

Chapter 558 Normal Exams

Milena felt her heartbeat increasing. The tension in the hall was nearly palpable, her eyes glancing at the massive man sitting a few tables ahead.

The nearby students had all quieted down, trying to listen in on the conversation of the powerful Sentinels.

Milena watched Gael eat, both his looks and the way he ate downright vulgar. *Can't he take care of his hair and clothes at least*, she thought, seeing his eyes snap up to meet her own.

Oh no. She felt the terror deep within her as she looked down, staring at her own nearly empty plate. One little piece of potato was left and a slice of meat she didn't particularly like, mostly fat.

Please don't come here. I'm sorry.

"You're way too scared of him," Seth whispered. "A man like him, you look into his eyes and don't relent. If he wants you dead, you're done for anyway. But he's going to think less of you if you're a little wuss."

"You know the rumors Seth... how can you say that, not even at level fifty yourself," she said.

Milena had reached level fifty five in her Medic Sentinel Class on their last assisted dungeon trip. Just reaching that much had cost her a ridiculous amount of pain and tears.

Her parents had gotten her into this school. The classes were interesting and everyone was very motivated but by now she didn't know if it was all worth it. Her new Class was good and worked well together with her ice magic but there was so much to learn, so much pain, and so much training. Out of the ten that had joined on the same day, only her and Seth remained.

By now she could heal her own injuries and had a rather high tolerance to pain but the faculty just made her training harder in turn.

Did they do the same thing until they reached level one hundred... two hundred?

"Elias is sitting next to him. You know that guy helped me out when I was living in the streets. If he isn't scared of Gael, neither am I," Seth said with a grin.

But you wouldn't say that to his face, would you?

Milena didn't comment on it, still keeping her focus on her plate, playing with the food.

"They're supposed to be taking their Hunter exam," Seth said. "That means they're already level two hundred."

Milena nodded.

"Can you believe that? They're barely any older than we are. How long could they have been here? A year? Two?" he asked.

"With how difficult it is, I don't see how you wouldn't reach a high level here," Milena said. "Even I am already over level fifty."

"You just have to kill enough monsters. The healing makes it easy. As long as you don't die, you can fight on," Seth said. "Just wish they weren't so self righteous."

“What do you mean?” Milena asked.

He looked at her, leaning a little closer. “All that talk of healing people, helping them. We didn’t get strong here because others healed us. We worked hard to get this far. What help is it if you just fight for others?”

“What? But isn’t that how this all started... when Lilith took the first students in and showed them her power?” she asked.

Seth grinned. “You believe those fairy tails? If you ask me, the faculty did something to their minds. Why would somebody just offer all this for nothing? Trust me, I’ve heard of enough healing orders. They sucker you in with promises and then do something to make you stay.”

Milena shook her head. “But you were healed too? I don’t think Elias had any reason to help you.”

He shrugged. “He might’ve seen the strength and potential in me. Or he was tasked to find more people. Bunch of sad refugees looking for charity.”

“Why are you still here then? If this is all charity? I worked hard to stay, did all the assignments and trained every day. I won’t let you just dismiss all that,” Milena said.

“I take what I can get. There’s food here, and shelter. A powerful Class. And... you,” Seth said with a smile.

“Me?” Milena asked. She was confused. He was her only friend here. The two others in their team looked at her like she was some kind of noble.

“Yeah. We have to stick together, don’t we?” Seth said.

She nodded. “I suppose.”

He leaned in even closer and whispered. “But once we’re strong enough, we get out and go to another city.”

“I can’t do that... my parents live in Ravenhall now,” Milena said.

“You’re old enough. How long are you going to be a burden to them? I’m sure this place costs enough gold to buy a whole set of armor,” Seth said.

They said it was free.

What if they lied?

Milena wasn’t sure. She liked it here but the stress and difficult training was getting to her. Maybe becoming an adventurer like her parents was the way to go.

Is he right?

Vienna checked her bracers, her chest plate, and finally her boots. The rest was already in order.

Her ashen armor spread over her light gear, wisps of dark gray moving slightly as her defenses expanded.

Most Sentinels had a form of ash armor, the differences however were quite staggering. At least now that the levels had spread out as far as twenty to two hundred.

Her own would probably be classified as a light version, providing protection but not impeding her with additional weight or a bulky design. Her Ashen Ranger Class had changed the armor into something a little more lithe at two hundred but so far she had a hard time gauging the differences, even with all her perception abilities.

Chana on the other hand had evolved her Classes into something more attuned to earth and stone. The girl certainly was stalwart, but not quite as attuned to the fine line of risk and death so many others veered towards.

Bulwark of the Sentinels, she repeated the name of the Class in her mind. It was certainly a mighty declaration. One a few others had challenged because of a lack of ash. They didn't complain anymore.

