

## Chapter 539 Playtime

Ilea continued her training. With the survivors gone, she could focus near fully on herself.

Michael begrudgingly accepted the closure of the gate in a month's time, the ultimatum coming from Meadow instead of Ilea.

She didn't feel like arguing with the man and thus told Meadow to inform him.

He damn near revered the creature as a divine being, easily taking the explanation at face value.

*I do wonder if Meadow could create Divine objects again if Michael thought of it as a god. Or is its own self perception already preventing such a possibility in the future?*

Ilea activated Phaseshift, displacing a few death flames and blinking up before the spell took effect of the space near her body.

She remained in the air, slowly floating upwards when the first Astral Spirit finally showed up.

It would simply be unacceptable to leave this place without killing at least one of the creatures.

Her ethereal form was enveloped in astral energy, the spirits of death climbing on top of each other behind her were incinerated near instantaneously.

Ilea continued to float closer before she deactivated Phaseshift, her form flickering while the enemy spell still moved through her as if she didn't exist. The second passed and she displaced herself close to the spirit.

Her ash rushed out and a near fully charged Heart of Cinder slammed into the smooth body of the spirit. Burns and blemishes showed immediately, the body molten where it had faced the spell. A thick turquoise liquid seeped out of various wounds, all of it reforming quickly as it drained her mana.

Ilea's resistance to the drain was high. High enough that she should be able to kill some of the lower leveled Astrals. Both her own knowledge of the creatures and Meadow's insight suggested such.

The problem in actually killing them was however difficult to overcome.

It didn't just drain mana from her, it drained mana from spirits of death and even its own kind. Both the strength of their drain and the range they could use it at made the beings insanely hard to kill. As long as there were other creatures around.

The only reason she hadn't given up on a kill entirely, was because of their somewhat lacking tactical sense.

They just stayed there, attacking and draining anything that even resembled a pool of mana. So far they hadn't shown anything close to concern or fear. Sometimes they left but Ilea doubted it was her doing in the first place.

She covered the creature in ash, igniting all of it with Flare of Creation. The spell blazed up with the full five hundred health per second she could add additionally.

Ilea kept a close look on her health and sacrificed a thousand points to activate her third tier aura.

Her ashen limbs cut and slammed into the creature as quickly as she could manage. She grappled it from behind and pushed reverse mana into it as Absolute Destruction charged.

The hits she took from its astral area spell were substantial but she simply kept her third tier healing active at all times. Her growing resistance and other bonuses made the enemy magic at least manageable.

Her resources dwindled quickly but she kept grappling the spirit.

She saw two more Astrals arrive and released her charged Absolute Destruction, her destructive mana coursing through the creature with all the buffs and bonuses she could muster.

Ilea was forced to jump off, displacing herself as she dodged a few spells on her retreat.

*Not quite enough... even with all that.*

The hordes of Death spirits continued being burnt through by the Astral variants, until nothing was left but a group of nearly twenty of the latter.

*But if I go in now there are too many,* she thought with a sigh. It was just as hopeless if she looked for an area with no death spirits, or if she tried to use this area where the Astrals killed all the Death variants already. In those cases, the star monsters would simply not come.

Ilea definitely had the power output to kill the various creatures but when it came to pure mana usage, a group of fifty death spirits still outperformed her. Even then it often took twenty to fifty seconds for the first Astral Spirit to show up.

*Damn all those regenerators!*

She flew back to the temple, frustrated another attempt had failed. Killing an Astral Spirit wasn't her only goal in the month left on Erendar however.

*"Failed again?"* Meadow asked.

*"It's nuts... I can kill even higher leveled beings with less damage output,"* she said.

*"Destructive mana may not be the best way to face Astral Spirits. A more physical approach might be beneficial,"* it informed her, again.

*"Yes. Let me just get new Classes and level them to three hundred. My ash doesn't do enough either,"* she said.

*"As long as the death spirits remain, it will be troublesome,"* Meadow said.

*Not if I get Flare of Creation higher. Or if I actually manage to charge Destruction for longer than a few seconds.*

Ilea could deliver more damage with consecutive punches using her Destruction but what she needed against the quickly regenerating creatures was heavy damage that came all at once. Both methods however had failed so far.

It was sobering in a way but on the other hand she could easily survive even combined attacks by the beings. Her own regeneration wasn't anything to laugh at either after all. *At least I don't need dozens of living creatures to siphon away health and mana.*

*"Don't frown like that,"* Meadow said. *"I'm sure you'll succeed eventually."*

*"I have my armor on. You can't see my frown,"* she said and sat down on the black grass.

*"I can feel it. It's all encompassing,"* Meadow said.

*"Can you help me with a skill. It's been a little annoying to level,"* Ilea said.

While Sentinel Huntress did gain levels during her training and fights, it was still far behind her other more directly useful abilities.

She knew that adding markers to enemies during her bouts made a difference but the core of the skill was an investigative one.

*"How may I help you, my friend?"* Endless Meadow asked.

