

## Chapter 565 Perseverance

Ilea had stopped checking the Queen's status, confident in her own growth and entirely within a trance. Every dodge and strike flowed into each other, each spell now familiar, every movement of her enemy's body telling her more than her precognition ever could.

By now she reacted on instinct, the spells dodged or taken with a calculated risk. Most of the magic flying around served no other purpose but to fuel Ilea in her continued pursuit of whittling down the Queen's health.

She had expected a change at some point, another burst of power when the enemy had reached a critical state or perhaps entirely new spells she could use when a dire situation demanded it.

Her expectations weren't met however. The Queen didn't majorly change her approach and neither tried to flee or focus more on defense. Perhaps whatever was left of her mind couldn't understand how a low level human like Ilea could even still be alive. Or she simply wasn't capable of more advanced tactics.

With each passing minute, Ilea continuously worked against the Queen's resources and recovery, her own body fully enhanced by her own powerful skills.

The queen's armor was stripped away by a charged blast of cinders, her skeleton clad in white flame a moment later. Visible damage now showed on her form, the dark material scorched and brittle. Any attempts at reforming her armor of flesh was interrupted by ashen tendrils, the healer only pushed back for a split second by the concentrated blood and rot.

Ilea slammed her fist into the Queen's skull with a last use of Absolute Destruction, her fire clad body ready to dodge the response. The powerful mana flowed into the creature, forming lines of fire and energy visible through the cracks in her bones.

The Queen didn't retaliate.

Ilea floated backwards, her fists ready as she felt for magic around her. She'd rather repeat the whole fight than die to a spell that activated on death much like that of the Praetorians.

A ding resounded in her mind, followed by a dozen more. Her muscles remained tense and ready to react as she watched the skeletal form slump to the ground, a pile of bones glowing with the light of cinders, pale white flames flickering on their form.

She didn't dare check the messages, instead charging Heart of Cinder, more heat and power forming in her core with each passing second. The courtyard had calmed, the permeating presence of rot gone with the Queen's death.

It was quiet. Entirely so. "Anticlimactic," Ilea murmured, her eyes focused on the pile of bones that previously held the most powerful entity she had faced without allies.

There were no cheering warriors next to her, no slaves waiting to be freed, or Meadows waiting to be rescued. It was only her. And a faint feeling of disappointment that the fight was over. Ilea couldn't help but wish the Queen had been sapient. *To fight someone that powerful, with the full capacity of their mind.*

*Would've been more of a challenge, that's for sure,* she thought with a wide grin. Ilea displaced the small crown that had appeared next to the corpse into her hand.

Heart of Cinder released, burning away the bones that now lacked any enhancements the Queen had previously supplied them with.

***[Crown of Lumian – Ancient Quality] – [Reduces corrupting effects to the mind]***

*Finally, I can get my berserker Classes. Just have to wear this bloody thing all the time.*

The crown was simple in design, modest if anything. The material was either iron or a metal that had lost its shine long ago, perhaps influenced by the rot it may have been exposed to.

The Queen hadn't worn it during their battle but neither did it look pristine or unused.

*Not exactly my style. Maybe Maro would like it,* she thought with a smirk.

Wasn't quite enough for you Lumian? How long were you down here? Ilea wondered as she glanced at the palace.

*Alright, first to safety,* she thought and teleported upwards until she reached the cavern ahead of the settlement.

*No rot here either. I wonder if killing her had any effect on the Abominations that roam the caverns. Or were they entirely separate?*

***'ding' 'You have defeated [Howling Queen of Rot – lvl 1062]'***

***'ding' 'The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 448 – Five stat points awarded'***

...

***'ding' 'The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 461 – Five stat points awarded'***

***'ding' 'Kin of Ash has reached lvl 444 – Five stat points awarded'***

...

***'ding' 'Kin of Ash has reached lvl 456 – Five stat points awarded'***

***'ding' 'The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 383 – One stat point awarded'***

...