The girl sat, finishing her armor check, a much bulkier plate version of the stonehammer and bone armor Lilith had provided them. The helmet looked fierce on her, deadlier than many of the monsters they had faced in the past weeks.

She took a deep breath and formed her spear of stone, thin lines appearing on the growing material before the runes flickered once.

Chana grabbed the weapon and checked the enchantments she had placed on them before she glanced at Vienna.

"Oh... did I do something weird?" she asked while giggling, scratching the back of her helmet.

"No, not at all," Vienna said and stood up. "Are you ready?"

Elias opened his eyes, floating up with a gust of wind that formed below him. He remained cross legged for a moment before he cracked his neck and limbs.

He landed and went through a few combat forms in fluid motions, his Sentinel armor even thinner than Vienna's. The man was by no means without defenses however, his ash armor not only highly versatile but helped by additional air defenses.

Not that he needs it in the first place, Vienna thought, allowing herself a slight smile.

They were as prepared as they would get.

Whatever the faculty threw at them, they would tackle it to the best of their abilities.

A knock on the door resounded.

"Ready," Vienna said.

Orthan stepped inside, handing her a map. "You have six hours. Good luck."

Vienna took the map and turned to the others.

Neither of them complained or commented, instead looking at the clue together.

"Mountain ranges," Elias said.

“Ravenhall is here,” Vienna said and pointed at a specific spot. It wasn’t marked but she had made sure to familiarize herself with the terrain surrounding this city. To an extent even before she had become a Sentinel. Her father had always insisted on little things like that.

“I know this peak. Eight kilometers away,” Elias said.

“There isn’t a direct route, not if we can’t fly,” Vienna said. They couldn’t fly. Elias wasn’t strong enough to carry the three of them.

“We take the route towards Morhill before we turn back here,” she indicated a spot and put the map into her pack.

“Can we make it in six hours?” Chana asked.

“We have to,” Vienna answered, the three of them teleporting up and out of the Sentinel headquarters, meeting behind the building to not attract too much unnecessary attention.

The citizens of Ravenhall were somewhat used to the presence of powerful Shadows and adventurers but their headquarters remained somewhat of an unknown.

The three sped through the city using their teleportation abilities, only stopping when they reached the northern gate.

They slowed down as they exited, Vienna giving the Shadowguard a quick nod before they continued their mad sprint.

All three of them knew the limits of the others. They could easily make it to Morhill with running and teleportation. The terrain would become harder to traverse afterwards, meaning they could slow down from time to time to use their Meditation.

This was not the time to pace themselves.

Vienna used her air step ability to climb over the deep crevice leading down into a frozen abyss.

The winds were stronger here, a freezing cold sweeping over the group despite the time of year.

Chana broke out of the ground with an explosion of ice and rocks, landing before she vanished. Elias on the other hand simply floated next to the others, occasionally giving Vienna a hand to conserve their collective mana.

Few monsters showed themselves, the terrain neither providing food nor prey. Any shelter in the area would be farther down or hidden. The ones they met either weren’t interested in the group of humans or were shoed off with a few spells.

Vienna could see the thin road down below, her eyes managing to pierce through the icy veil. They had reached the top of the mountain chain. *The rest of the way should be simple enough.*

They didn’t have to check the final spot for accuracy, a plateau of ice and stone spreading out for a few hundred meters with an obvious cave entrance behind. In the midst of the field stood the stoic form of Aki.

“Had to be him,” Elias said next to her.

They were looking onto the plateau from an elevated position, hidden by snow and stone. Vienna could make out the machine's eyes. She was sure his sight was no match for hers. The assumption wasn't arrogance but based on hundreds of bouts and training sessions.

"Are we supposed to get into that cave?" Chana asked.

"We could avoid him, try to cause an avalanche maybe?" Elias suggested.

"No. If he's here, we're supposed to show what we can do," Vienna said.

"But this is Aki we're talking about. None of us has won a single fight against him," Chana said.

"When was the last time we fought him together?" Elias asked.

"Exactly," Vienna said. "And this is an open space. Remember, he can't fly."

She made two gestures, one suggestion formation four, the other one suggesting immediate action.

Her teammates vanished, Vienna forming her bow of ash as she stepped up, finding good footing before the arrow formed. She watched the machine, knowing that by now she had shown herself even to his limited eyes.

Her spell activated, the ashen arrow flashing out with increasing speed, aimed at Aki's chest.

The machine moved slightly to the left before the arrow exploded in a mist of ash.

Vienna teleported to change her position, forming another ash arrow, this one much thicker. She pulled back the ethereal string, pushing mana into her creation.

She waited until Chana broke out from the plateau, teleporting to close the distance to the Centurion of Akelion. Her spear clashed three times with the machine's before Vienna let her arrow loose.

