

RHAEGAR



# AZARINTH HEALER

BOOK FOUR

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# Book Four

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RHAEGAR



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## The story so far...

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In the aftermath of the demon invasion, Ilea was visiting the slowly recovering Ravenhall when she received an ominous message. Her friend's family had been the victims of a brutal attack. With Kyrian by her side and Claire's support at her back, Ilea rushed to find Trian and bring justice to the murderers. After realizing the culprits were a rival noble House, Ilea soon became embroiled in the brutal machinations of the politics in Virilya, the Empire's capital.

Without many allies, they went in search of Eve, who had notified Ilea of the attack, only to find their friend had been dead for some time due to her attempts to find and fight an organization called the Golden Lily.

At their lowest, Ilea and her team of Shadows clung to the one lead that might offer insight into the hidden affairs of Virilya's elite... Edwin Redleaf. A dangerous man whom Ilea had met in the first Taleen dungeon she found. They tracked him down and made a deal out of mutual revenge against the Birmingdales, who'd killed Trian's family, and Arthur Redleaf, the hated father of Felicia and Edwin.

Together, they investigated, fought, and killed their targets, but not before both Ilea and Kyrian were cast away by a Taleen teleportation device used as a final weapon by Arthur Redleaf. Ilea arrived in Iz, an ancient

Taleen city, but made her escape with her third-tier Blink to rejoin her allies and finish what they'd started.

Yet it was a hollow victory, as Kyrian remains lost in an unknown dungeon, yet to make his return.

With the fires of war racing through the Empire of Lys and their involvement in the murder of several high nobility, Claire suggested that everyone lay low. Trian went into hiding with his remaining sister in Ravenhall, while Ilea decided to go north to find clues as to where Kyrian had been sent. More than that, Ilea needed to get away from the murder and conflicts she'd seen in the previous few months. She wanted to get stronger so that she could protect the friends she had left.

The north proved to be exactly what she'd been looking for. Dotted with monster-filled dungeons and ancient ruins, she soon found her groove again, fighting one species of monster after another, training up her resistances, her Classes, and her skills.

She met more potential allies and friends too, few of them human. The smith Goliath, an artist and high-level craftsbeing of black mist and metal, and Catelyn, a fox-like creature and councilmember of Hallowfort.

Ilea fought and leveled, slowly unraveling the secrets of Tremor, an ancient city of Rhyvor, a kingdom of humans that had ruled these lands millennia past. There she met the elf Niivalyr, a self-proclaimed historian and potential ally. She also visited Hallowfort, an underground settlement of Awakened who had banded together to form a small community that could thrive even in the hostile landscape of the north.

With the help of Niivalyr and Terok, a local dwarf, engineer, and scavenger, Ilea found another ruin of the Taleen. A place where she might find more levels and answers about her missing friend. Here, they met a band of Cerithil Hunters that Niivalyr took under his wing.

Through an unlikely series of events, Ilea also found herself freeing Maro and Elana Invalar, former King and Queen of Rhyvor, from their self-imposed prison, and shortly after was met with an urgent request by Niivalyr. The young elves and Cerithil Hunters had decided to enter the Taleen ruin and face the Great Hall within. Ilea rushed to help, urging the elf to join her despite his species' rules preventing him from going into a dungeon.

When Ilea found the three young elves, they were facing down an enemy she had fought long ago. Taleen Praetorians. Fighting her fear, Ilea

faced them, and soon she was joined by Niivalyr, who had resolved himself to join the ranks of the Cursed, the Cerithil Hunters.

With her allies Maro and Terok also joining the fray, Ilea and Niivalyr fought together against the ancient machines of the lost Taleen civilization. The battle was hard-fought, but their group prevailed. Their reward? A Taleen Gate Key, an artifact that could reveal more about the ancient teleportation gates and a reason to go south that Ilea could no longer ignore.

With her level at three hundred, her new Class evolutions enhancing all aspects of her magic, and an artifact that could shed light on the ancient Taleen technology, Ilea is nearly ready to make her way back to Ravenhall...

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ONE

## Taking Stock

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Ilea stretched and yawned as she exited the Taleen dungeon. The storms crackled nearby and cast purple light over the landscape and harsh wind ruffled her hair, but despite it all, it was nice to finally be above ground once more.

As the natural sunlight hit her skin, she found herself less disappointed than she had expected. The treasure vault of the Taleen Great Hall had been in the same location as the first one she'd found below Dawntree. But this time, there had been no gold and ancient artifacts to be found. Just acid.

It was the same trap she had encountered before, but with nothing to protect. Terok had been devastated, which Maro thought was funny. Ilea wouldn't have minded some additional gold, but the Key was the real prize. A chance to go after Kyrian, if he still needed her to.

At least she'd spent some time training her corrosion resistance. That acid bath had been rather soothing, even managing to get it into the second tier...

### ***Corrosion Resistance – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 4***

***2<sup>nd</sup> stage: Your insatiable need to melt and dissolve your body has changed its structure significantly. Your very cells have become more resistant to change and imbalance.***

...but now she was ready for some fresh air.

The elves and Goliath had remained below, ready to explore more of the ruins and the Centurion facility at their own pace. Now that Niivalyr was a Cerithil Hunter as well, he would join their efforts directly instead of training and preparing them from above.

“Some fresh air, finally,” Maro said as he stepped next to her.

The ancient king was wearing his antlered helmet and robed armor. If Ilea hadn’t known him so well, she may have been fooled by his ‘necromancer lord’ getup.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Maro asked.

Ilea smiled. “Nothing,” she said, then stretched.

Terok trudged up beside them. “Finally ready for those vaults of yours, Maro,” he said. “I hope all this effort will be worth it in the end.” He looked at Ilea. “Beyond the friends we made along the way, of course.”

“Of course.” Ilea smiled again. She really was glad about the friends she’d made along the way, but also about the monsters she’d found and fought and the evolutions she’d gotten. She felt powerful, and now she’d even taken down two Taleen Praetorians. Who else could say the same?

She glanced back to the dungeon entrance, then spread her wings. She was proud of Niivalyr. He’d faced his fears and entered the dungeon. She’d even handed him the Taleen diary she’d found back below Dawntree. He had agreed to translate it.

*To the vault of Tremor, then southward, at my own pace. I do hope the war between Lys and Baralia is already over. And that Kyrian has returned to Ravenhall.*

*How long has it even been?*

She wasn’t sure, but it had certainly been a while. A lot of monsters. A lot of dungeons. She ascended with her ashen wings and flew off.

## The Vault

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Tremor was just as they'd left it. Dust-covered and abandoned.

It felt a little weird to be down in the king's cellars without any Kingsguard around. The danger was gone, the tension of walking the white marble halls replaced by the atmosphere of a forgotten and empty ruin. Ilea decided that she liked the danger more.

*It's eerie here.*

Looking around and seeing her surroundings in her sphere showed her more. The plants didn't look as healthy anymore, and the enchantments to keep them alive were losing power already. Leaves had fallen to the floor. The lights above shone brightly, but, someday, they too would cease. A job done for millennia now finally put to rest by her intervention. Somehow it felt weighty, just looking at the magical lamps.

Terok tapped her side, making her jerk toward him.

He held up his hands in a placating gesture. "Hey there, maybe you should get some sleep soon."

Ilea yawned, perfectly timed, before pointing a finger at the laughing dwarf. "Hey! You've been awake just as long."

"Not really. You were training nonstop before killing all the Kingsguard. I had a couple hours every night. Plus, I found a nice lounge in Lisburg. Very comfortable couches there." He laughed when she narrowed her eyes at him. "At least we're here now. You have the key?"

She summoned the little golden thing and handed it over, dropping it into the dwarf's open metal palm.

"Damn..." he murmured as he looked the thing over. "Yeah, that would have taken a while to crack."

He hummed and inserted it into the keyhole. There was a sizzling noise as Ilea watched the magic flow through not just the metal door but also the walls and even the floor and ceiling. An impressive burst of energy.

She looked at Maro, who was scratching the back of his head, "Only the best. We had the gold."

Terok laughed. "Hope some of it's left, King Necromancer."

The gate moved away, and a corridor opened up before them, the glint of shiny steel already visible in the room from ten meters farther in.

"Looks clear," the dwarf added, taking the first steps without any response from possible defensive enchantments.

"There's nothing there beyond the door. Having the place combust upon entry seemed like a stupid idea, despite Elana wanting such measures. Even the best enchanters told me there was a tiny risk of it going haywire," Maro explained, entering behind a giddy Terok, whose feet only touched the ground with every second step.

Ilea crossed her arms when they arrived in the surprisingly large hall, Terok's teleporting now interspersed with excited squeals. "Now that's what I call Christmas."

"Is that a word from your realm?" Maro looked around the room. "There's more left than I thought."

There was so much stuff Ilea could barely process it all, chests all over, gold and silver glinting wherever Terok flung them open, his laughter echoing through the hall. Different colors of metals, ingots, and ore piled up next to assorted weapons of all kinds, some looking deadly and efficient, others looking more ornamental.

Ilea took a few steps and then stopped, looking beyond the chests and displayed weapons to where she saw rows upon rows of flawless armor. Half and full plate, each with matching weapon racks containing swords, spears, halberds, and axes. Enough to equip hundreds.

"There will be more of that below," Maro said, his voice quiet. "A prosperous kingdom. Only the best equipment for our men and women. If only there had been more of them willing to fight."

"What do you mean?" Ilea asked.

“Fewer signed up every year. I don’t really blame them, of course,” Maro said, picking up a spear that glinted with a golden point. “Why go out there and fight when everything fun and exciting can be found safely in the city?”

Ilea had her thoughts but didn’t voice them, leaving the old king to his memories.

“Christmas is a holiday in my realm,” she said instead, looking at the rows of swords and halberds. “Many associate it with presents. Kids would get incredibly giddy the closer the day came, though luckily they couldn’t teleport while wearing a five-hundred-kilo steel suit.” She stopped and watched Maro look over the room. “Rhyvor really was quite impressive, wasn’t it?”

He didn’t react for a moment, jerking his head toward her when the sentence hit the spike of a question. “What...? Yes... well, you could say that.” He glanced past her before walking toward a nearby weapon rack.

Ilea smiled, following him. He carefully reached out and grabbed a rather worn-looking staff, the wood still holding together after all this time. There had to be an enchantment in the room helping to preserve things.

“The Staff of Hemur, Doom of the East. It’s one of the most powerful and precious items in this whole dump.” He smiled, holding the thing as his hands carefully brushed over the wood.

“Yours, isn’t it? Let me guess, your first weapon?” Ilea asked.

Maro grinned before pointing the staff at her. A glow formed on its tip, red energy rushing out and hitting her in the face. Ilea’s Azarinh Fighting had informed her about what she was certain of already, the energy splashing onto her skin without a noticeable impact.

Maro twirled the staff and handed it to her. “You know me too well already. I need people more gullible than you lot.”

Taking the staff, she inspected it and smiled. “I will gladly join your cult, oh great necromancer king,” she said with a dry tone.

### **[Arcane Staff – Common Quality]**

She twirled it and handed it back. “Feels good in my hand. So, are there magic wands that can cast spells you don’t have a skill for?”

He brushed over the staff once more, then stored it in his ring. “Yes and no. You need a certain affinity to use it. It can be a good help to channel or

focus spells, but pure skills are always stronger, by a massive margin.” He thought about it for a moment before expanding, “Comparable to the fire rune tool you have, I suppose. Not usually worth the cost of production.”

“HOLY FUCK!”

They turned their heads at Terok’s exclamation before he walked over, a chunk of azure ore in his steel arms, a golden crown on his head, and a massive fur coat barely hanging onto his machine shoulders as he stumbled over to them. Gold coins spilled from every opening in his metal suit, rolling away with every step he took.

“You know we have storage items,” Ilea said, smiling at the sight before looking at Maro. “You think he’ll just make a war machine out of gold?”

Maro crossed his arms and sighed. “I’m surprised his magic hasn’t evolved into gold magic already.”

“This,” Terok said as he reached Ilea, holding up the chunk of ore, nearly touching her face with it. “Can I have this?! Please?”

She pushed it away. “Maro still gets a say in this. I don’t own all of this.”

“You do. You got us out,” Maro said simply. “And I suppose Terok should get a small cut for his minor contribution.” He winked at the dwarf.

“Minor?!” Terok shouted. “Minor he says! I spent... days! While Ilea fought a few puny knights of a mere three marks.” He shook his head. “So, about that azure metal?”

“Sure. I do want to give some of the metals to Goliath, and most everything else, I plan to give to Claire.”

“The friend in Ravenhall. You trust her? This is enough gear and gold to topple a nation,” Maro said.

“Exactly,” Ilea said with a smile. “I wouldn’t want it in anyone else’s hands. No, Terok, especially not yours, or mine for that matter.”

Terok, who had been eyeing Ilea imploringly, sighed. “Fuck, man, I wanted to be King of the Pit,” he said before walking off, collecting more treasures by exchanging the items he was currently wearing with new toys.

Maro watched Terok and glanced at Ilea. “Do you think I should tell him where the storage items are?”

Ilea grinned. “Let him roam a bit. It’s funny.”

“It is. Ilea, I’m really glad it was you two who found Tremor and made it down here. Thank you again.”

“You know I was just looking for cool monsters to fight.”

“Sure,” he said. “Keep telling yourself that, and I may actually believe it too one day.”

