

## Chapter 542 Docking

Nearly forty seconds passed until the first Astral Spirit showed up. Its body looked smooth, without any blemishes. For all she knew, it could've been born two seconds ago.

If that had been the case, her plan wouldn't work.

She had charged Heart of Cinder for long enough, activating Phaseshift as the creature finally took note of her.

In the next few seconds of her approach, she sacrificed tens of thousands of health into her Flare and Awakening. The Astral magic she dodged with displacement.

The spirit didn't take her as a large threat, instead using its manifested astral power to disintegrate the hordes of monsters below, their initial target completely forgotten.

Ilea let the creature work, revealing herself only when the next Astral Spirit showed. Her magic flared up with a bright explosion of flame and light, her fist lashing out to strike the being's back.

Sentinel Huntress manifested in a forced mark, the rest of her spells burning into the creature with devastating results. Her mana made bits of the creature burst, the thick blood splattering down onto the icy desert.

Wounds opened and closed as her assault continued, its focus now entirely on her as both its area attack and concentrated beams burned away at her ash.

It didn't relent.

Ilea renewed the mark when the hordes below started to die down, more Astral variants appearing in the area, adding to her falling health.

Every point of mana stolen would further inconvenience the creature but the burst of power she received from her new phased state still wasn't enough to overwhelm the monster in time.

By now it was regenerating quickly, the blemishes remaining returning to pristine skin as it drained not only from her but its brethren alike.

Those in turn would drain from the others and Ilea, creating an increasing mesh of mana draining entities.

The Astral spirits effectively forced an attacker to overwhelm every Astral Spirit present if a single one was the target. The same was true for their offensive arsenal, quickly getting through even Ilea's defenses as they grew in numbers.

She displaced herself a few times, adding blink into the mix as she created distance between herself and the spirits. *Their spells at least don't multiply each other*, she thought. *Would be quite interesting if they could combine attacks like humans with artillery spells.*

Ilea smiled to herself as she lazily flew over the desert of Erendar. The lost mana returned to her bit by bit, her gaze focused on the single Astral Spirit she had chosen to mark.

She could feel it. Sense it.

The remaining Spirits of Death were destroyed, until they would rise again. Ilea didn't need an additional sense to tell that the Astral Spirit had healed back to full again.

It was unclear to her how much mana the creatures possessed, let alone how quickly they regenerated but perhaps facing them like this wasn't beneficial in any way.

Only about ten seconds passed as the ground froze again, streaks of burnt sand reclaimed by the unforgiving cold.

When the spirits started to leave, nothing but scattered bones remained from the large scale battle.

*It's just an exchange of mana, isn't it?* Ilea thought to herself. *A natural phenomenon given form.*

Humans had the capacity of harvesting energy from such phenomena, Ilea just had to figure out when, how, and where to strike.

She could gain experience from killing the death spirits, could gain resistances and skill levels from battling the entire group but the most beneficial enemy to fell would be the Astrals themselves.

The spirits didn't leave as one, not in the sense of timing or destination.

All were gone in the span of a few moments, flying away at incredible speeds, ready to find the next encounter.

*What do they even get out of it? Can they not regenerate mana themselves? Or is it just an instinctual need? To consume and destroy?*

Ilea knew they didn't drain mana when they weren't injured so that shouldn't have been their main goal.

*Maybe they just like it? Like moths attracted to light, Astrals are attracted to mana. And the death variants in turn seek life.*

Survival and procreation were the main goals of most creatures Ilea was familiar with but by now she had been confronted with enough examples that suggested a different approach to life was certainly possible.

The Fae didn't exactly strive for survival when splitting up to travel the world at much lower individual power. Nor did the Meadow procreate in the same sense as humans did.

She did wonder if it was a change that happened after centuries of introspection or if it was something more instinctual, a difference within the species themselves.

*Gonna miss this one if I continue with that train of thought,* Ilea mused and focused on the quickly moving mark.

Her wings charged and she followed.

*Just don't fly back to Sephilon.*

Sentinel Huntress lead her through the wasteland, most of it comprising of desert. The occasional mountain broke the monotonous terrain.

Clouds of frozen ice hung low at the side of the nearby mountain chain.

Ilea felt the chill even from a few kilometers away, the slowly moving giant traveling over the landscape in a steady crawl.

*Another Ice Elemental? Or just a natural occurrence?*

The temperatures would challenge even a high level Shadow with an Ice Resistance, or so she assumed. Her own body had grown so used to the surroundings, if anything welcoming extremes.

*Feels good to put that natural regeneration to use.*

The giant light blue ice cloud moved past, replaced by yet more desert. *And Meadow managed to build a working civilization here.*

Ilea thought back to the shared memory. Erendar didn't look much different without an eclipse underway. It just looked boiling hot instead.

*No wonder everything dies out with a sudden decade long winter after centuries of summer.*

*The mark is getting closer.*

She slowed down, looking up into the dim blue sky.

"Astral. Right," she murmured and shot up.