***'ding' 'The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 405 – One stat point awarded'***

***'ding' 'New skills available for [The Faen Valkyrie]'***

*New skills? I already have too many to choose from,* Ilea thought with a sigh. *No evolution either, despite my achievements.*

She didn't really mind, proud she had bested the creature now that the adrenaline and trance of their long battle wore off. *Gotta find another one of those.*

***'ding' 'Sentinel Huntress reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 19'***

*'ding' 'Azarinth Reversal reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 30'*

*'ding' 'Storm of Cinders reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 30'*

*'ding' 'Eyes of Ash reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 30'*

*'ding' 'Phaseshift reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 11'*

*'ding' 'Phaseshift reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 12'*

*'ding' 'Phaseshift reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 13'*

*'ding' 'Phaseshift reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 14'*

*'ding' 'Flare of Creation reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 17'*

*'ding' 'Flare of Creation reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 18'*

*'ding' 'Flare of Creation reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 19'*

*'ding' 'Displacement reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 13'*

*'ding' 'Displacement reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 14'*

*'ding' 'Space Shift reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 9'*

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

*'ding' 'Body of the Valkyrie reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 14'*

*'ding' 'Body of the Valkyrie reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 15'*

*'ding' 'Body of the Valkyrie reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 16'*

*'ding' 'Deviant of Humanity reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 13'*

...

*'ding' 'Deviant of Humanity reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 16'*

*'ding' 'Meditation reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 12'*

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

*'ding' 'Monster Hunter reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 11'*

*'ding' 'Veteran reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 15'*

*'ding' 'Blood Magic Resistance reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 15'*

...

*'ding' 'Blood Magic Resistance reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 18'*

*'ding' 'Bone Magic Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 11'*

...

*'ding' 'Bone Magic Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 16'*

*'ding' 'Rot Resistance reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 2'*

*'ding' 'Rot Resistance reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 3'*

*'ding' 'Rot Resistance reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 4'*

*'ding' 'You have laid to rest the lost spirit of Lumian, freeing both her and the people she had sworn to protect – One Core skill point awarded'*

**'ding' 'You have defeated a four mark creature while alone before reaching level 500 – One Core skill point awarded'**

*Nearly got the investment back, she thought. And another slew of stat points to spend.*

She checked her new skills for The Faen Valkyrie, despite having no intention of switching any of them out at the moment.

**Skills available for The Faen Valkyrie:**

**Active – Ward of Creation**

**Summon a shield of flame that floats around you. The Ward blocks and absorbs spells, growing in power. When the Ward has reached maximum capacity, you may unleash the stored up energy in a blast of fire.**

**Category – Fire Magic - Space Magic**

**Active – Force Projectile**

**Unleash an invisible blast of concentrated space magic.**

**Category – Space Magic**

**Active – Force Tear**

**Use space magic to tear out or damage a part of your enemy.**

**Category – Space Magic**

**Passive – Space Drift**

**Move your body with space magic. Increased mana expenditure enhances the speed of flight.**

**Category: Body Enhancement – Space Magic**

**Passive – Space Telepathy**

**Learn to communicate through space itself, forming thoughts into perceivable concepts for space aware sapient beings.**

**Category: Body Enhancement – Space Magic**

She ignored the ones she already knew.

*Bunch of offensive stuff for the active slots. Ward is interesting, I suppose. But not worth trading with anything I currently use.*

*Space drift is just a flying skill? Based on space magic. And Telepathy is kind of unnecessary with my Mental res and Monster Hunter.*

Ilea wondered if the numerous new skills meant that there would be more slots at some point or if her Class didn't consider her current abilities quite as set as those in her main Classes.

*Not that I'd change anything now. But I guess it wouldn't be too surprising if more slots became available. Then I can try stuff again.*

Ilea put a hundred stat points into Wisdom and fifty into Vitality.

She twirled the crown in her hand and jumped back down into the tunnel settlement. The lowest layer had to be explored after all.