She ignored him. “With most of this going to Ravenhall and Claire, maybe some of Rhyvor will live on after all.”

Ilea was impressed when Terok’s right metal arm split in two, picking up two massive chunks of ore. His movements were now getting more clunky under all the weight. At least the white marble floor wasn’t cracking under the dwarf’s steps.

“Come on. Let’s see what we have,” Maro said, gesturing to Ilea as he moved a chest to the side, picking up a silver box from behind it. The locks snapped open with two smooth clicks, revealing two rings and a bracelet.

“They’re empty and unclaimed. This one...” He paused before chuckling, taking out the bracelet. “Well, let’s say I might have been a little overeager in having it made. A rejected gift.” He held it out to her. “I’d be happy if you accepted it.”

Silver just like the rings, it shimmered a little in the light.

**[Legacy of Rhyvor – Rare Quality] – [Storage capacity at 0/100]**

**Would you like to claim Legacy of Rhyvor?**

Ilea smiled and accepted it. “I’ll wear it with pride. Thanks, Maro.” There was a small clasp that let her open it.

She closed the bracelet around her right forearm, the base lying comfortably on her skin. The top was adorned with thorned silver stems winding around in a beautiful fashion, all congregating on the small silver rose sitting at the center, right above the top of her arm.

She moved some mana into it and felt it tighten before sitting unmoving yet not uncomfortable on her arm. Maro remained quiet as he looked at her for a moment, then he nodded – more to himself, it seemed, than to her.

“May I ask... for whom was this intended?”

“Now that... that is a secret I will keep.” The man quickly changed the subject. “Do you want one of the rings too? I promised one to Terok.”

“I’ll take one, sure. Would make a very nice gift.” She took them and identified each.

**[Bottomless Ring of Fire – Rare Quality] – [Storage capacity at 0/50]**

**[Band of Infinity – Rare Quality] – [Storage capacity at 0/60]**

“Guess the fire one heats up stuff inside? Any quirks with the infinity one?”

“Yes, but the heat isn’t bad. At least if you have a basic resistance. The infinity one needs more mana to use. Also takes longer to store things,” he explained.

Ilea stored the latter in her new bracelet, twirling the Ring of Fire in her hand. She smirked. “Storing storage items... seems to work fine.”

“They’re empty and unclaimed. It would be different otherwise,” Maro supplied.

Ilea waved at Terok. The dwarf was hunched over as he tried balancing the ores, metals, and armor on his back, the metal he wore having reformed to make him look like some kind of treasure turtle.

“Seems like the fire one would be more useful for him,” she said. “Terok! Drop the crap. Maro has a ring for you. And calm down, otherwise you’ll have to wait outside for ten minutes.”

The dwarf looked at her and groaned, the sound turning into a full-on scream as he straightened, the ores rolling off his back and falling to the floor. “How can you not be excited?” he asked in a defeated voice, damn near hissing.

“Don’t turn into an elf,” she said, though she was admittedly quite excited about her new bracelet. Her ashen armor was likely better than anything here, and she wouldn’t have much use for weapons. Gold she had plenty of, but more certainly wouldn’t hurt. But Terok’s whole Class and mech-fighter style being about utilizing rare metals, as well as the fact that he was likely not as wealthy as her, made this treasury magnitudes more significant for him. The recent evolutions had been her kind of excitement; she was still not quite used to all the changes.

She did feel a deep joy in knowing that all this equipment and gold would help Claire and all of Ravenhall. But the real thrill would come once she showed everything to her friend.

She clasped the ring as Terok approached and closed her eyes. Using her sphere, she saw magic helping him move his steel suit as its back reformed like flames wrapped around his very being. Around him, dozens

of items in the room were bright in her sphere, different hues as well as shapes wrapped around them.

Opening her eyes again, she flipped the ring at Terok. The dwarf caught it before his suit opened, his jolly figure jumping out and grabbing the item from the mechanical hand. “Lassie... I could kiss you right now!” He jumped up, ring in hand, before he put it on, cackling like a maddwarf.

As soon as he had it on, the chunks of ore vanished at his touch. Terok even forgot about redonning his armor suit as he collected all his loot.

“What about Elana?” Ilea asked. “Wouldn’t she want some of all this?”

Maro laughed, the reaction surprising her. “Oh, you have no idea how stubborn she is. After what you’ve done for us, she wouldn’t accept a single coin of copper.”

“I took her for someone who wouldn’t care about that. Everything for her goals, her people.”

He shook his head. “Perhaps if she thought you incapable. Elana isn’t stupid, Ilea. Having you as a friend as well as knowing you would feel somewhat indebted... Again, I don’t think you should feel that way at all. She will see it as more beneficial. If anything, what makes Elana special is her ability to plan and think long-term. No wonder both of us are still alive.

“She is well aware of the treasury, but at this point, she likely has a grasp on Hallowfort’s resources too. As far as Awakened go, the way they think and live, and with the town being as old as it is... well, I think a lot of the things here wouldn’t hold the same significance as they would to a human settlement.”

“You care about her a great deal,” Ilea said.

He glanced at her. “I do.”

“Sure you don’t want to stay?”

“I am,” he said. “And you know I am. Maybe it’s not all that. I did talk to her about it. About the vault. About Rhyvor. Maybe she just doesn’t want anything that reminds her of it.”

Ilea nodded. “Lots to figure out for you two.”

He smiled. “She’s already getting herself involved in the local politics and management of Hallowfort.” He looked at her. “Always something else, you know?”

Ilea grinned. “What about you then?”

“Journeying south with you sounds fun. And then? Being a tourist?”

“Sure. From king to tourist. I don’t see any problems coming up with you being at three hundred.”

“My power is the opposite of a problem,” Maro laughed. “When it came to Elana,” he said after a few moments, “I got comfortable, helping out where I could and following whatever... *suggestions* she had for me.

“Still, I sought to escape whenever I could. Of course I had a responsibility, and if Rhyvor was still here, I would continue to serve as its king. Yet I can’t say I was always fulfilled, happy. In some ways, I guess, it would be easy to stay.”

He considered his next words, his mouth opening and closing.

“You know, I would have loved to get a small mansion in Lisburg, living there in peace with Elana and seeing our son... grow up.”

*And she knows it too. Knows that her ways make him feel like that.*

“Hey, it’s fine. I’m sure I can introduce you to a bunch of cool people whom you would like. Never too late to find joys in life.”

Ilea felt a little silly, talking to him as if she had any more life experience at her young age. But she also knew that getting older didn’t automatically mean that people grew wiser or that they would solve their issues.

“Thanks,” he said. “You know... I didn’t expect you to care as much.”

Ilea smiled and grabbed a halberd, twirling it around before hitting the floor with a loud bang. “I just think you should get the chance to choose.” She eyed the weapon, looking down the length of the shaft.

“It’s too long for you,” he said, grabbing a few swords before he handed them to her. “Is that what you care about, then? Giving people the chance to choose?”

She grabbed the weapons and twirled them around in a sloppy manner. At least she was tough enough to not hurt herself.

“Everyone can get a Class here, can fight if they want to. But yeah, something like that, I guess.” She let the blades fall to the floor, Maro looking at them before he stared at her. “I haven’t really thought about it much so far.”

Was that what she wanted? She was at three hundred now. There were other humans with that power, surely, but she had influential friends and gold as well. And that meant some measure of responsibility as well, didn’t it? Claire would likely think so.

“Any warriors seeing you wield those blades and letting them fall to the ground like that would not think very highly of you,” he said.

“Then they can bring it up with my fists.”

If the weapons were damaged from falling to the stone floor, even in the slightest, they weren’t worth anyone’s attention. Not here, not with the monsters around.

He laughed. “Why even try them? Do you want to get a general skill? Or get a weapon-based third Class?”

“There are third Classes?” she said, instantly appearing an inch away from his face. The king just chuckled, not moving an inch.

“At the rate you’re going, I’m sure you’ll discover the truth behind those legends long before me.” He smiled as she turned her head and moved on to grab a scythe.

Twirling it a few times, her speed increased before it slipped out of her grasp, slamming blade first into the wall.

“Now that’s a high-quality blade,” she commented, moving on. “I’ve got my hammer, just thought I could at least try some other things.” She grabbed a spear, then immediately discarded it. “It’s not looking good, though, Maro.”

“Who’s the menace now?” Terok asked as he approached, not a single piece of treasure on him. “Ah, the young and greedy,” he added with a shake of his head before dodging the halberd that Ilea threw his way.

## THREE

### Cleaning out a Ruin

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Most of the hall had been cleaned out by now, and Ilea had filled her storage items with gold coins, metal ingots, crowns, and dresses. But mainly with full sets of armor, swords and shields, halberds and spears, and tons of other weapons. She filled up crates found in the treasury to reduce the required space in her items. For some reason, a single set of armor used up the same amount of space as a crate filled with five sets. Still, her items were damn near full, including the new ones she'd gotten.

A small gift for Claire and Ravenhall, she supposed.

Maro had only asked to keep a couple of sentimental treasures. One of them was a small cuddly toy dog, worn with age. He called it Layro and made sure to clarify that, yes, it was his cuddly toy dog.

"It's a cute dog," Ilea said.

"Very," Terok confirmed, both moving on with their search, the dwarf now mostly focused on interesting metals.

Ilea, on the other hand, was trying out some of the weapons.

"No, no, no! You're not putting your weight into it!" Terok laughed.

She centered herself again and lifted the massive olvor hammer over her head before slamming it down, the floor cracking under the weight, her body easily taking the force flowing through her.

Terok groaned next to her. "You're literally just using your hands." Maro nodded at the dwarf's comment. "I mean, it's enough to kill most

people, but if you want to get a skill out of it at some point, you'd better work on it. And that's coming from me. I know little about using hammers."

"Your feedback isn't incredibly helpful, Terok," she replied, putting the hammer away.

*Guess I'll have to find someone who can show me how to use a bloody hammer.*

With all her skills and strength, as well as the seemingly simple weapon, she felt a little embarrassed.

"The problem is that you're already so strong you don't really need to use it the correct way," Maro added. "Still, getting the hang of it should make it even more deadly. Right now, you're basically an ice troll hitting things with a large rock." He said it seriously, leaving her to question if it had been an insult or not.

Terok, of course, laughed, but he stopped immediately when she turned his way and summoned the hammer again. "We wouldn't want to hurt good ol' Terok, now, would we?"

"Maybe... maybe I do, Terok, just maybe," Ilea said, eyeing him as the dwarf vanished into his metal suit before it closed.

Ilea threw the hammer his way with as much power as she could muster, the dwarf rolling away to avoid it. The hammer crashed to the floor, stuck in the cracked marble.

"Hey now," Terok said. "You should really be careful, Miss Ice Troll."

She ignored his remark. For now. "Wish I could summon it back... Is there an enchantment for that?" she asked Maro.

Maro glanced at the weapon. "You mean like those Taleen Centurions? Possibly. I'm not sure how it would work with such a heavy weapon. I can barely lift it as is."

"I'll ask Iana," she said.

Terok was trying to pry the hammer out of the ground. When it finally came free, the weight immediately brought him to the floor, his metal head bouncing off the handle.

Ilea laughed whilst Maro clapped his hands.

\* \* \*

“How big was Rhyvor exactly?” Ilea asked as they walked through the halls of the royal palace, Terok still collecting some of the furniture into his new ring.

“Hmm, I don’t know what to compare it to. There were eleven cities nearly as big as Tremor, about forty smaller towns, and even more villages. All of it was connected by roads, some better maintained and safer than others, of course. The actual area wasn’t as big as many other kingdoms of its time, but the resources here, dungeons, rivers, metals, and especially the variety in monsters attracted a lot of adventurers trying to make a fortune.

“That’s how it started, and it only got bigger with time. Settlers, smiths, and everyone else followed as soon as the first areas were mapped, the monsters known, and the dungeons culled and controlled. Every city had to supply its own guards. The knights, however, were only trained here.”

Ilea nodded, thinking about the ancient kingdom as she slowed and looked out from a balcony onto the dust-covered houses beyond. *How many people were there? A hundred thousand? A million?*

Maro stopped when they approached the large double doors of the throne room. He smiled, his face suggesting a mix of feelings.

*Memories. But he didn’t exactly enjoy being king, yet he still sacrificed himself in the end for his people, for Tremor. And now it’s all dust.*

“Want to leave?” she asked. “Or sit on the throne one last time?”

He glanced at her, then back at the door. Slowly, he nodded. “One last time, sure.”

They walked into the throne room, their steps echoing through the empty ruin. Maro summoned his armor as he approached and a silk robe of red and silver to accompany it. Instead of a crown, he put on an antlered helmet.

Ilea watched as he floated up to the throne and turned in a practiced and awe-invoking manner. He sat and rested one leg on the other, his hand supporting his chin as he looked over his throne room.

“Quite the sight,” Ilea said. “You perform well.”

“I do, don’t I?” Maro said, now leaning forward, his legs close to one another.

He looked small now, uncomfortable. Just a man sitting on a chair that was too large, too prominent.

He stored his helmet and smiled. A sheepish smile. “It’s really over, isn’t it?”

Ilea looked at him. “How does it feel?”

He leaned back and sighed. “Like a lot. I’ll have to drink and fuck quite a bit to process everything. But,” he added, standing up, “I’m also free. Free to do whatever.”

“I don’t suppose you want to build another kingdom?”