Aki used a thrust attack, his weapon deflected by the sudden stone covered form of Chana, glowing enchantments visible on her gray armor. She attacked back when the arrow exploded with heat and ash.

The Centurion was pushed to the side, singed slightly as he continued to deflect spear thrusts.

Elias appeared behind him, his timing perfectly set up to deliver a blow of his intrusive wind mana. He deflected the butt of the spear coming for him with a simple movement.

Vienna teleported downwards, stepping through the air until she reached the plateau herself. Her arrows formed more quickly now, shot from a shorter distance at the limbs and spear of their combat instructor.

By now she focused on weight more than anything, not using her area attacks in an attempt to keep her allies from harm. This wouldn't be the only step of this exam.

Aki's attacks increased in both speed and power, his green eyes glowing brightly as he slashed through Chana's armor, his spear digging deep into her stomach.

Vienna used the opening to send an ashen arrow at the machine's left eye.

He moved his head in the last moment, the homing properties of the spell not enough to adjust at the short distance. The arrow slammed into his head, pushing it back slightly.

He ripped out the spear and jumped back, slashing at a retreating Elias before he suddenly threw his weapon.

The man was forced to teleport away.

Vienna didn't let up, watching as Chana knelt down to heal her injury.

Aki tried to get to her but was intercepted by Elias and continuous arrows. When he threw his spear, it was deflected by an explosive ash arrow. Just enough to graze past Chana's head.

He's not holding back. If I had missed that, her head would've been hit.

Vienna took a deep breath, creating a few dozen smaller projectiles that hovered in front of her ashen bow. She teleported closer to join the fray.

Elias was pushed to the defensive entirely, a few dozen dents and cuts showing on his armor by now.

Vienna veered to the side, releasing her projectiles in an expanding cone.

Aki jumped back but was hit by about ten of them anyway, their force pushing him back and twirling him to the side.

Stone shot up from below him, trapping the machine for a moment.

Vienna loosed her arrow, the dense piece of ash crashing into the joint of one of his legs, denting it into the process.

Elias appeared close to the machine and kept it busy as more stone plates broke out from the ground.

She kept her next volley ready, adding to the density as she mixed in explosive mana.

Chana finally boxed in the machine, forcing it to jump up.

Vienna aimed and shot.

Sixty dense ash projectiles slammed into the warrior before they exploded in red light.

Stone spikes broke out of the ground where the machine would land, catching the damaged warrior.

Vienna appeared close by, another volley already floating in front of her bow.

"You are defeated," she said.

Elias appeared next to the machine and stomped down on the spear, his fist hovering above Aki's arm.

Chana broke out of the ground behind him, her own spear leveled close to his head.

"Indeed, it seems I have been bested," Aki said.

If Vienna was honest, he didn't look bested. There was a slight dent on one of his legs, his armor slightly singed and blackened but she didn't detect any major damage.

Their team on the other hand had used considerable mana to get him that far.

She shot out her volley, aimed at the leg joints.

Chana slammed her spear into the joint where his arm was connected while Elias sent his wind mana into the machine.

Aki broke out of the stone with a whirling motion, his spear swiping past them.

Vienna had seen it coming, already far enough away to let the weapon pass harmlessly in front of her.

Chana took a direct hit to her throat, her stone armor partially broken through as blood was flung into the air.

Elias had taken the worst hit, his right arm separated entirely due to his close proximity to Aki.

The machine rushed Vienna, his spear thrusting at her with precise and deadly attacks.

She remained calm, her steps calculated as she continued to avoid his attacks, volley after volley of ashen arrows pushing him back. She noted that the joint she had damaged earlier didn't look the same anymore.

Reparation. Well, it's only fair.

Chana held her throat with one hand, the other one steadying Elias' lost arm to make it easier for him to connect the limb again.

Take the bait.

Aki dodged a volley and turned around, rushing at the two injured.

Vienna knew that Chana's throat had already healed, and Elias was perfectly capable of reattaching a severed arm. They had trained it hundreds of times after all.

The machine took a last step, his spear rushing at the stone wall erected by Chana. Before he could reach her, the ground opened up under him, swallowing the creature into a shaft of stone and ice.

Vienna stepped through the air above, seeing the machine slam its spear into one of the walls.

A single charged arrow hit the spearhead and exploded in a shock wave of mana, ash, and heat.

Chana slammed her hands together, a loud groan of moving stone resounding from below as the shaft was pushed together.

Vienna landed close to the thin crevice, aiming downwards at the slightly bent and flattened Centurion. Mana flowed into her arrow.

"Sentinels, you may pass," Aki said. "Find what the deepest chamber of the dungeon holds and return it to me."

Vienna dissolved her ash, kneeling down next to the shaft. The instructor wouldn't invoke the name of the Sentinels in a ruse. That rule had never been broken.