The air thinned quickly at her speed of flight, the high level of Oxygen Repository coming in handy. However long a battle with the spirit would last, her oxygen wouldn't be the deciding factor.

Ilea stopped her charged flight, continuing on with her normal speed as the ground grew ever more distant. She could see the curve of the moon much clearer now, the air cooling more with each passing second.

*Is this the highest I've been?*

Ilea wondered if her wings worked in zero gravity but decided that at the very least displacement and blink wouldn't be affected. If the Meadow couldn't disable the skills without using complex runic creations, a lack of gravity wouldn't affect them either.

The air had thinned enough to let her fly faster, any resistance it had provided gone near entirely.

All she heard now was her beating heart, her lungs useless at this altitude. Ilea just held her breath and zeroed in on the mark that grew closer evermore.

Eyes of Ash spotted the single spirit hanging in the distant space, its humanoid shape looking up at the dark planet of Sephilon.

*All alone.*

Ilea used phaseshift, stacking her health sacrifices for a few seconds before she displaced herself closer.

The spell deactivated and she grappled onto the being, a soundless beam of astral energy shooting past into the void of space.

Ash formed around her, spreading onto her adversary and igniting with a brilliant white hue.

The spirit lashed out, powerful spheres of astral energy burning away layers of ashen armor, its arms slashing at her with condensed power. Each strike that stripped away her ash revealed the bright blue Azarinth runes before the dark material covered them once more.

Blood both red and blue floated away from the spiraling forms of the two entangled enemies, both slowly moving down as the now weak gravity of Erendar pulled on their mass.

Ashen limbs slashed into the smooth skin, Destruction and Storm of Cinders dispersing their powerful destructive mana into the creature with every punch.

A bright sphere of fire and energy joined the spheres of astral magic, lighting up like a bright beacon in the eternal darkness of space.

The creature was hurt, more of its blood and mass floating down towards the frozen moon, entangling with Ilea's ash, skin, and blood.

Its wounds healed only slowly, five more cuts opening in the time one healed.

The powerful astral magic cast near instantly burned away the human's ashen armor. The beams moved past, fighting the tough dark material. It seemed fruitless, the magic gone as the human's armor remained, gray moving towards an obsidian black as its density increased, all covered by a bright white flame.

Ilea didn't let up, her offensive spells lashing out with all the frequency and mana she could muster, the mana drain and astral spells more nuisance than anything else. Flare of Creation burned away both her mana and the enemy, the effects stacked from Phaseshift still remaining.

***[Astral Spirit – lvl ???]***

Her Veteran suggested a little over eight hundred.

She knew she would win. The spells were meaningless against her defense, resistances, and regeneration. Time was on her side, each minute adding to her defenses and output of power.

Even if she couldn't keep up the offensive onslaught for very long, she wouldn't retreat. The mana it stole from her would only damage it further.

It just had to remain here, alone, facing her without other sources of mana.

The bonuses stacked during Phaseshift receded, returning her to a weaker state. Much of her mana was already gone after her excessive spending.

The spirit had been reduced to two thirds of its mass, blood floating away from it as the two continued to spiral downwards.

Storm of Cinders had stripped away its mana intrusion defenses, the Flame of Creation was slowing its regeneration, and her mana continuously poisoned the creature from within.

The many open wounds allowed her to use her ash freely, creating dense combined limbs and shredder imitations to rip through the tough material of the spirit, each touch and attack adding more white fire to her now blazing enemy.

Their speed picked up as they moved closer to Erendar, wisps of fire flaring up as they entered the lower atmosphere and sound returned to their surroundings.

Ilea prepared to use another set of skills when what remained of the spirit went limp. A few dings resounded in her mind.

She stored the corpse and slowed down, blinking a few times before she stopped in the sky above the frozen desert.

*Alright, that was pretty cool*, she thought and checked the messages with a bright smile on her face.

***'ding' 'You have defeated [Astral Spirit – lvl 821]***

***'ding' 'The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 397 – Five stat points awarded'***

***'ding' 'Kin of Ash has reached lvl 396 – Five stat points awarded'***

***'ding' 'The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 245 – One stat point awarded'***

***'ding' 'The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 246 – One stat point awarded'***

***'ding' 'The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 247 – One stat point awarded'***

***'ding' 'The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 248 – One stat point awarded'***

“That’s what I call pod racing. Or something,” she said to herself, floating slowly through the sky.

Ilea twirled and checked herself for injuries, her mana slowly recovering as she flew. *Just takes too much out of me to kill a creature of that level.*

The rewards easily justified the high spending, Sentinel Core once more providing a massive boost to her offensive capabilities. *The stronger they are, the longer I can beat the shit out of them.*

***'ding' 'Sentinel Huntress reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 16'***

***'ding' 'Body of the Valkyrie reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 5'***

*Not a long fight. Not a lot of danger.*

She was surprised the two skills had even leveled, assuming each was close to the next level anyway.

*Oxygen Repository is at twenty... could go up there and... no. Meadow is safer.*

It crept her out a little to fly up towards space. With a clear goal and a physical enemy in mind, her fear was subdued but to go there alone, just to choke on a lack of air? A small vacuum created by her tree friend seemed more welcoming.