“No, no, no, no. That is... not a good idea. There are kingdoms already, and empires. Ready for me to explore. Plenty of opportunities for fun – and for art.” He walked past her. “Some fresh air.”

Ilea glanced at his back, then turned again to look at the empty thrones. She saw a weight there. Power and responsibility.

*Maro is walking away from it all. What’s your path going to be when you’re back, Miss Level Three Hundred, hmm?*

She smiled. *Definitely not becoming some kind of ruler or politician. But other than that, who knows?*

She felt grounded. Ready. After everything that had happened. All the death and loss. Soon, she would return to meet up with her friends in the south.

*First things first. After the Taleen key and all that, I’ll make sure to find Keyla. I hope Claire managed to find her and get her the Drake, if she wanted it. My food is running out.*

\* \* \*

She met Maro out in the empty, dust-covered courtyard of the palace. Ilea formed two chairs made of ash and sat down on hers, then sighed.

“This courtyard... would be the perfect place to finally have our bout, if you’re still up for that,” she said, her eyes closed as she leaned back.

“Sure, now?”

Her chair expanded and moved back, becoming more like a lounger. “No, I haven’t slept in a while.”

“You’re going to sleep here? In your ash? Can you make mine a little more relaxing too?”

She obliged before forming herself a blanket of ash. Ilea didn’t have to think on it too hard, being the Kin of Ash and all.

“I’m going to go to my apartment as soon as Terok is back.”

“Ah, yes, you claimed one of the noble houses,” he said.

“What’s this?” Terok exclaimed when he came out of the palace. “And here I thought you two were obsessed with training. Didn’t know you actually slept. I’ll be going to Hallowfort now, and then back to the elves and Goliath. Plenty of work to do.” He sounded excited.

Ilea turned to face him and opened her eyes. “I didn’t take you to be a workaholic. Did you get everything you needed?”

Terok nodded. “I did. Thanks for all the help and the gear, you two. I’ll make sure to not let it go to waste.”

Ilea got up, her lounger vanishing, as did Maro’s, the man teleporting right before he hit the floor, reappearing with both feet on the ground.

“Why would you do that?” the necromancer asked good-naturedly, dusting off his armored robes.

“I’ll visit before we go south,” Ilea said. “Keep the idiots in check. Especially if they think of fighting another Praetorian.”

Terok opened up his suit and stepped out, shaking his head with a grin. “I don’t think I have that kind of power, Ilea. See you soon, then.”

With that, he turned and began flying off into the distance. Ilea hoped he managed to avoid the storms. She still hadn’t managed to say a proper goodbye.

\* \* \*

Ilea left for her claimed apartment and went to sleep – for the first time in a while. She’d fought and defeated the Praetorians – with help, but she decided that it counted anyway. And now she’d gotten a ton of goods to bring to Claire and a necromancer to journey with.

*I do wonder how people will react when they see Maro. And I wonder how Trian is doing, and if Kyrian is already back. I bet Claire is even busier than before.*

She smiled at the thought, excited to see them again sometime soon. But she wouldn’t leave without saying goodbye, and there were a few things left to do anyway.

Ilea cuddled into her blanket. She added a bit of ash to her pillow, smiling to herself before she dozed off.

When she woke up, she noted that it was still dark outside. Pulling her blanket a little closer, she turned in her bed and sighed, enjoying the warmth

and feel of the fabric. She hadn't dreamed, even with all the impressions of recent days.

*Feynor... Praetorians...*

She turned on her other side and simply lay there, thinking about what had happened, her new abilities, the faces and monsters that had burned themselves into her memory.

She touched the bracelet, looking at the silver rose, then summoned a book. The fiery lines of her Aspect of Ash lit up the pages of an adventure she had started reading a couple of weeks ago. This was actually the second book in a series. It was called *The Late Knight*, named for a powerful protagonist who always appeared a moment or a day late to the quests he accepted.

In the second book, he had accepted his weird curse of fate, using it to his advantage as he planned and prepared his approach with the knowledge that he would be late anyway. It wasn't particularly deep and the side characters lacked personality, but be it real or not, the monsters and towns, as well as the ruins, were captivating.

Ilea even wrote down some of the names in her notebook. Perhaps it was all fiction, but there was a chance they were based on legends that held some truth. She was sleeping in a once noble-owned apartment in the capital of a once great kingdom, after all.

When the sun broke into the dungeon and reached her room, she sat up on her bed and summoned a meal. Only around eighty remained from the batch Keyla had prepared. One thing was clear: she hadn't eaten enough during her time in the north.

*I should take the time at least once a day.*

She was worried her priorities were shifting, seeing as most of her days were spent training and fighting. She soon put her bed back into her necklace and spread her wings.

\* \* \*

Maro was waiting for her as she came in for her landing, sitting on a beautiful brown leather armchair in the courtyard of his former palace. There were several crates nearby, some filled with books, others with stacks of paper.

“What’s all this?” she asked, her wings disintegrating as she walked the last steps and took one of the books.

He looked up and smiled. “Good morning.” He showed her the front of his book. “Records. Mostly taxes, but also more interesting things.”

“And why did you collect all this stuff?”

Maro leaned back slightly. “I couldn’t sleep. Some questions still bugged me. Everything that happened before Tremor was attacked. Before the north, as you call it, was reduced to the state it’s in now.”

“What exactly do you want to find out?”

“I want to know what happened, at the very least. And maybe there are some clues left here. You can leave if you want to.”

“Depends on how long you want to stay, but I’m happy to help you out. What were you thinking?”

Maro showed her a few as yet unopened boxes, and they settled into reading. Ilea wasn’t sure how much time passed before she heard an excited exclamation from Maro.

“Have you found something?” she asked, actually interested in what he could have uncovered in his book on tax records.

“An off-hand mention, but yes. Something related to Captain Reyker. You found his diary in the palace.”

She nodded.

Maro chuckled and shook his head. “Guy hated me. Still the most loyal and capable man who ever worked under Elana. Would have made a terrible king, though.”

“Get to the point, oh great king Maro,” she said.

He smiled and pointed at her, a massive beam of death magic burning into her and her chair. “I never said I was great.”

### ***‘ding’ Death Magic Resistance reaches lvl 13***

“Well, someone reported him returning from the Soul Ripper dungeon, falling to the beasts only around an hour away from Tremor. The scout couldn’t advance because of the nearby monsters, but the report made it back. Maybe he found out something?”

## FOUR

# Rescue Mission

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“He returned but was felled before reaching the city. One of our scouts saw him before he died and managed to get a report in.”

“And you think he found something?” Ilea asked.

Maro nodded. “He would not have returned empty-handed. There was a location too. By flight, it wouldn’t take long to reach it. If the area hasn’t changed too drastically. But it’s outside the city walls, in the section of the... dungeon that the light no longer reaches.”

“You want to find the corpse?” she asked as he closed the book.

“Yes.”

“The area outside the wall was full of Soul Rippers,” she replied. “I thought you weren’t keen on fighting them? Not that we could, even together. They’re triple marks, and I couldn’t damage them at all before my evolutions.”

“You’re not curious to see how you’d do now?”

Ilea smiled. “I would. But yeah, it won’t be easy. We can try, but we should fight a single one first, in the lower regions of the city but still inside the walls. Just to see how we do.”

\* \* \*

“Ugly fuckers,” Ilea whispered to Maro, who was standing next to her on the roof of a dilapidated house, crouching as she watched the Soul Ripper through her sphere.

They were twenty meters away, but she was pretty sure the monster heard her, though it still didn’t move an inch from its position at the side of its chosen wall, fungi growing near the beast.

“I was more thinking of terrifying. Ugly fits too, I suppose. What’s the approach?” he asked.

“I grapple, you beam,” she said. The necromancer snorted, and she turned his way. “Any better suggestions?”

“No. Let’s go,” he replied.

Ilea grinned in the dark before she spread her wings and jumped off the side of the building, speeding up.

She noticed a twitch in the elongated hands of the monster right before the beast jumped, flying at her with outstretched arms. Ilea blinked above it, her ashen limbs closing around the beast and pulling her toward its spine.

The pull added speed to her movement before her fist slammed into it, Absolute Destruction spreading into it as her reversed mana added to its pain. Then Maro’s purple beam lit up a part of the surroundings. She noted the monster’s skin was a similar color, simply much darker.

It landed and thrashed, spinning as it tried to get her off. They crashed through several houses, Ilea holding on and punching despite the stone and steel slamming against her back. Then the monster suddenly stopped and turned its head backward.

A shiver went through Ilea as she stared at the writhing tentacles, Maro’s death beam burning right into them. She felt an attack from the beast coming thanks to her Azarinth Fighting and let go, blinking away before a chunk of air as well as Maro’s beam vanished from her previous position.

The pull of the vacuum moved her forward a little. She watched Maro send another beam at the beast before it jumped away, barely interrupted as it clipped a roof and broke through a wall. They followed through the air but lost it when it jumped again, farther this time.

“Any idea how much damage we did?” Maro asked, the two slowing down but flying higher to make sure nothing jumped them from below.

“Not much, I would guess. The skin and bones felt nearly as hard as when I hit one before my evolution.”

It had at least shown a new move by turning its head backward one hundred and eighty degrees.

*But it did run.*

“So, we just damage them a little and they flee?” he asked. “Very unusual. I thought they were more aggressive.”

“Maybe it’s because we’re in the dark?” Ilea suggested.

She wondered if they were really that aggressive. With how they waited for prey on the side of the walls, she thought of them as more of an ambush creature. Like the plants that ate insects, just waiting until something came close.

“But it seems like you can handle them defensively.” Maro looked her way, more a question than a statement.

“True. The evolutions did change a lot. I think we can go look for Rhykker now. Let’s just stay this high. Can you see to the ground?”

He nodded. “Not well at this distance and without light, but I should be able to spot the area at least. If it still looks similar.”

They continued their flight, keeping up a high speed to make it harder for any monsters to attack them from below.

“There’s...” Maro started after a while, hesitating as he slowed down. “Ilea, there are hundreds... beyond the wall.”

She looked down but didn’t see or hear a thing, goosebumps forming on her skin. “Want to move on?”

Maro didn’t reply, simply picking up the same speed as before. A couple of minutes of silent flying later, the man spoke up once again. “He’s there.”

“What do you mean? You found the corpse?”

“No... no, he’s there, walking around. He still has a sword. The creatures move out of his way.”

Ilea raised her eyebrows. “Interesting. He’s undead, then... Are they avoiding him?”

Perhaps there was something about him they didn’t like. Or whatever they could take from him was long gone.

“Looks that way. Maybe he’s bait... They’re looking up at us, Ilea.” His voice was steady, but she could tell he was tense.

Thinking on it, she tapped her chin as the two hovered over the area.

“Do you have a bunch of corpses remaining?” she asked after a while, the king nodding in response, “Hand me one; revive it as I hold it up.”

A Feynor corpse appeared, and Ilea took it with two ashen limbs and held it in place as his magic flowed into it, animating the body, its eyes opening and muscles tensing up.

“Show me where the knight is. I’ll hover above and drop it.”

Maro moved a couple of meters through the air before he nodded. She moved the undead closer to him and dropped it. The body fell for a couple of seconds before she heard the noise, impacts on metal, then earth. Silence returned as she looked over at Maro.

“It’s bait,” he said simply.

“Did all of them jump?” she asked, but he shook his head before dropping a bunch of bones. This time, no noises followed.

“I suppose they’re only going for things that have mana.”

“Can you reach them from here with your beam? Maybe we can scatter them?” She formed and fired off a bunch of ashen lances.

“No, and they also dodged your attacks,” he commented. Ilea just formed a heavy mist of ash that immediately dropped down. “Are you trying to bury them? You’ve certainly got my former captain’s attention.”

“Hmm, no. Not really. But the more ash that’s down there, the harder it will be for them to get to me,” she replied.

She could tell that she was afraid of the creatures. Eldritch monsters waiting in the dark. She could tell that there were two paths.

One was to retreat, to plan, or even to let it go. The safe path.

But it didn’t feel right.

Perhaps it had always been this way. She could’ve stayed in Riverwatch, could’ve not gone to Dawntree, could’ve refused to enter the Taleen dungeon. She could’ve become a local adventurer or something instead of joining the Shadow’s Hand.

But she hadn’t.

She was here.

In the north. In an ancient capital full of nightmarish creatures.

The question hung in the air. But Ilea knew which path she’d take.

“I’ll need as many distractions as you can make.”

Maro stared at her before he laughed. “You’re crazy.”

She didn’t reply.

“Are you sure? I mean, I’d like to have some answers as to what happened in Rhylvor, and I’d like to know what Rhyker found out too, but not so badly I’d risk my life – or ask you to do the same.”

Ilea smiled. "This isn't just about you, Maro."

He looked at her, then nodded to himself. "Alright. What do you need?"

"As many undead as you can throw down there. If I can't avoid the Rippers, I'll blink out. I just hope the knight isn't at a higher level than the others."

"Can you kill him that quickly?"

"No. I'll carry it out."

"I know what you've done to get me out of the palace, but seeing it is something else. If you weren't a healer, you'd have been dead ten times over."

"Hundreds," Ilea said, focusing on the darkness below.

"I'll try to give you as much time as I can," Maro said.

Ilea formed a small platform of ash for him to drop and imbue his undead and skeletons on. She continued to create more ash, the soft flakes falling like snow, her sphere showing them in a dark red color. The magic faded from them as she let go, yet the ash remained.

