to slaughter sapients, I’ll step in,” Ilea said. “I’ve seen the way he looked at me. He wants a challenge. It would already be difficult to provide one in most human settlements. And much harder to find than out in the wild.”

“I see. I’m glad to hear that. Though not everyone with a high level will be content hunting monsters. Some will want to get revenge or take power where they came from,” Trian said.

“And that’s such a bad thing? I remember a certain noble looking for revenge,” Ilea said.

“It’s not what the Sentinels should set out to do. We’re here to hunt monsters and heal people,” Trian said.

“True. But sometimes you need to rip out corruption before you can start healing. I’m sure there will be people who do as you suggested but if they provide enough evidence to convince us their actions were necessary, I don’t see the problem,” Ilea said.

Trian shook his head. “You’re taking this too lightly. The consequences could be devastating. Let alone the retaliation from foreign nobility or countries themselves.”

“All we can do is make sure they’re good people at heart. We teach them what we can and guide them to a path that benefits all. If they manage to deceive us or if they choose to go against everything we stand for, there is no blame with you, Trian. We both agreed that the Sentinels shouldn’t be too hierarchical and rigid with our rules and teachings. I trust both you and them. And if that trust is broken, we intervene. It’s as simple as that. Anything less open would lead to more problems and corruption,” Ilea said.

“I agreed with you. But now that the first Sentinels are reaching Shadow levels and go out on their own missions... it just doesn’t seem quite as simple anymore,” he said.

Ilea slapped her hand onto his shoulder. “You’re not in this alone, alright? You’ve got me, all the faculty, Claire, and plenty of others in case shit goes wrong. You’ve taught them well. Give yourself and your students some more credit and trust. And look at what they’ll do, how many people they’ll protect and heal, how many monsters they take care of. The Shadow’s Hand isn’t perfect and neither are the Sentinels. Yet both are very sorely needed.”

“On that we can agree,” Trian said. “It just seemed simpler when they were all just starting out.”

Ilea laughed. “So that’s what this is about?”

“What?” he asked.

“You’re having difficulties seeing your children grow up and leave your nest,” she said and poked him.

Trian rolled his eyes. “I do care about them. Though I think my concerns stem more from a lack of control than any abandonment issues.”

“Control was never the goal. The other Orders control. We just provide a reason for them to up their game. Same thing for the Shadows. Maybe so many of them won’t just be sitting around in Viscera when Sentinel teams start finishing all the contracts,” Ilea said.

“We’re not the only organization that started with that goal,” Trian said. “But history proved that power corrupts and with time, the goals shift, until those who promised to fight corruption become the very thing they sought to destroy.”

“Very dramatic. But having heard you talk about some of them, I doubt they were helping orphans and refugees to reach power without asking much in return. Even if you’re right, I think most of them would make more decent rulers than most nobility I’ve met,” she said. “They want to be here and most want it for reasons we can support.”

Trian looked at her for a moment before he sighed. “I appreciate your hopeful outlook. I think changing things up at this point would be detrimental.”

He scratched his neck and nodded to himself. “I’ll try to trust them. We’ll keep a close look on the reports as more Sentinels start taking missions.”

“You can also hire more trainers and work a little more on yourself. Maybe you just feel inadequate comparing your growth to theirs?” Ilea said.

“How very blunt of you. I can’t exactly regrow my limbs,” Trian said.

“Then go on missions with them. See how they work, judge for yourself if your concerns hold any truth. You’re looking at this from your position as a noble, administrator, and council member of Ravenhall. Maybe look at it from the perspective of a Sentinel,” Ilea said.

“My presence isn’t as needed anymore... I’ll consider that,” he said. “Thanks. I hope you didn’t lose faith in me because of my concerns.”

“Not at all. That honesty is what we need. And your concerns are well founded. I just don’t think being afraid or trying to *fix* it is the solution. Trust and work alongside them. You’re a capable teacher and so are the others. Now let’s see what these two are about,” Ilea said.