No other skill leveled but she had reached her goal.

*Turned out easier than expected. Alone they're manageable but I guess the levels aren't that good. And it won't get better for the next one I kill.*

She didn't overthink it, flying back the way she came. Ilea had managed to convince Meadow of a huntress mark, the spell now providing a direction she would've had to find through landmarks.

*"I'm so close. Do you really not think it'd be worth it to max out my skills?"* she asked.

*"As I have said before. It is unlikely that you'll evolve at four hundred. Even your third Class is shaping up to be incredibly powerful for a Class beyond your species' limitations,"* Meadow said.

Ilea bit her lip. She didn't have much time left here. Maxing out her Azarinth skills was impossible in that time, due to Sentinel Huntress. With her ash she only needed a few more levels but considering the last weeks, it may as well take all her remaining time to get them to thirty.

*"Continue by the way,"* Ilea said, her training with the creature resuming.

Meadow formed a platform below her, the runes appearing near instantly.

Several hundred wooden spikes appeared all around her, cutting into her as she tried to dodge and move around them.

Roots filled the whole arena, quickly growing in all directions as pale white flames and ash tried to fight back against the powerful creation.

The growth didn't stop, overwhelming her offensive power with sheer density and resilience.

Ilea soon found herself unable to teleport not just due to the platform but mostly because she simply couldn't get past the sheer mass of wood.

Phaseshift activated, the wood quickly filling in the space where she would have been. The runes below were now the only thing preventing her teleportation but it proved to be enough.

*"It's just getting worse,"* she sighed.

Meadow laughed. *"You are trapped in my forest."*

*"What happens if I appear now?"* she asked.

*"Either your body will prevail, or the wood will,"* Meadow said.

*"Very funny,"* Ilea sent.

*"Maybe I could give you a helping branch,"* Meadow suggested.

*"I'm all ears. My mana is running out,"* Ilea said and smiled.

*"The runes carved into the platform below, the field it creates, the very mana that flows from my form into each,"* Meadow said.

*"What about them?"* Ilea asked.

Meadow remained silent.

The seconds ticked past.

Ilea strained her senses, focusing fully onto the platform of stone now hidden below her phased form and the sea of roots.

*What about the runes?*

She saw the stone in her sphere, saw the runes, saw the magic within them and she saw the way it all warped the space and mana within its area of influence.

And she had no idea what it meant.

The cost of Phaseshift maxed out, her mana now consumed in chunks of several thousand per second. Far too much for her regeneration to sustain.

*Mana flows from its body into the platform, the runes use that to create-*

Phaseshift deactivated, her body appearing within the roots as her spell tried to move her aside. She flickered a few times before her armor exploded, roots splintering, and bones groaning.

Her flesh ripped, penetrated by wood, both sides pushing on each other for the ownership of each cubic millimeter. Her ash and flesh lost as much as it won, her skeleton at least surviving the sudden appearance without major injuries.

Ilea still found herself severely mangled and stuck within the forest of roots.

Her health was down a third but recovered quickly, much of the damage however difficult to heal with the roots occupying everything around her.

Ilea didn't feel the pain nor did she care overly much about her circumstances. It was obvious by now that Meadow could crush her with whatever spell or magic it wanted to use.

Instead she continued to study the platform.

*Perceive and differentiate magical frameworks.*

The roots around her dug into her ash with every passing moment.

*Could I see the runes themselves? The magic that flows in?*

*Or the field it generates?*

"I give up," she said as the wood bored into her skin.

"Disappointing. My vague comment didn't lead to a revelation?" Meadow asked as the whole dense system of roots dissipated into mana.

"Not exactly... but you were talking about the frameworks, right?" Ilea asked.

A windless gust of pure mana moved through the hall. "Or perhaps it did," Meadow mused.

The platform remained and Ilea kept her focus on it.

"Perhaps we should start with something a little less challenging," the creature said as ninety percent of the runes changed into solid stone, the remaining ones changing shapes before a new effect manifested.

"Teleportation... without prevention of space magic," Ilea said, the wisps and mana around her enough to supply the information.

"Yes. Well done. Your experience once again prevails over your primitive knowledge," Meadow said.

"Yes yes. You could've shared this earlier too. Might've saved my life," she said.

"Where's the fun in that?" Meadow asked. "The chance of me physically moving Sephilon out of the sun's gravity is higher than a Spirit forming an anti space magic field. Their primitive brains work much like yours."

Ilea crossed her arms and sighed.

"Scared I'd advance too fast?" she asked.

"You show promise. Your arcane healing and resilience allow for strength far beyond your level. Adding space magic into the mix is almost ridiculous. Whoever that Fae was, you were lucky to meet them.

"I simply thought a humbling experience may be in order. Oh and don't think this will be easy. At best it will allow you to escape my grasp. At worst you'll just continue to struggle like one of those fish creatures you described, when they're out of water," Meadow explained.

Ilea just nodded along, staring at the runes with an intense glare.