Sometime later, their preparation was done, the two still hovering over the hordes. Closer now. Soul Rippers and the lone undead looked up at them, waiting.

*I really hope there aren't any winged versions of them just waiting to swoop in,* Ilea thought as she focused on her sixteen limbs of ash, each carrying a single undead. Additionally, there were twenty small ashen platforms with a skeleton or undead on each. Maro held five himself, with two holding onto his legs and one onto his back.

"Tell me when you're ready," he said.

Ilea activated Heart of Cinder, waiting for it to charge as she hovered right over the undead. She could feel the heat build within her, could feel the power she'd unlocked through her countless battles, her training, her evolutions. This was her magic, her ash, her flames. She breathed in and out, opening her eyes and grinning to herself.

"This has got to be one of my more brain-dead ideas," she said, smiling at the ancient king.

Maro laughed to her side, then turned serious again.

"Drop them," she said.

Maro's undead fell. A moment later, she let go of the undead she'd held. One more second passed, and she dispelled the ashen platforms.

She followed the falling undead down, flying straight as she sped up to her full speed. Maro followed a couple of meters behind her, her sphere already picking up the Soul Rippers that flew by, taking the bait. She blinked to avoid one of them, closing the distance to the single enemy undead below.

### **[Undead Rose Knight – ???]**

The armored knight screeched at her as beams of death magic slammed into the Soul Rippers above. Heart of Cinder was released, staggering the knight and causing the mountains of ash around her to swirl upward. Ilea willed it all into a massive whirlwind as she wrapped her ashen limbs around the knight's limbs and body.

Her wings pushed her upward, her other limbs crashing into the pouncing Soul Rippers as Ilea dodged and weaved her way through. She severed the connection to her ash to avoid two of them, appearing behind the knight and grappling him again as her wings brought her higher.

One of the Soul Rippers flew at them, but she avoided it with a twirl. A second and third were slowed by purple beams from above, their trajectory disturbed enough to allow her to narrowly escape without blinking.

The knight struggled, but she was successful in keeping his blade away from her. Another set of enemies were interrupted by death magic and her ashen limbs before she finally reached Maro. The necromancer appeared before her, his hand slamming into the undead's chest.

"Quick, he's paralyzed for a few seconds!" he shouted as the noises from below began to calm.

Ilea sped up, Maro falling behind as she shot for the sunlit part of the city. When the knight started moving again, Ilea trapped his sword arm with ten of her limbs, struggling against his overwhelming strength. And winning. She smiled, pushing herself to keep their flight stable.

Her hand slipped a few seconds later, the two tumbling through the air for a short while. The undead struck her face with a fist but she pushed on, only letting go of him when they reached the upper parts of the city.

The undead crashed into a house, taking one of the walls with him before he stood up and rushed out, focused on Ilea, who had landed in the open square in front of the house. As the knight's blade swung downward,

she folded her wings in front of her to catch it before stopping and looking up at the creature.

She smiled.

A purple beam slammed into the undead's chest, the creature skidding back a few meters.

"Should we take it out?" she asked.

Maro landed next to her as the creature screeched once more. He put a hand on her shoulder, eyes focused on the undead.

"I'd like to fight this one alone. You've done enough." He took a step toward the undead, his shield and purple flames activating. "Thank you."

Ilea remained where she was, her wings vanishing as she crossed her arms. Maro lifted his hands and spoke.

"Kohn Reyker... captain of the guard."

She felt the power in his words; the magic that slammed into the creature began to decay its Stonehammer steel armor as it struggled.

"You remained loyal till the end."

Maro dodged to the side when the sword was thrown, the undead crashing bodily into his necromantic shield a second after, punching and swiping before the sword returned to the undead's grasp. The necromancer stepped to the side a moment later, crouching as the weapon flew over him again.

The beams continued for a while, the undead breaking through his glowing shield several times. The former king simply teleported away whenever it happened, re-engaging with his ranged attack. Ilea felt like he was cheating a little, knowing she had to get close and personal, dodging any incoming strikes from melee range.

Then again, it was more fun that way.

Maro teleported a few more times, using floating purple shields to deflect the creature's blows as his magic slowly decayed its form. Finally, he stepped closer, and as the large sword of the undead glanced off one of his barriers, Maro raised his hand and touched the undead's chest.

Dismissing his helmet, he met the undead's eyes. Then Maro smiled as he watched his former captain of the guard collapse.

"May you find your final rest, warrior of Rhyvor."

**'ding' Your group has defeated [Undead Rose Knight – lvl 509]. For defeating an enemy two hundred or more levels above your own, bonus**

*experience is granted.*

**‘ding’ Blink reaches 3rd lvl 11**

**‘ding’ True Ash Creation reaches 3rd lvl 8**

**‘ding’ Ash and Ember Unity reaches 3rd lvl 8**

“Not bad, King,” Ilea murmured, walking closer as she watched him take a deep breath. She wondered what had really driven him: the report from Rhykker or a wish to bring the ancient captain of his city back from amongst those monsters.

She was glad she had helped either way.

Ilea was also sure the danger of the whole ordeal had played into those skill levels as well. Just killing the knight wouldn’t have granted her those skill levels, even if it was two hundred levels above her own.

She walked over to Maro, his shoulders slumped slightly, the corpse lying before him, unmoving.

“You did everything you could. He can rest now,” Ilea said after a long moment.

He sighed. “I hate that I know he would’ve done the same. Damn righteous prick.” He looked around, then walked to one of the nearby houses.

“Where are you going?” Ilea asked.

“Finding wood. To build a pyre.”

Ilea looked at the corpse, then went to join Maro. She patted his shoulder before going to work.

*An ancient kingdom to bury. Guess that’s quite a task.*

They built the pyre with old and dusty wood, then searched the undead.

“A ring,” Ilea said, showing it to Maro. A storage item.

The king took it without a word and gave her a nod. “Nothing else on him. You mind lighting the pyre?”

When the fire was burning, the two watched the flames consume the rotten armor and corpse, the once powerful guard captain put to rest one final time.

“I think he loved her,” Maro said after a while.

Ilea looked at him.

“Elana. Nothing quite as powerful as love, is there?” he asked, though not to Ilea.

Ilea looked down at her fists, standing there in that forgotten capital, somewhere in the north. “I wonder if my fists will ever be stronger than love,” she murmured.

She looked at the skeleton of the former guard captain and bowed her head ever so slightly.

*I suppose it doesn't matter anymore. May you find peace, ancient knight I did not know. I think Maro liked you more than you thought.*

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## Monsters Left Untouched

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When the pyre had burnt down, Ilea and Maro made their way back to the cathedral at the top of the former capital.

“Thank you, Ilea,” Maro said. “I know you wanted to dive down there, but I also know you didn’t have to.”

“It was fun,” Ilea said, sipping from a bottle of ale as she thought back to all the Soul Rippers jumping to catch her and the undead. “It’ll be a great story to tell. Can’t exactly tell my friends the same *I fought an undead knight* story seventy times in a row. At least there have been Centurions as well recently.”

She smirked but saw that Maro didn’t see the humor in her words.

“How are you feeling?” she asked instead.

He smiled. “Sorry. I know you’re just trying to lighten the mood.” He sighed.

“That’s one hell of a sigh. Jesus,” Ilea said.

“Who’s that?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“I feel kind of shit,” Maro said.

“Very specific.”

“Grief, I guess. Lack of purpose. Excitement, but also bad for feeling excited.”

“Shame?”

“Yeah, that,” Maro said and laughed.

“A bit of a cocktail,” Ilea said. “Maybe let all that run its course for a while, then think about it again. I suggest beating down a dangerous creature. Always helps me center myself.”

“Yes. I figured,” Maro said. “I’d rather have a bar and some interesting people to talk to.”

“You have me,” Ilea said, sipping from her ale.

“Exactly. That’s the problem.”

She laughed.

He laughed.

“Want to check the ring?”

“Can you access it?” Maro asked

Ilea identified the ring.

*All that action for this little thing, she thought as she looked at it. Didn’t even level my Fear Resistance.*

Even in her conscious mind, the creatures were just that by now: creatures. Kind of terrifying but also exciting at the same time. Something to face rather than something to be afraid of. They were too strong to take on right now, but it was only a matter of time and training.

*Not that I have to face them. For all I care, they can rot down here forever.*

**[Ring of Holding – Rare Quality] – [Storage capacity at 12/30]**

**Would you like to claim [Ring of Holding]?**

She accepted, nodding to him. “There’s a bunch of stuff in here. Let’s check it out in the cathedral.”

Maro agreed. He looked a little lost as they made their way there.

Ilea let him be as they entered, instead focusing on the ring.

She summoned each item and put them on the floor, Maro standing next to her to see everything.

*Sword, set of knight’s armor, painting of... She brushed over it. Elana... well.*

Maro chuckled lightly but didn’t comment any further.

There was also food, water, and other essentials like a fire rune and a notebook with a pen. The notebook was, of course, the most interesting piece of the bunch. Ilea handed it to Maro, assuming it was written in their language.

“I’m an archaeologist in my own city.” Maro sighed, starting to flip through the pages.

“You had those?” Ilea asked.

“Yes... I think something like the scavengers living in Hallowfort come close... although the archaeologists weren’t in it for money or survival. More for historical—”

He cut off, turning the page, eyes going wide.

“They did it... He... the team he put together, they pushed into the dungeon, avoiding the monsters thanks to illusion and concealment spells. The place was full of Mothwing corpses, the original monster occupying that dungeon. In the deepest hall, they found runes and Soul Rippers digging into the stone – ‘*confused and scared*,’ he wrote.

“Nothing else was down there. Something must’ve gone wrong during the ascent. Maybe one of the monsters spotted them. Either way, someone brought these creatures here. Someone intelligent enough to use runes,” Maro said, turning the book to show Ilea the writing. “So it was deliberate after all.”

Ilea thought about it, shaking her head. “The runes brought them here? Then we should maybe go have a look. But neither of us is exactly a rogue...”

She started thinking about who could do the job when he interrupted her train of thought.

“No need. They copied the runes down – with great difficulty, it seems.”

When he showed her yet another page in the notebook, the runes burned into her mind as she looked at them. She ignored the mild defensive measure, comparable to a Mind Weaver’s attack.

“You don’t get fucked reading that?” she asked. She had no clue what kind of runes those were.

“Runes, at least reading them, were a great joy of mine. Mind magic Resistance is one of the first things I focused on defensively. Too dangerous to leave a gap like that.”

Ilea checked out the rest of the runes but couldn’t make any sense of anything.

She thought back to Adam Strand and the demons summoned to Ravenhall.

*Guess he wasn’t the first to have an idea like that. Not that it’s a surprise.*

“Any clue what those are? Or who could’ve drawn them?”

“I have no idea,” Maro said. “Which is more concerning than you’d think. I knew at least the basics of all runic systems in the area, even obscure ones.”

Ilea gave him a look.

“It was a hobby. Why are you surprised?”

“I mean, you’ve talked about adventuring, pubs, and drugs. I didn’t take you for someone interested in runes.”

“I’m offended.”

“I apologize.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“I do a little,” Ilea said, raising her hand and moving her thumb and index finger the barest width apart.

“A cult, perhaps? Or something entirely different? But why would anyone unknown to us target Rhyvor?” He shook his head and sighed. “Well, it’s in the past now.”

“I can show it around, see if anyone knows the runes. If you want me to. I’d be interested in finding out,” Ilea said.

Maro seemed to think about it, looking at the old diary that had been preserved well within the ring.

“I got him back. But whatever enemies there were... Tremor is gone. Rhyvor is gone. If you want to play historian or archeologist, I won’t stop you.” He handed her the journal.

Ilea took it and stored it. “You mentioned closing the mind magic resistance gap. Out of curiosity, what other gaps are there that would need to be filled?”

He smiled. “Death magic is one. If I can overwhelm someone’s defenses and they have no resistance, it’s very... well, deadly.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Blood magic is another, as is lightning, surprisingly. Void too, but it’s hard to find something or someone who could train you. There are, of course, some rarer ones that could deal heavy damage, but preparing against things like silver magic is inefficient at best.”

She nodded, feeling some joy in having all the resistances he talked about. She assumed there were simply too many hyper-specialized magic schools out there to get them all. Just spending time on leveling or general defense was perhaps worth more in the end.

But with her potent healing and ability to ignore pain, there was just no way for her to resist working on her resistances. Perhaps now that she'd reached the three hundreds, she could focus on that again once she returned to Ravenhall. Her departure had been rather quick, after all.

"Any clue how runes can create or summon monsters like that?" she asked.

Maro summoned a dagger and scraped something into one of the old chairs, a simple symbol looking a little like an *S*, just drawn by a two-year-old.

"Runes are the language of magic, capable of creating things with mana. Once etched into an object by a rune mage or an enchanter, they can be used by anybody. Now, while the language of magic is universal, its understanding is not something easily taught, or learned."

"The runes Rhyker and his team copied down. Just reading them may kill a level fifty human, put a level one hundred warrior to bed, and even give a headache to someone above two hundred. The reason being that they're not versed in the language."

"These symbols contain knowledge and understanding I cannot comprehend. It's been a while since I've felt that much feedback from just looking at runes. Whatever they do, their effect would be powerful."