Ilea found everything the way she had left it. Deep furrows told of the long battle she had fought against the four mark being, large parts of the houses and palace destroyed and reduced to rubble.

*I need a treasure sense skill, she thought with a frown.*

The various houses held simple stone furniture and various runes that would make life down here somewhat easier. Even here, the interior didn't exactly look comfortable. Whatever had driven these people down into the mountain, it must've pushed them to urgency if nothing else.

*Not even enough time to line up the hallways.*

*Or am I not giving them enough credit? I've got no clue how hard it is to dig tunnels like these. And maybe they simply didn't have the magical knowledge we have in Ravenhall at this point.*

Ilea scanned through the eight houses, finding nothing valuable. There were a few items that might've once held emotional value but nothing that hasn't been tarnished by age and rot.

The palace itself was the same. She floated over rubble and blinked through walls, trying to find a hidden treasury or other rooms she had missed. The only thing she found was a small room with various overgrown dresses and the only wooden furniture she had found, entirely decrepit.

She was about to leave when her sphere picked up the etched letters within a small stone statue sitting below a turbid mirror. The statue itself looked simple, a woman with two wings and outstretched arms. It reminded her of an angel.

She didn't need to touch it to read the inscription going around the round base.

*'For I shall find no rest, until my people are freed from this prison. Even in death, I shall protect them'*

"Worked out fantastically. Why not just be motivated without cursing yourself?" Ilea asked, shaking her head. *At least it's an noble notion. I just fucking hope you weren't really there anymore in the end.*

She checked once more if she could detect any hidden areas before she left.

*I need a bath after that, she thought and blinked up to the actual Caverns of Rot. Now perhaps just the Caverns.*

Ilea exited the dungeon, a nearby guard scrunching his nose as he turned towards her.

"By the gods... woman... what did you do?" he spoke.

"Killed the Rot," Ilea said with a smile, giving him a thumbs up.

She strolled past as he glanced at her with confusion and disgust.

Ash along wouldn't help here.

*I could just rip off my head, reform my body and then quickly burn away most of what's on my skull before healing. Hmm... maybe a little much. Wouldn't want to traumatize the locals.*

*Plus, a bath sounds nice.*

Ilea entered the tavern with a normal set of leather armor on, quickly making her way to the counter. Only a few groups had started murmuring about her.

She heard a muffled curse before Sophia sneaked away from her table, going towards the exit.

Ilea smiled to herself but didn't interact with her this time. "I need a bath."

A flash of recognition lit up in the innkeep's eyes. "Yeah, you do. Rooms are full though."

"I can pay premium," Ilea said.

The man looked at her for a moment. "Five silvers."

She summoned the coins and placed them on the counter.

He shouted to someone in the back, nodding towards the stairs as he looked at Ilea. "Second floor, last room to the right."

Ilea nodded and vanished.

*More luxurious than the Queen's bloody room*, she thought, looking at the spacious area.

She crossed her arms and summoned her fire sphere, displacing a few pieces of firewood into the hearth before she set them alight.

*Poor girl.*

Ilea saw the young woman carry a large tub upstairs, touching her back when she had to pause. She lent her a hand, displacing both the tub and the woman herself up into the room.

"Wha...", the girl exclaimed, her eyes opening wide.

"Please don't scream, I've had enough howling for a day," Ilea said.

To her surprise, the girl nodded quickly.

"Yes... of course. That's a rare spell miss," she said, glancing at her a few times as she set up the tub, connecting a pipe from a nearby wall.

**[Mage – lvl 21]**

"What kind of magic can you do?" Ilea asked.

The young woman shook her head. "Nothing much, miss. Water and heat mostly, was the only way my father would agree to let me learn. It's useful in the inn."

"Makes sense," Ilea said and stored her clothes, walking past the woman before she stepped into the seething water.