*"Have you ever heard of Hide and Seek?"* Ilea asked.

Ilea felt the tear tremble in her hand. Just enough for her to register.

She was on the right track.

*Probably in this range,* she thought, flying upwards now. The mountains here rivaled the north in Elos, bursting out of the ground beyond the wastes she had covered.

Ilea had flown for hours, Erendar really proving to be quite desolate.

*But I guess it's quiet at least,* she thought. *No annoying people. Just monsters to battle. For all of eternity. What a dream.*

There were however no cooks, no humans to talk to, no cities or architecture to admire. Even for Ilea it may be a little much. Perhaps as a spa it was acceptable.

She felt the temperatures drop even further as she flew up towards the distant peaks. Everything was frozen by now, even Ilea taking damage from the weather. She started using Heart of Cinder to counteract the cold.

Her wings could barely move anymore, despite her high second tier resistance. The crystal was thrumming now.

Ilea displaced herself a few times, appearing in a broad valley. A cave entrance showed on the side of a still distant mountain.

*What's that, a hundred meters high?* she thought, teleporting closer.

The storm cleared up more the closer she got. *Less snow too,* she thought, starting to see bones stick out of the icy wasteland.

Mountains towered to each side, untouched for thousands of years.

Ilea looked down, seeing something trapped inside the ice. A spirit. An astral one.

She tried to gauge if it was alive still but couldn't discern any information at all.

The closer she got to the cave, the more skeletons and frozen spirits were visible in the ice, entombed forever. There were hundreds of each kind, even the skeleton of one of the worms broke out of a frozen mountain side.

The snow had stopped, even the air itself entirely still.

Ilea looked at the cave entrance, the hair on her neck standing up as she took a deep breath. There wasn't much oxygen here.

*Might be rude to enter its home without permission*, she thought, looking at the crystal that now nearly hummed with power.

She played around with her ice manipulation, forming a snowman with the level ten skill that somehow worked instinctively as long as she held the crystal.

Her Monster Hunter charged and was infused with the intent of a greeting.

“Hello!” her shout echoed through the soundless valley, traveling through the terrain like waves in a pond.

A few kilometers behind her a crack formed near a peak. Massive chunks of ice broke off and quickly formed into an avalanche, crashing into the valley before it all froze again, long before it should've stopped moving naturally.

Ilea watched the cave, her arm outstretched and holding the crystal.

She felt as if the air stilled even more, her own heartbeat and breathing the only sounds perceptible to her.

Ilea saw the creature emerge, the pale light from the eclipse reflecting from the clear parts of its body. The being took the form of a wolf and reached a height of nearly sixty meters, its body entirely made of ice.

The shape of the creature didn't come from bones and muscles but from smooth geometrical shapes. Each shape connected to the next in an angle to form the massive being, almost like the wolf had been carved from a piece of crystal.

There were patches covered in white frost, others entirely clear, some a pale blue just like the tear Ilea held in her hand.

The creature moved with deliberate and slow steps, the ice on its body shifting, none of it making a sound. Antlers seamlessly grew out of its skull, up and right below the ceiling of the cave. The patterns didn't make any sense, forking out continuously.

Ilea noticed that the single forks of its antlers were moving, shaping themselves into new forms as the wolf like creature stepped out into the open.

When it reached the valley, its antlers grew upwards, as if the air itself was water that froze at the being's touch. Its gait wasn't interrupted by the weight or unwieldiness of its antlers, its crystal like eyes looking at her, frozen just like the rest of it.

“Hello, nice to meet you,” Ilea said.

***[Ice Elemental – lvl ?????]***

Her Veteran informed her that this creature was in the leagues of Meadow, unable to determine any specifics however.

*Peace*, she sent.

The creature didn't react.

Ilea tried something else. She held out her arm to her left and started forming ash.

The Elemental watched her but didn't interfere.

She formed Endless Meadow, both the grass, the tree, and the little creek that flowed through it.

The image was hazy, further distorted by the freezing temperatures.

Ilea flew up and joined her ashen creation, displacing the Elemental Tear towards the ashen Meadow before it floated back to her on a bed of ash, indicating that she was given the item.

She turned to the creature and watched in fascination as ice came into existence before her, forming yet another Meadow but this time an antlered wolf lay curled up near the creature.

It looked smaller than what she was seeing now or perhaps the Meadow had been larger at some point.

She made the ashen Meadow smaller, adding the temple on top and creating the gate. Ilea added herself appearing beyond it, before she formed an army of small astral spirits coming towards the temple.

Her arms moved slowly as an antlered wolf appeared on top of the building, fighting the spirits with massive claws.

She wasn't sure the creature understood when the ashen wolf amidst her creation froze, ice forming both amidst and around the ash before the wolf became a perfect miniature copy of the Elemental.

Ilea held up the Elemental Tear. They assumed the tear to mean a favor, repaid once the creature helped in their endeavors.

The Elemental moved closer to her now, crouching down to meet Ilea's small form.