"Like opening some kind of doorway through which the Soul Rippers walked? Or creating them from thin air?"

"The former, more likely," Maro said. "I suggest you don't copy them onto a random set of walls and power them up."

"I'll be careful."

He squinted at her.

"I'll be *careful*," she said with a heavy eye roll. "Where do you think they came from, then? Another realm?"

*Could those things be summoned to Earth? The planet would probably be fucked. Though it would be interesting to see what a fifty cal. bullet would do to them.*

The answer was probably nothing. Her next thought was, of course, what such a bullet would do to her. Could her armor take it? *Maybe one day*, she thought wistfully.

"Realm travel is something of legends. Those claiming to be from other realms, at least according to Scipio, never actually understood what happened. They were successful by chance and without intention, or

something else willed it to happen. Are you concerned about your own realm?”

“I don’t know, honestly. Though I certainly didn’t intend to travel through magical realms. Until now, I had assumed it was some kind of magical accident that I ended up here, but with these runes and what I saw in the demon realm? Who knows?

“And as for summoning monsters, I think I’m more concerned about Ravenhall, to be honest. You talk of legends, but I saw it happen. Demons were summoned into the city, and there were plenty of runes involved as well.”

“I understood that demons were different in some way. I hear they were powerful, but three-mark creatures like these? That is something entirely different.”

Ilea didn’t really see it. Whether two-marks or three-marks, they were the same thing. Monsters summoned from another realm. There had even been a three-mark demon whale that was summoned above Ravenhall.

“The one responsible for the demons, could you ask them?”

“Not at the moment. I’ll be sure to ask him quite a few questions if I do meet him again,” Ilea said. “What about this Scipio of yours? Think he’s still kicking?”

“Unlikely. But compared to nearly everyone else I knew, perhaps not impossible. Finding him will be difficult. And he would have grown stronger all this time.” Maro laughed. “Well, the same would be true for the perpetrator of your demon summoning. I suppose it makes sense that knowledge like that is heavily guarded.”

“It does,” Ilea said.

Monsters summoned from another realm, or created somehow with runes that even an ancient necromancer king with an interest in the language of magic didn’t know. She wondered what it all meant. But at the end of the day, Maro was right. Rhyvor was gone, and the monsters that remained here didn’t exactly pose a threat to anyone other than explorers.

*Another mystery added to the pile, she thought. I wonder if I’ll find out more about this particular one at some point or if it’s just a piece of forgotten history of the north.*

“Thank you again for the help, Ilea. I think... yeah... I think I’m ready to accompany you to the south now, if that offer still stands.”

“It does,” Ilea said. “But I don’t know when I’ll be back up here in the north. I want to say my goodbyes before we go. Do you mind coming along, or do you want to wait here?”

“To Hallowfort?”

“And the Taleen dungeon. I want to see Elfie before I go.”

He looked to the door of the cathedral, then glanced at her. “I think I’ll wait here if that’s alright. The last wistful night of an ancient king looking over his forgotten, dust-covered city.”

“No need to be sarcastic, Maro. It’s okay to feel sad, to grieve. Take your time. I’ll come back when I’m done.”

He sighed, and for once, he actually looked his age. Deep wrinkles and grooves were etched into his face, showing the toll of a lifetime of hard choices and responsibility.

“The sarcasm is a defense. An important resistance as well, and a gap you shouldn’t ignore.”

“I’m well versed,” she said, winking at him. He snorted. “I’ll see you later. Enjoy the melancholic brood.”

\* \* \*

Ilea decided to go to the Taleen dungeon first.

The flight was quick, and Ilea passed the entrance without even slowing down, rushing to the Centurion production facility. She looked over the railings, then jumped down and landed on the uppermost layer.

It didn’t take long for her to find Goliath; he was in the same area as he had been last time. Steam rose from a trough of water as he worked with Terok, and there were stacks of ingots and various pieces of gear nearby. Ilea assumed most of it was from the Tremor armory. A few enchantments lit up the machines around them, Goliath having shaped the metal and tools here to his own desires.

As Ilea approached, he looked up at her, a piece of glowing metal on a broad anvil before him.

“You return,” the smith said, looking at her with sparkling golden eyes.

“I return,” Ilea said. “And soon, I will leave the north. For a time, at least.”

“Hmm. Human affairs... in the south. Your journey here, and the strength you have gathered, will move like ripples through your lands, I am sure.”

Ilea crossed her arms as she looked at the smith. “We’ll see about that.”

“Will you return?” Goliath asked. He had stopped his work and looked at her.

Ilea felt a tension in the air. *Is he concerned?*

“Of course, Goliath. I’ll be back as soon as I can. There’s a whole lot more to explore up here. Just need to check on my affairs in the south.”

“Aye, all of those affairs,” Terok said between hard breaths. He lugged around a large chunk of machinery whilst wearing his war machine.

“You’re manual labor now?” Ilea asked him. He did seem to have developed a substantial resistance to Goliath’s presence. That or he was getting some healing help from Neiphato.

“I’ll be whatever Goliath needs me to be. To get his help.”

“Rare ingots you have found within that armory of the ancient king,” Goliath said. “It is... quite amusing... to work them into the shapes that the machine-wearing dwarf wishes. He is quite creative with his designs.”

“Not nearly as creative as you,” Terok said.

Ilea smiled. “Seems like you two have found each other. I knew your war machine was different, even though I haven’t seen many others.”

There had been a few in Hallowfort, all comparable to movable tanks. Terok’s machine was smaller than all the others, and he moved with far more precise and nimble steps. Though perhaps Goliath had meant something else. Ilea didn’t know much about the dwarven war machines.

“Well, I’d offer to build you one in the future, but Goliath got there first,” Terok said and laughed.

Ilea nodded. “I’m still figuring out exactly what it is.”

Goliath’s eyes sparkled, but he didn’t offer anything more. Neither did Terok. Ilea got the feeling the dwarf had learned a few things about her Armaments of Trials. She narrowed her eyes but didn’t pry.

“The elves are out hunting,” Terok said, setting down the massive piece of metal he was carrying.

“You’re not joining them in their hunt?” Ilea asked.

“Not right now. But I will again. Here and there. The little adventure we had was... lively, and training with those Elves was an opportunity that I didn’t want to miss. But I do prefer jobs with a little less risk involved.”

“Another one lost to riches and comfort,” Ilea said with a sigh. “Any clue where the elves are hunting? I wanted to say goodbye, at least for the time being.”

“Hold on with that. Goliath has been working on a little something, and Elfie wanted to be here for it. I’ll go and get them; you just sit tight and have a drink.” He summoned a bottle of something and handed it to her. “Drink – before it gets warm. One last reminder of shitty northern drink before you get the good stuff again.”

Ilea stored it. “I’ll drink with you when you’re back.”

She wondered what they had cooked up. A tiny Centurion necklace to remind her of her time here? A hammer even bigger and heavier than the one she’d gotten from the guard in Hallowfort?

“There’s more where that came from,” Terok said. “Shouldn’t be long.”

Ilea nodded and summoned the bottle again, looking at the painted logo. She may have seen it before in the Abyss, but they’d had quite the selection, despite the small population of Hallowfort. Travelers and scavengers.

*Maybe that’s why the ale and beer up here in the North isn’t exactly the best. I bet half of it comes from one ancient ruin or another.*

She raised the bottle and looked at the murky liquid. Barely any light of the nearby forge and machinery managed to get through.

“To the north,” she said, flicking the cap away before she looked at Goliath. “I don’t suppose you drink?”

“I absorb fluids passively,” the smith said. “But I approve your toast.” He grabbed the glowing ingot on his anvil, joy sparkling in his eyes. “To the ground below, to beasts unknown, to drums and steel, to ash and fire.”

Ilea looked at her bottle. “That toast is so much better. To ash and fire.”

## The Uses of Bones

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By the time Terok returned with the elves, Ilea had taken up residence on one of the broken Taleen machines, sipping on her already underwhelming and now also warm bottle of ale.

*Being able to heat things up is cool and all, but I'll have to somehow get a cooling skill too in the future. Ice magic, maybe. Wonder how I could unlock that one.*

Elfie hissed as he joined them, giving her a slight nod. “I hear you are leaving the north.”

“You say that like I’ll never come back,” Ilea said, hopping down from the chunk of metal before she walked over to him. “Just wanted to let you guys know that I’ll be away for a while.”

She hissed a greeting hiss to the other elves. Neiphato smiled, his sharp teeth showing, while Heranuur and Seviir glared at her with some annoyance. The two looked tired. She assumed the fights hadn’t gone quite as smoothly as they would’ve liked.

“Still, our journeys will lead to different places,” Elfie said. “But I hope we will be reunited again, sometime in the future.”

“I hope so too,” Ilea said.

“Goliath and Terok have made something for you,” Elfie said, glancing at them.

Goliath waved his hand, and an armor stand with a new set appeared from thin air.

The design looked similar to the pieces of armor she'd requested from Goliath before, all the Stonehammer sets. But this one looked less streamlined, less sleek, and more jagged, more vicious. And it was made from bone, not metal. Nor was it full plate.

"You mentioned something about light armor in one of your evolved skills," Terok said.

Ilea stepped closer to the stand, touching the small forward-facing horns jutting out from the temples of the full-face helmet. It looked a bit like a mask, but of course it covered the back of the head as well. A symbol that looked like a flowing rune, almost like calligraphy, was etched into the left cheek.

The openings for her eyes looked more embedded than those on her previous set of armor. The mere fact that it was bone rather than metal gave it all an almost feral look. This set was not that of a knight or soldier; it was that of a gladiator or a scavenger, a survivor.

She grinned, gently moving her hand over the both smooth and rough material, small edges standing out on the shoulder pieces, as well as on the back, hips, thighs, and shins. It wasn't full plate but more focused on vital points, like Terok had alluded to. If it counted as light armor, then the third tier of her Armor of Ash would still count toward her body's resilience.

"It's beautiful," Ilea said.

"I can already hear the *but*," Terok laughed.

"You may wonder why it is bone, not metal," Goliath said.

"We know how many sets of armor have been destroyed in your training," Elfie said.

"This set is made from the bones of the Undying Lord. The spirit of death you fought in the Vineyard Caves," Terok said.

"And it has retained its Timeless quality. Inspect it," Goliath said.

**[Eternal Guardian Armor Helmet – Ancient Timeless Quality]**

**[Eternal Guardian Armor Torso – Ancient Timeless Quality]**

**[Eternal Guardian Armor Arms – Ancient Timeless Quality]**

**[Eternal Guardian Armor Legs – Ancient Timeless Quality]**

**[Eternal Guardian Armor Boots – Ancient Timeless Quality]**

**‘ding’ Identify reaches lvl 9**

*That skill continues to level at weird times...*

“Ancient and timeless,” Ilea said.

“It will regenerate any damage dealt to it with time, even if reduced to almost nothing,” Goliath said. “We have tested it. But you, surely, will do so too.”

“Seviir helped with the shaping of the bone,” Elfie said, glancing at the elf, who hissed in response.

“Thanks,” Ilea said, nodding to the elf before she looked back at the armor.

She liked this. More than all the other non-ashen armor that she’d had. It felt cool to the touch, smooth in some places, rough in others. It wasn’t a perfectly symmetrical piece. It didn’t look ornate or embellished. Nor did it sparkle or reflect the light in a fancy way. No, it looked rough and vicious. It was made for her, and it was hers.

She traced the symbol carved into the cheek. “What does this mean? Is it enchanted?”

“No. We lack the skill to enchant ancient and timeless bone,” Goliath said. “But you may find someone more skilled to do that.” He glanced over at Elfie.

“I do not have a skill in the shaping of armor. But I wanted to leave a mark on it as well,” Elfie said. “If you meet other Cerithil Hunters, they will know that you are an ally to our cause.”

Ilea looked at him and smiled. She waited, but he didn’t elaborate further. “Thank you, Niivalyr,” she said.

She gazed at the armor. With a personal note from Elfie, the armor was shaped to be light to accommodate her skills, made from the undying bones of the spirit she’d felled with Maro. A memory of Rhvor, of her adventures here. Made by Goliath with the help of Seviir and Terok. She would’ve treasured the gift even if it wasn’t timeless, but she would’ve put it into the armory in her house. But with it being timeless, she could actually use it.

“What are you waiting for?” Terok said. “Put it on.”

Ilea grinned. She stored the set and summoned it onto her base-layer pants and shirt. Her field of view was good, better than with the full-plate

steel armor. And it did feel quite light.

Testing her ash, she felt the black armor flow into existence, seamlessly layering itself onto the bone armor. The full effects were in force, her body still as tough as it was without wearing any armor.

She used an ashen limb to scrape into the bone that covered her chest. It took considerable effort. Ilea watched the fine scratch and started smiling when she saw the material reforming all on its own. It was nowhere near as fast as her healing or her forming her ash, but that didn't matter. It was armor that regenerated.

"This is so fucking cool," she murmured, moving her ashen armor into a small sphere on her back, below the bone set. She spread her arms and curtsied as best as she could.

Terok laughed, and Elfie hissed. Neiphato had a smile on his face. Goliath nodded sagely.

"It's not made for a court," Terok said. "More for an arena."

"Or to face Taleen Praetorians," Elfie added.

Ilea smiled. "I may very well wear it to court. Not that I plan to ever attend one." She made a fist. "Can't wait to test it out and have it scratched up and destroyed."