The girl flinched back. "It's ho...",

"It's perfect, don't worry," Ilea said and closed her eyes. "Thanks for the bath."

She could tell the girl wanted to ask something but right now she wouldn't push her to do it.

It was interesting to see the expression on her face change from scared and hesitant to brave and courageous, only to falter back to the former.

The girl slapped her cheeks and spoke. "Are you the one they call Lilith? The Ashen Healer?"

Ilea opened one eye and glanced at her. The woman looked to be in her late teens, wearing a modest outfit of brown pants, red and white shirt, and an apron. She had long black hair, a little curly. Freckles and black eyes adorned her round face.

“And what would you want from the ashen healer?” Ilea asked.

She clasped her apron and looked down onto the tub. “I... I would ask her to train me!”

Ilea couldn't help but smile. “And why would Lilith want you as her apprentice?”

The girl looked up now, locking eyes with her. “Because I want to become a healer like you. Because I want to get out of this shithole and I want to become powerful. I want to fight monsters like you did, want to defy assholes like the ones lounging around downstairs, doing nothing but getting drunk and fighting each other.”

“What are you willing to do for that? It would mean a lot of pain, a lot of horrifying experiences, it would mean facing monsters that could rip you to shreds in seconds,” Ilea said.

“I'll do it,” the girl said without hesitation. “Better than growing old in this place.”

“I see. And what do your parents think about that?” she asked.

“My mother supports me. When I talked to my father, he simply laughed, telling me to bring Lilith to him when I find her. Miss... I heard the rumors. You were here before. I knew it was true. Sophia thinks she can lie easily but she nearly spit out her drink when I asked her,” she said.

“What's your name?” Ilea asked.

“I'm Willa, ma'am,” she said and bowed.

“Don't bow to me,” Ilea said.

“As you wish,” Willa said and looked at her.

“I'm taking my bath in peace. We can visit your parents as soon as I'm done,” Ilea said.

The girl damn near lit up, her mouth quivering slightly as she grinned, tears forming in her eyes. “I... I... the songs say you love food... I shall help prepare dinner. If you wish to stay?”

“At your parents' place?” Ilea asked.

“Yes, ma'am,” Willa said.

“Sure. Haven't eaten anything in a while,” Ilea said and closed her eyes again, sliding a little more into the tub.

“Lilith?” Willa asked shyly.

“Hmm?” Ilea said.

“Can you use that spell again?” she asked with a grin.

Ilea didn't say anything, displacing the girl down into the common room where a large man spilled his drink from surprise.

His friends laughed at him as Willa seemed to squeal with joy, running out as she shouted something to the innkeeper.

*We'll see how you do, Sentinel,* Ilea thought and calmed herself, going under in the hot water to get rid of the smell.

*May you rest in peace, Lumian.*

Ilea stretched her arms about an hour later, the water still hot thanks to Heart of Cinder. She blinked out of the bath and summoned fresh clothes onto her body, absorbing the heat with her Lava Magic Resistance.

She cracked her neck and back, teleporting out of the inn and landing in the mud with her bone armor boots.

Sentinel Huntress led her towards the woman, her scent easily picked up by the skill.

Ilea strolled through the small dungeon town, finding the tiny apartment where the woman lived with her parents.

*A little scary how easy it is for me to find her.*

She discarded the thought and knocked on the door.

A muffled voice could be heard from the other side. "Baseless dreams, delusions, and lies... Willa I told you not to believe these stories. Adventurers have nothing good to share with you, all they want is your coin or worse. Someone like Lilith either doesn't exist or the songs are lies anyway, nor would she visit a backwater dungeon town like this one."

"You're being too harsh," a woman said, her hand on Willa's back as she shook her head lightly.

"Let me tell this thief off and you can go back to the inn. I won't have another discussion with Hudson about your work ethic," the man said before he opened the door.

What he found was a winged being clad entirely in ash, wisps of white flame lazily moving on her horned helmet.

"Good evening. I was promised dinner."