She held out the crystal but nothing happened to it.

Its eyes were as large as her torso, the creature now resting a few meters in front of her.

A wisp of ice moved out and touched her.

Ilea didn't resist. Her chest tightened, her lungs nearly freezing before the feeling resided.

Her breathing accelerated slightly but she calmed down again once the being stood back up.

She watched it jump, its whole body fluidly running up the mountain side.

*Alright*, she thought and followed with a few uses of teleportation.

Ilea appeared beyond the peak, watching the creature literally run on freezing air.

*That's pretty cool*, she admitted to herself and followed with her wings. Beyond the valley, the temperatures weren't quite as insanely low, as long as she kept some distance to the Elemental.

It wasn't moving particularly fast, most of its speed coming from the ridiculous size alone.

Ilea still had the Tear, looking at it as she charged her wings.

The Elemental was moving in the right direction, already reaching the frozen desert beyond its mountain chain.

She held the pulsing item close to her chest and accelerated.

***'ding' 'You have met a mature Ice Elemental and didn't die – One Core skill point awarded'***

***'ding' 'Deviant of Humanity reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 2'***

***'ding' 'Veteran reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 10'***

*Even a Veteran level. Seems a little excessive. We didn't even fight, she thought, landing in the temple once more. The landmarks on the way had been few and far between, allowing for a somewhat quick journey back.*

*"You bring the Tear once more, were you not successful?" Meadow asked.*

*"Don't shit your pants. The Elemental is on its way. It didn't want the thing back," she said.*

*She blinked down and joined the Meadow, tossing the Primal item into the air where it vanished.*

*"That is good news. I was afraid it had forgotten. I'm glad you did not end up frozen for eternity," it said.*

*"Hey me too," Ilea said. "Judging by its speed, it'll need a day or so to arrive. Maybe longer if it has to fight spirits on the way."*

*"They will surely challenge it. I will have to shelter it in here... though the temperatures will not be suitable for humans anymore," it said.*

*"Just tell Michael he should move upstairs or farther out. Will the cold spread through the gate?" Ilea asked.*

*"I will try to prevent that... though the Elemental was young when I first met it. Many thousands of years have passed in the meantime and its strive must have been difficult during the last eclipse," Meadow said.*

*"It didn't wait out the eclipse here?" Ilea asked.*

*"No, the Ice Elemental merely stayed for a few decades," it said.*

*How fucking long is this eclipse? How does that even work?*

*"Hmm," she sent.*

*The space around her distorted, earth and wood forming in the very air around her as everything started moving around.*

*Meadow was getting more familiar with her Sentinel Huntress spell, adding the slightest magical and odor cues. It was both a puzzle for her Space Awareness and her Huntress skill, both of them pushed to the limit as she tried to figure out which blade of grass or piece of rock the Meadow had chosen for today's solution.*

*A fist sized rock rushed past her head, dodged in the last moment.*

*Ilea formed a wall of ash to slow down the roots about to skewer her. Phaseshift activated as her armor tried to stop the powerful magic. The wood moved through her without issue as soon as Phaseshift took effect, Ilea deactivating the spell immediately after.*

*Meadow had already formed a wooden prison for her manifesting form, preventing her from using her teleportation.*

*"This is bullshit and you know it," Ilea said.*

*The wood pressed into her from all sides, the spiky ends cutting through her armor and flesh.*

Ilea ripped through the wood digging into her skull with ash before she cut off her head, her regenerating form displaced away from the death prison with the rest of her body as she continued her analysis of the surrounding space.

*“You shouldn’t use that skill against a sapient being, lest it catch you. Or only use it while you have momentum... it’s far too easy to catch you otherwise,”* Meadow said.

*“Most creatures I fight aren’t four mark wood creators able to instantly create a prison, let alone one that can withstand most of my offensive skills,”* she retorted.

*“You should always assume such however. If a skill opens up such a weakness, it shouldn’t be used in the first place,”* Meadow said.

*“I know,”* she said. *“Which is why I haven’t leveled it yet.”*

*“One Core skill point is hardly that valuable. Perhaps the third tier would remedy its weakness,”* Meadow said.

*“It is to me. I won’t level it as it is,”* Ilea said.

*“Are you hoping for new skills? Or perhaps an evolution? Both will likely require three fifty or even higher,”* Meadow said.

*“Enough time to switch again,”* Ilea said with a smirk, dodging a few attacks. *“Against the spirits it’s the best one I have though, so I’ll keep it for now.”*

*“Your mana becomes near invisible. I agree with your assessment,”* Meadow said.

Ilea felt the tiniest flicker in space and turned to her right.

*“Foound it,”* she exclaimed and grabbed the tiny piece of wood.

*“Congratulations. You’re getting better,”* Meadow said.

*“Not good enough. Make the space aspect harder again and the magic aspect a little easier. I hardly noticed anything with my Huntress skill,”* she said.

*“As you wish,”* Meadow said and once again distorted the entire hall.