She imagined Claire's reaction when she showed up with a vicious-looking bone armor set. "Lilith, the destroyer," she murmured, moving into a pose.

"It's really better if you don't talk," Terok said.

"Agreed," Elfie said.

"I, too, agree," Goliath added.

"Yes," Neiphato said.

Heranuur didn't seem convinced but ultimately nodded as well.

Sevir seemed ready to get back to fighting Centurions.

"Well then, I won't hold you up any longer," Ilea said. "Good luck on your hunts, Cerithil Hunters." She waved at the three younger elves, then turned to Elfie and offered her hand.

He took it. "Thank you, Ilea. If you ever need my assistance on your journey, come and find me."

"And the same to you, friend," Ilea smiled.

Elfie nodded, squeezing her hand before he let go. "Before I forget. The booklet you asked me to translate. It is a diary, much of it illegible, but there were some interesting entries."

He summoned it and handed it to her. Ilea stored it in one of her many storage items.

“Thank you, Niivalyr.”

He gave her another nod and then hissed, turning toward the other elves. “May your path be prosperous, friend.”

“And yours. Good hunting,” Ilea said.

Elfie hissed, the other elves adding to the sound before they left, heading back into the depths of the Taleen facility.

“Hell of a journey,” Terok said. “Glad you got your set of bones. I’ll stick with metal, though.”

“I do like bones and scales,” Ilea grinned. She did like her drake scale armor, but this one felt more personal.

“You’re damn near a monster too. Just don’t forget you’re human,” Terok said, tapping the chest piece of her armor.

“I won’t.” Ilea cracked her neck. “I’ll see you around, then, Terok. Hopefully with some upgrades to your rig.”

“Oh, I’ll be upgrading,” he said and chuckled to himself. “Really glad I met you back then, near the Penumra dungeon. Got some stories to tell. Hope you’ll visit to tell me more in the future.”

“I will,” Ilea said.

He nodded and offered his armored hand. “Take what you can. Good luck out there, scavenger.”

Ilea grasped the metal hand and grinned. “You too, Terok.”

She looked over at Goliath. The smith was watching with amusement.

“One of flames and steel,” Ilea said, bowing to the floating smith. “Until we meet again.”

“Until we meet again, warrior of ash and bone,” Goliath said.

She smiled and spread her wings, giving the two a last look before she blinked to the open central space of the Taleen facility. She looked down into the deep-reaching Taleen production facility, then flew up and out of the ancient dungeon.

*One more stop to make,* she thought as she sped through the northern landscape. She knew these parts well by now, familiar with the shape of the mountains and rock formations.

It was a quick flight to Hallowfort.

\* \* \*

Hallowfort felt different this time around. It had neither the usual relaxing atmosphere that Ilea had initially associated with the town nor the tension present during the Feynor attack.

There was an energy about it. Awakened walked with purpose, armed and armored. Ilea heard beings speak with heated voices and saw one being with feathery wings strap on a large backpack while another pleaded with them, though she couldn't understand the language they used.

There were more guards too, and more defenses. Earth mages poured their mana into new walls, and the hammering of metal against metal was audible throughout her walk to the Hunter's Den. Nobody stopped her; some beings nodded her way, while others waved with appendages that differed from being to being.

The Hunter's Den looked different as well. Weapons, sets of armor, crates of supplies, and working Awakened had replaced the bar's previous assortment of junk and serene atmosphere.

It felt busy, and this time, Catelyn wasn't sleeping somewhere on a table but instead looked alert, instructing the staff here and there. She stood on top of a large, uncluttered table at the center of the spacious room, a series of maps with marked sections spread out about her. Various beings stood deep in discussion around the table, Elana among them.

When Ilea entered, Catelyn looked up, froze, then did a double take. "Ilea?"

The others took note as well, glancing her way. Haiden, the barkeep, was among them.

"Catelyn," Ilea said. "Am I interrupting something?"

"You are. But I need a break anyway," Catelyn said, looking at the others at the table. None of them opposed her. She jumped down and walked over. "That armor is giving off an interesting energy," she said, stopping in front of Ilea. "I know I'm imposing, but are you available right now?"

"I came here to say that I'm leaving to go south for an undetermined amount of time," Ilea said. "What's going on with the city? This looks like a war room or something."

"We're not at war," Catelyn said, then she sighed. "My apologies. This is not the welcome I would usually give to a customer, let alone a friend who's saved my life."

“You want to grab a bottle of ale and have a chat? Seems like you could use it,” Ilea said, waving at the others and locking eyes with Elana for a moment. The former queen gave her a slight nod.

Catelyn seemed conflicted for a second or two, then nodded. “Yes. You know what? Yes. I just don’t have a lot of time, but if you’re planning to leave, I want to give you a proper farewell at least. Come, if you will. I know a good spot.”

Ilea followed as the fox walked with quick and focused steps, leading her to a small shack and up a shoddy stairwell that led to the roof. Empty chairs of various forms were arranged around the makeshift space. The roof overlooked the vast cavern lake far below the city. Ilea assumed the roof was used to maintain the view now that a wall had been built around the settlement.

A floating sprite with seven ice-like tendrils came out of a complex geometrical structure that Ilea didn’t know the name of and joined them a moment later, speaking with a deep voice that sounded deceptively human.

Catelyn ordered two bottles of ale before she sat down on a block of stone.

Ilea chose an actual chair and looked at the fox-like being. “You seem stressed.”

“I am stressed.”

“Never thought you could walk with that much focus,” Ilea smiled.

Catelyn rolled her eyes. “You wouldn’t believe the weeks I’ve had since that stupid attack.”

Ilea mimed looking at a watch. “I’ve got a few minutes. Tell me about it.”

Catelyn nodded, then laid down on her paws, took in a deep breath, and shuddered. “I will. But first, how have you been? You said you wanted to leave for the south?”

“Yeah. It’s time. Got my evolutions, a ton of gold and equipment, and some Taleen technology that may become important.”

“That friend you said that was teleported away, yes. And the gold, you have more trade in your lands to make use of it, I see. What are you planning to do with it all?”

“I’ll see how things have changed, how everyone is doing. Then, I’m not sure. I’ll think about that when I get there. But I do have a friend who’ll be very happy about the gold, at least,” she said, smiling.

Catelyn smiled back. "I can imagine. I know plenty whose eyes light up when they hear about one resource or another becoming available to them. A way for them to exert their will upon the world. Though I understand that both you and I are a little more hands-on."

"Paws-on," Ilea pointed out.

Catelyn narrowed her eyes.

"But tell me about the town. Is this about the Feynor attack?" Ilea asked.

"Yes," Catelyn said. "The attack has left us a little shaken. We in the council didn't think we'd be targeted like that, but with the attack on the Vineyard Caves, it was only a matter of time after all. I suppose we were hoping things would be different. Foolish in hindsight."

She thanked the floating Awakened that brought them two bottles, then opened her own with one tail. They clinked their bottles together before Catelyn drank deeply.

"So now we're preparing for more to come. More defenses, more guards, more training, and we have to reassure the beings who live here that it's safe to stay. Many have already left to join the Dark Protector. I don't blame them, but I also don't think it's any more safe than being here. If anything, they will be sent to invade Feynor lands, traverse through the hostile landscape, and fight for the simple purpose of war and domination. I'd rather they stay here and defend the home we have built."

"Sounds like a lot," Ilea said.

"It is. But I joined the council long ago and vowed to defend this town both when things are calm and when they're not. We will weather this, as we have weathered other crises. It's just a lot of work, and we could use all the help we can get. Well-paid, of course," Catelyn said.

Ilea thought about it, drinking her ale. She really was looking forward to the southern stuff again. Some of it, at least.

"I'm happy to help if you're under an immediate threat. But I'm not particularly interested in being a guard, nor in attacking Feynor out there."

"I understand. Still felt like I should ask, as one of the councilmembers of Hallowfort. As a friend, I knew you would decline, and I apologize for asking."

"I did get a ton of resources from the vaults in Tremor. Maro left that with me after we got him out. Maybe some of that could be helpful to Hallowfort?"

“Maybe. What did you get?”

“Gold, armor, weapons, and metals, mostly,” Ilea said.

“Hmm. Gold is mostly useless at the moment. Everyone local is willing to help anyway, and few other traders even make it here. The armor and weapons are made for humanoids, I suppose? Humans?”

“Yes.”

“It will be difficult for Awakened to use. As for metals, however, we will buy whatever you can spare. Goliath has offered to create specialized equipment already, and all our smiths and enchanters are giving it their all. But it’s difficult to get more base materials. Scavenging isn’t safe as it is, and with the Feynor now this far south and west, many are taking fewer risks.”

“I can just give you some of the metal; you don’t have to pay me,” Ilea said.

“No. That would feel wrong. It’s already a little questionable to pay you in gold, as many here don’t put much value on such a currency. But knowing how valuable it is in the south, and knowing that you will be going there soon, it feels like a reasonable trade to make. A win for both of us. If you agree, of course. I will pay a premium too, and that is non-negotiable.”

“I’m just offering because the metals really don’t mean that much to me. And I feel like, if anything, they belonged to Rhyvor. My claim is not particularly strong. But if the gold is mostly useless here, I’m sure Claire could put it to good use in the south, as you say.”

“The vaults of Rhyvor, let alone Maro and Elana, wouldn’t be things we’d be discussing without you.”

“I can’t argue that,” Ilea said.

“Good, then we have a deal. Whatever you can spare, we buy. With gold.”

Ilea nodded. “Where should I deposit it?”

“At the Hunter’s Den, after, if you have some time.”

“Sure.”

Catelyn sighed deeply. “Thanks. That will be a weight off our shoulders. Finding raw metal has been getting more difficult. And a lot of our higher-level scavengers are still on their expedition into the Descent.”

“Right. Didn’t they leave a while ago?”

“They did. And there has been no word in all this time. It’s another thing to worry about. I hope at least some make it back. It would be a blow

to Hallowfort if they were lost. Though some hope they will return with artifacts and resources that could help with our situation here.”

“You don’t sound so optimistic,” Ilea said.

“The Descent has lured many. And many have not returned from its depths,” Catelyn said. “I don’t suppose... I could entice you?”

“What? To go explore and look for that expedition and those resources?”

Catelyn smiled.

“Maybe once I come back. You know I’ve been exploring down there already. And I want to see more of it too. But it’s time for me to go south, and I really don’t know how long I will stay.”

“A shame. But very much understandable. And we’ll be here whenever you return,” Catelyn said. “Oh. If you’re going south... can I ask for a favor?”

“Diplomatic ties? More metals?” Ilea asked.

“No.”

Ilea raised her eyebrows.

“Well. Whatever metals or help you can bring is welcome. But there’s something I can’t get here at all. You mentioned before that there were bakeries in your lands? Bakeries that make, hypothetically, something you called a... cake? You know, the gift you once shared with me?”

“I’ll bring you cakes,” Ilea said, smiling. She understood the importance of good food, and while she wasn’t exactly fanatical about cakes herself, she could empathize with the fox-like being.

“A lot of them,” Catelyn said, nodding. “I will pay a premium. Without using the city coffers. Maybe.”

“Maybe?”

“It wouldn’t be the first case of embezzlement. And once I share the cake around, I’m sure the council would agree on the spending. Gold isn’t worth much to them either, after all. But we’re digressing.”

“I’ll bring your cake, fox,” Ilea said, drinking from her ale. “How is Elana doing, by the way?”

“Thank you. And Elana, she’s been a great help in all this. Her skills in organization, logistics, and planning are downright terrifying. I’m not yet sure what her goals are here, but I do think she’s enjoying the work at the very least. And work we have.”

“She’s helping with managing everything?” Ilea asked. “Think she wants to take over?”

“She is helping, yes. Not just with management, but also with preparations, legislation, and potential diplomatic communication with the Dark Protector and even the Feynor, though I doubt we’ll reach any agreements with the latter. Nobody has. And we’ll see. I think her care is genuine. Maybe she still feels a connection with these lands, even though they no longer belong to the ancient queendom she once ruled.”

“Hmm.”

Catelyn was quiet for a moment. “Maybe it’s a way to grieve. Or a way for her to move forward. As I said, we can use all the help we can get. I can’t currently afford to question her motives, and I’m sure she is aware of that too. We’ll see where things go, in time. Change is happening anyway, and the council is currently meeting every single day.”

“The toll of responsibility,” Ilea mused.

Catelyn smiled. “You are young, full of energy, and full of freedom. In some ways, I envy that. But responsibility is not just a burden, Ilea. There is a lot of meaning in duty, even though it can be difficult. Maybe precisely because of that. You struggle against monsters, I struggle trying to support this settlement and its people. Maybe you will understand someday.”

“Maybe,” Ilea said. She did enjoy that she wasn’t tied down at the moment. Of course she had connections, people she cared about, and places too. She’d built a new home here in Elos, in Ravenhall. And she did feel a connection to Hallowfort and its people, though more so because she just really enjoyed being in the north. But she was just as happy with the fact that she could come and go as she pleased. And she hoped that would never change.

“You’ve become quite a powerful warrior since you first arrived here,” Catelyn said. “And you remind me of myself in some ways. You have not been here for long, not even in Hallowfort a lot, and yet you’ve left such an impression. The people here know you: the solo adventuress who hunted the Blue Reapers, defied Krentin, and befriended the solitary Goliath – and me, for that matter. You killed the Undying Lord and fought the Feynor to defend us Awakened, here and in the Vineyard Caves. Few know of your exploits in Tremor or your connection to Elana. But you’ve made a name for yourself.”

“What are you getting at?” Ilea asked.

Catelyn sipped from her ale, looking at her with a knowing smirk.  
“Who knows, Ilea. Who knows.”

Ilea narrowed her eyes.

“And so easily annoyed,” Catelyn snickered. “It will be a great loss to see you go.”

“I’ll be back,” Ilea said. “Don’t make me feel guilty.”

“I would not. You can do what you feel is right. And you owe nothing to us. However, you are a friend, and you are a resource that Hallowfort could make use of. Now that you have reached level three hundred, your power cannot easily be dismissed, and as a councilmember, I cannot just let you run off without a way to contact you.”

Ilea leaned in, intrigued.

“I understand you are a mercenary,” Catelyn said.

“What do you have in mind?”

“You’re a powerful and trustworthy ally, and I have a feeling that Ilea will not remain at her current level of power for long. We could likely offer you potential opportunities and jobs in the future. If you are willing to work with us. For fair compensation, of course.”

“I already agreed to bring you cakes.”

“I’m not thinking of cakes for once, Ilea. I’m thinking of situations like the Feynor attack, when we are desperate to defend ourselves against people and monsters that threaten our very existence. And I would like to have a way to call for a friend like you – not just a friend, a powerful warrior – who could fight by our side against whatever would threaten us. If you are willing to answer the call.”

“You know I am,” Ilea said. “At least if I’m not otherwise occupied with something important. I won’t choose between you and my friends in the south.”

“I won’t ask you to. I won’t be able to anyway,” Catelyn said, giving her a considering look.

Two spheres appeared on one of her tails. They were covered in runes and glowed with bright magic in Ilea’s sphere.

“These are Glint spheres, forged and crafted long ago, found in ancient ruins. They are rare and valuable artifacts. I would like you to have one. Take it, and activate it with your mana.”

Ilea looked the small marble over, feeling a magical connection to it. She willed her mana into it and saw how the sphere opened up, almost like

a blooming flower. She saw that the other sphere, still on Catelyn's tail, did the same.

She felt a faint pulse as well, repeating every other second.

"They are connected through magic I do not know or understand. An ancient gift, perhaps, from the Spirits of Old or crafted by civilizations past. I don't know if there is a limit to their range, but there does not seem to be. If we are in need, then you will know."

"An emergency signal of sorts."

"Yes," Catelyn said. "I will not use it lightly. Only when I'm desperate for another high-level warrior, one like yourself. Your sphere will lead you to this one, pulsing faster the closer you get."

"It would take me a while to get here."

"I know. As I said, I will not use it lightly. All I want is the ability to call."

Ilea looked at the sphere and held it up. "Can we test while it's in storage?"

"I tested it already. It will expand once you take it out," Catelyn said.

"Cool," Ilea said, storing the sphere. It felt nice. As if she was some kind of spy or secret weapon...

*Call her.*

*Are you sure, boss?*

*Yes. It is time.*

*Then my theme starts playing. Dadadadadum, ash all over.*

She could see that Catelyn was giving her a strange look as she played out the scene in her head.

"What?"

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Ilea said, leaning back in her chair and tapping one of her bone bracers. "We should probably wrap this up, then."

"We should. Duties call," Catelyn said. "It was good to see you. Apologies for the serious nature of our talk. I would've enjoyed having some tea and cake in my den – a quiet, empty den. Perhaps with some alchemy experiments."

"I'll look forward to that another time, then," Ilea said.

"Me too," Catelyn smiled. "Now come. We've got a trade to complete."

Ilea followed, soon summoning entire crates of metal ingots into a backroom of the Hunter's Den, causing quite a few eyebrows and similar

body parts to rise from nearby beings when they saw what was happening.

Catelyn didn't have to talk to her allies for long as chests full of gold coins, pieces, and artifacts were gathered to be exchanged for the copious amounts of metals.

Ilea did keep some of them, enough to maybe have a weapon made from each, but mainly to have a gift for Balduur once she was back.

As she left, Ilea stopped near Elana. "There's something I wanted to tell you, if you have a minute. Maybe not here, either."

Elana gave her a look, then excused herself and followed Ilea outside.

"What is it?" Elana asked. She seemed impatient.

"We found Captain Reyker," Ilea said. Elana's eyebrows rose. "He had become one of the undead. They went into the dungeon infested with Soul Rippers and found runes that suggest someone summoned them or ripped a hole through realms. I thought you might've wanted to know that. Maro fought the undead. We burned the body."

Elana was silent for a moment. "Thank you," she said eventually. Her voice sounded timid compared to before. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to brush you off. I'm glad about what you've done. It's just..."

"Sure," Ilea said. "He left a diary too, and his storage ring. If you wanted either. I'd just have to copy down the runes he found, it's—"

Elana shook her head. "Keep it."

She seemed a little lost.

Ilea looked at her. "Are you sure you want to stay? I know you're already involved, but—"

Ilea raised a hand. "No. I don't need your pity. Or your help, for that matter. Not anymore."

Ilea nodded.

Elana sighed. She looked older for a moment, vulnerable, and, most of all, tired.

"Rhyvor is gone. And now that Maro and Tremor are free at last... there is nothing more. I must move forward. It is what I've always done, Ilea. Maro has always found it easy to go from one place to the next, and now that our kingdom is no more, he is free of his duty. But as for me? I suppose I can't help being stubborn."

Her focus returned, the weariness gone in an instant.

"My people are gone, my cities reduced to dust. But here I will remain."

Ilea took her in. She remembered the paintings in the vault, the proud Queen of Rhyvor. “To revive your queendom? To take power?”

“What is it to you?” Elana asked, narrowing her eyes.

“I care about Hallowfort, about the beings that live here. And you are a dangerous woman.”

“You don’t trust me,” Elana said, shaking her head. “I will not hurt your friends here.”

“But Rhyvor is gone, and I don’t see why you would care about Hallowfort and its people.”

Elana breathed in deeply, shuddering slightly. “I don’t,” she said in a whisper.

“Then why stay? Why get involved with the council?”

Elana’s lips quivered. She stepped closer and spoke with a shaking voice. “Because it’s what I know.” She looked up and met Ilea’s eyes. Her voice cracked slightly. “Because this is my *home*.”

*She’s not staying to get power. She’s staying to grieve.*

“I’m sorry, Elana.”

“I said I don’t need your pity,” Elana spat. “All those years in that vault. All those years. I had hope. Hope for the future. Not for two scavengers looking for treasure. And now...? No.” She breathed in deeply. “I’m sorry, Ilea. Perhaps it is best I return to my duties. I am here now, in Hallowfort. And I will move forward.”

“I’m sure you will.”

Elana looked at Ilea and gave her an almost timid smile. Then she nodded and turned, glancing back at her one more time. “Good fortune to you, warrior of ash.”

Then Elana left. And that was that.

Ilea wasn’t entirely sure what to make of her now, but she couldn’t imagine what she was going through either. Maro had spent less than a year stuck in his necromantic contraption. But Elana? Years? Decades? And not even in the tube of mist. And while Maro surely cared about Rhyvor, Ilea could tell that for Elana, there was more to it. Far more.

There was a lot of pride. A queen, the ruler of a nation. And yet, for a moment there, Ilea had seen that she, too, was human.

She stood there in front of the Hunter’s Den for a long moment until Catelyn came out and joined her.

“She seemed almost shaken. Anything I need to worry about?”

“I don’t know,” Ilea said. “Keep an eye on her, I guess. In general. I think she could use a friend, or five. Just not a scoundrel scavenger like myself.”

“Yes. You two don’t strike me as particularly compatible.” Catelyn snickered, then spoke in a more serious tone. “I’ll take care of her.”

“Didn’t take you for the motherly type,” Ilea said.

Catelyn smiled before her face took on a more thoughtful expression. “I suppose I can empathize with her loss. But do run along now. We’ve held you up for too long, young human. Adventure calls.”

“Don’t patronize me.”

“Hush, scoundrel. You have monsters to fight, dungeons to explore. Go forth.”

Ilea rolled her eyes. “Sure. I mean, I do enjoy that stuff.”

“Don’t forget the cake,” Catelyn said kindly. “Safe journey to you – safe enough for you not to die.”

Ilea crouched down, then petted Catelyn’s fluffy head. “Thanks, mother.”

She laughed when the fox burst into flames, the look on her face both amused and pissed at the same time.

“Leave.”

“Yes. Glad to have found you.”

“Me too.”

Ilea spread her wings and ascended. She waved at the fox, then made her way out of the settlement, but not before she turned one more time to look at the massive and ancient stone statue, the expansive and crystal-lit caverns, and the glittering lake far below.

*It really is a lovely place.*

*I do hope I can come back soon.*

She took a deep breath and moved her wings.

*Time to pick up a necromancer king.*

## SEVEN

### The Way Back

---

When she returned to the surface, Ilea couldn't help but feel drawn toward the Penumra dungeon. It was so close, after all. Ilea spread her wings and murmured to herself, "I want to at least try once more before I go..."

She jumped down toward the massive roots and vines that filled the dungeon entrance. When she reached a root around thirty meters in, she started heating up her Heart of Cinder. The first Drop Saurians were already moving up the walls and nearby roots. The ranged monsters sent their thorns her way, but this time, they couldn't even penetrate her ashen armor.

When the first monster reached her, sixteen sharp ashen limbs greeted it, cutting deep into its flesh. Blood started leaking down its torso as it screeched at her, more of the beasts charging in response to the cry. Her limbs wove around her, slicing through the monsters.

Their defenses were enough to prevent her from outright killing them, but the wounds were severe. Many of the creatures darted away again after their initial approach. When Ilea's Heart of Cinder flared out, a group of seven were engulfed, and their wounds, coupled with the fire and heat, were too much to survive.

**'ding' You have defeated [Drop Saurian – lvl 362]. For defeating an enemy fifty or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted.**

...

**'ding' You have defeated [Drop Saurian – lvl 391]. For defeating an enemy eighty or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted.**

She stood there, amongst the dead creatures, looking out at the others.  
*They're too weak.*

When the last heat of Heart of Cinder had subsided, the nearby Drop Saurians seemed warier. Those that had not yet attacked were just staring at her from a distance while the injured ones simply fled. The ranged variants continued their fruitless assault, lacking either sight or an understanding of what had just happened.

*They just attack blindly.*

She caught one of the thorns and looked it over, spreading her wings again before she flew up and back out of the dungeon.

*Might revisit that one... but not today.*

Ilea had spent very little time in Penumra. She felt a little disappointed that she had likely missed her opportunity to find a good level of challenge there. When she'd last entered, the creatures were far too dangerous. And now? Now they hardly posed a threat.

She made her way back to Tremor and found Maro sitting on top of the cathedral, looking out over the ancient city.

"You're done?" he asked.

"I am," Ilea smiled. "You as well?"

He stood up and dusted off his armored robe. "Yes."

"Southward then. Now. Where is south exactly?"

Maro sighed. "We should get you some basic astronomy lessons. Not just to get to the south, but so that you can also find your way back here, if you need to."

"Sounds like a plan."

"You hadn't thought about it?"

"I'm pretty familiar with some of the mountains and rock formations. I think I would've found it... eventually."

"Eventually," Maro sighed. "You're somehow both the best and worst adventurer I've ever met. Come, I'll teach you on the way. It'll be easier – and more fun."

As they flew, Maro explained the positions of the suns to her, what they meant, and where they rose and set. At night, he started with the

constellations, the ‘sword and wheel’ as well as the ‘light of the east,’ a star that was easily distinguishable.

Ilea could already somewhat see where they were, and the more constellations he pointed out, the more exact her estimations of their traveling direction became. At least in her head. So far, there was no reference point, neither in the south nor in the north, but as soon as she was somewhere she had been before, it would become clear.

She wrote all of it down in her notebook, and when the suns rose again, she determined both started in the east and set in the west, just like back on Earth.

\* \* \*

No sunlight reached the crevice anymore as Ilea and Maro flew southward through the northern landscape. Ilea slowed to a stop when she saw mist flowing in from the top of the crevice, the last light of the suns coloring the sky a deep shade of red.

She flew up and landed on an outcropping of rock, checking to see if there were any storms left in the vicinity. She found none.

“We’ve been flying all day. A break to eat and drink?” Maro asked.

Ilea rolled her shoulders. “That too,” she said, squinting to look at the appearing Miststalkers moving with slow and circular motions through the lakes of mist. It looked almost like a dance of sorts, but the lack of music gave it all an eerie atmosphere.

“You want to level your resistances more?” he asked.

Ashen armor formed around her, starting at the small dot on her back. Her wings spread, and her ashen limbs extended.

*Would I look just as eerie to someone else by now? With all this ash?*

She pointed at the mist. “*You* will be leveling your drain resistances. *I* will try to kill them.”

She thought back to when she first came north, first faced those monsters. How she had damn near died, mostly because of their constant paralyzing song.

*But I didn’t die. And now I want to see how much of a threat they still are.*

Maro looked at the dancing Miststalkers. “They vanish after you damage them for a while. I tried.”

“When did you try that?”

“You slept all through last night. I didn’t.”

“Fair. Well, I’ll try to hold on to them. Might be it prevents their escape.”

He nodded. “Yeah, I’m not getting that close to them.”

Ilea walked toward the dancing figures. “Just let them drain you, and don’t steal my kills. I’ll murder you if you do.”

“I don’t believe you,” Maro replied. “Just let me know if you need help.”

“I will.”

Ilea walked to the shore. *Now what should I try? Grab one of them and get it out, fly off with one, or just tank it?*

She decided that flying up and grabbing one with her ash was the safest bet. If she could even grab the downright spectral beings. She saw the magic in her sphere pulse when she got closer to the lake, the mists themselves forming tendrils of power.

The first dancing Miststalkers noticed her a moment later, slowly meandering toward her as they spun their scythe-like arms around and around.

### **[Miststalker – ??]**

*Just two question marks. Should be manageable.*

Still, she could feel her heartbeat pick up, her breaths become faster, her fists tense. When she had last tried, their high numbers had been the main problem, but she still found them eerie.

*One way to change that.*

She felt the drains, barely noticeable now, then approached the creature. She waved at it and wrapped her ashen limbs around its form, smiling as she found purchase and flew up into the night air.

As the monster was pulled up with her, Ilea felt her health and mana slowly drain, the latter regenerating more quickly than the creature could steal it.

When the monster lost its connection to the mists, it started evaporating immediately, as if it were cotton candy dunked in water. When Ilea blinked

her eyes, the creature was gone, as if it had never existed. No kill notification appeared.

*Alright, I guess this is going to be a little more complicated than fishing in shallow waters.*

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## EIGHT

# Weather

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Ilea hovered over the mists and found herself a single monster, dancing aimlessly through the ethereal lake of white mist. Its body lit up in her sphere as if it were made of magic itself.

She spread her wings wide, her sixteen ashen limbs aiming forward, all of her buffs active. She sacrificed health as her body started glowing neon blue and fiery red under her ashen armor. She grinned at the feeling, remembering the difference between her first foray into the north and her current self.

*Alright, let's go.*

She rushed down, the Miststalker barely turning her way before she impacted it, her limbs coiling around its scythe-like arms, torso, and head, its white eyes staring back at her. Destructive healing mana started flowing into it immediately.

She felt the monster try to disperse, the wisps of mana flowing away but whipping back as if her ashen limbs were magnetic.

“Who’s paralyzed now?”

She punched with Destruction and Storm of Cinders, heating up her core in the meantime. The damage stacked up, each hit sending more mana into the Miststalker. Ilea could feel the creature weakening. She finally released the heat stored within her, burning heat and fire flaring out and through the monster.

A ding resounded in her mind and she smiled, turning to look at a group of monsters approaching in her sphere as her health and mana drain increased drastically. Still, it felt manageable.

***'ding' You have defeated [Miststalker – lvl 421] – For defeating an enemy one hundred and ten or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted.***

*Looks like I've found a pastime to make this journey less monotonous.  
She slammed her fists together and slowly ascended with her wings.*

After a blink brought her to the closest monster, she found its arms rather weak against her ashen limbs. The mist-like protrusions tried to push through, but her armor refused.

*Second-tier mist resistance?*

It had to be. When she first fought them, she'd thought they were using curse magic, but it turned out that mist magic passing through her body felt quite similar.

Ilea felt more scythe-like arms try to dig into her as the other Miststalkers closed in. She kept her attacks focused on the first one, and a ding hit her mind soon after. She flew up and blinked as soon as none of them were touching her anymore.

***'ding' You have defeated [Miststalker – lvl 408] – For defeating an enemy one hundred or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted.***

*Looks like they're at four hundred and higher. They don't feel that dangerous, though? Is that just where my current power is at, or is there more to it?*

The Blue Reapers were a little lower in level, but Ilea still thought them far more dangerous, with their mind and lightning magic. The monsters in the Penumra dungeon were at a lower level too, but they had dangerous venom.

*Maybe it's a matter of resistances? I guess mana and health drains could be pretty dangerous, especially without a healer nearby or a way to quickly teleport or fly away.*

*I'll want to work on those when I get back to the south. Maybe I can hire a bunch of people like in Hallowfort? Sounds like a nice pastime as well, and I could round out my defenses.*

After two kills, there was no level-up message. Ilea knew that the challenge and familiarity of the fights were relevant, but higher-level monsters seemed to provide some experience regardless.

*The Kingsguard were much more difficult to face, but the level difference isn't that crazy. Around a hundred? But I suppose knowing that Identify changes from two to three marks at level five hundred means something.*

*Well, looks like I'll be busy on the way back.*

When her Heart of Cinder started to damage her, Ilea checked her health and mana as she watched the group of seven Miststalkers dance below her, trying to reach the flying food with their scythes.

She smiled and blinked down, the sphere of cinders, heat, and fire flashing out over the creatures. Her ashen limbs moved in right after, wrapping themselves around the injured monsters.

Ilea pulled them closer, pushing her destructive mana into them as she punched the closest target with her mana intrusion abilities. One after the other, they fell.

It looked like more Miststalkers were forming in the area around her – by now, over thirty of them were draining her health and mana. She was able to finish five of them before her Heart of Cinder exploded once more, so Ilea blinked up and spread her wings in the moonlight.

The creatures fanned out below her, moving away as she hovered there, too high for them to worry about now that she wasn't damaging them anymore.

***'ding' You have defeated [Miststalker – lvl 430] – For defeating an enemy one hundred and twenty or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted.***

...

***'ding' You have defeated [Miststalker – lvl 411] – For defeating an enemy one hundred or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted.***

She smiled, breathing in the cold winter air. The recent fights against the Feynor and the Praetorians had been tense, so she very much welcomed this

rather serene method of killing Miststalkers and grinding some experience.

She soon deemed it more efficient to fly around and target single creatures or pairs before going up again. She still occasionally faced more because it was fun, but the combined drain of ten or more stalkers was bothersome, even if it only meant she needed to go up and wait for her mana to regenerate.

She lost herself in hunting the creatures for a while but eventually returned to Maro. The necromancer was meditating around twenty meters away from the mist lake. Rocks crunched under her ashen boots when she landed.

“I can actually kill them,” she announced.

One eye opened, glancing her way. “Their drain magic is tedious. Feels like my life is slowly being sapped. It sucks.”

“I mean, that is literally what they do, right?”

“Yes. But I’m not a healer.”

“You could have just asked.”

He waved her off. “I think it’d be better to let my natural regeneration do its job. I’ve been trying to get some kind of healing or health drain ability for ages, but I think I just didn’t commit enough.” He sighed. “Maybe now? After all this time?”

Ilea thought he didn’t sound particularly convinced. She wondered why. If she didn’t have her healing and there was such an easy way to maybe unlock something further down the line, she’d be sitting here for months.

“How long do you want to stay here?” he asked.

She felt that question confirmed her assumption. “An hour or so? Not sure. We can move on and find another lake, kinda travel slowly. Once the suns are out again, we can go faster.”

He looked at her and nodded. “You’re the guide.”

“I’m the guide,” Ilea confirmed.

She still had no clue where they were.

\* \* \*

Ilea wasn’t absolutely lost, of course. She had some general idea of where north and south were, thanks to the very rudimentary astronomy lessons

that Maro had given her. There were also a few stars that guided her, and she continued to add more with Maro's help.

Hours of travel and fighting passed, Ilea's hunting speed increasing as she learned about the creatures, how much they could actually take, how they formed and moved. How long it took for them to notice her in different scenarios.

She found that the creatures appeared continuously, no matter how many she killed. It was as if they were a part of the environment, sprouting out of the mist lakes with their sole desire for life and mana. The songs they occasionally sang were serene, and now that her Veteran skill was high enough, she actually enjoyed them.

No Famine Crows or other monsters interrupted them that night. When the first color of the suns started to paint the distant horizon, Ilea landed on a small mountain peak and waited for Maro.

He landed a moment later. "We should find a crevice somewhere and go on from there," he said. "Storms are coming."

Ilea followed his gaze. There were no clouds yet, but she knew they appeared quickly, as if some balance tipped and purple lightning replaced the lakes of mist. Already, she saw the mists dispersing.

"Why are we not moving?" Maro asked, though he sounded more intrigued than anything else.

"Why don't you go and find a place to hide from the storms. I want to try something."

"Really? You know you can't punch an arcane storm."

"Oh? Are you the authority on storm-punching now?"

He sighed. "Well, I'll be going in that direction. If I see you get evaporated, I'll continue southward alone."

"At least loot my stuff," Ilea said.

"That goes without saying," Maro replied. Then he winked in a very charming way.

She smiled at him, noting the slight worry in his eyes. "I'll be fine."

"Just be careful."

"It's a bunch of weather. How bad can it be?"

\* \* \*

The clouds formed.

Maro had already left, Ilea glancing around to see his form vanish into one of the crevices nearby.

She turned back toward the dark clouds and saw the first flashes of purple light in the distance, all life in the north forced down into the cracks and into the caves and tunnels underground.

*Not all of it.*

She spread her wings, feeling the excitement and anticipation, her heart beating quickly.

*Should I really do this? I mean, I'm tough, and both my arcane and lightning resistances are high, but exactly how stupid is this?*

*It would really suck if I got all the stuff from Tremor, destroyed the Praetorians, and got that Taleen artifact only to die here because I'm taking stupid risks.*

And still.

She wanted to try.

She really wanted to try.

So she did it with as much preparation as she could, finding a storm cloud and checking for nearby cracks in the land. She would be able to escape quickly. And now she could test the waters. This wasn't a sapient creature, as far as she knew, just a very dangerous weather phenomenon.

Ilea approached the edge of the storm and saw lightning crack down into the ground. A shock wave hit her, bits and pieces of rubble flying by. It felt powerful. Powerful, but not like the overwhelming force it'd been upon her arrival in the north.

She flew farther in, the light of the suns vanishing behind the large and moving cloud. She could feel the arcane energies, whether they were residual or from the storm itself. Her sphere was bright with magic.

Lightning shot down, a dozen or so meters away. The ground shook, the air burned, and Ilea raised her right wing to cover herself against the shock wave. She strained against the arcane-fueled air, rocks glancing off her armor, leaving small scratches and dents here and there.

Another strike blasted down, this one sending her tumbling through the air. Another came closer, forcing her to blink. She was focused, using her blink whenever she felt the arcane energies spike too close to her.

And still, she got closer and closer to the strikes, feeling the heat, the sheer arcane power. One strike came down mere meters away from her, and

she could feel her body heat up slightly.

She felt the excitement now and slowly got more comfortable within the storm. When one blink brought her right below a forming thread of purple light, it felt to her as if time was slowed, the second tier of Azarint Perception activating.

*Bring it on!*

She willed her wings above herself, crossing her arms to shield herself and bringing a meager wall of ash to life in the little time she had left. All of it was washed away when the pure arcane energy flowed through her, sending Ilea to the stone ground, burning up damn near everything that made up her body.

The energy continued moving through her as she twitched, her blood evaporated and her organs destroyed. Her eyes were gone, her sphere the only thing that let her see. She tried to get up, but her body didn't move.

*Heal.*

Her instincts kicked in, sacrificing a chunk of mana with her third-tier Sentinel Reconstruction to rapidly bring her back. She coughed and stood up, her armor reforming and her wings spreading again as wisps of purple energy moved about her form. Another bolt of lightning slammed down a dozen meters away, the shock wave washing over her as she skidded for a couple of meters.

Ilea breathed out, blinked out of the storm, then flew to the closest crevice, where she crashed down and rolled on the ground. She felt her heartbeat and laughed.

“Holy shit! ... Holy shit...” she repeated, sitting up, glancing up to make sure the storm hadn’t followed her down here. “I tanked it.”

Ilea looked at her trembling hands and laughed again before staggering to her feet and raising her fist toward the sky.

“Fuck you, storm!”

Loud impacts resounded from above, but the storm didn’t seem to be addressing her directly.

*Fuck. I didn’t expect it to hit that hard after the near hits only burned through a bit of skin.*

She thought it was also possible that the separate strikes of lightning or even the clouds varied in power. She checked her messages, seeing some from the past night as well as just now. The storms were certainly

dangerous. Very much so, but she couldn't deny either that they were very good training for her Arcane Magic Resistance.

**‘ding’ You have defeated [Miststalker – lvl 418] – For defeating an enemy one hundred and ten or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted.**

...

**‘ding’ You have defeated [Miststalker – lvl 402] – For defeating an enemy ninety or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted.**

**‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 306 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 307 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 305 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 306 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ Absolute Destruction reaches 3rd lvl 14**

**‘ding’ Sentinel Reconstruction reaches 3rd lvl 14**

**‘ding’ Azarinth Fighting reaches 3rd lvl 11**

**‘ding’ Azarinth Reversal reaches 3rd lvl 3**

**‘ding’ Armor of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 13**

**‘ding’ Keeper of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 6**

**‘ding’ Mist Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 6**

**‘ding’ Mist Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 7**

**‘ding’ Mist Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 8**

**‘ding’ Arcane Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 8**

**‘ding’ Arcane Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 9**

**‘ding’ Arcane Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 10**

**‘ding’ Arcane Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 11**

*Four levels of resistance from just a few near hits and that direct one. Though I guess it'll be less effective now.*

The Miststalkers had also boosted her health and mana drain resistances, both of which were already at the end of the second tier.

*Still, nothing about a third-tier resistance. Guess I'll just have to level up more of them, see if I unlock anything else.*

“She survived,” Maro said when he landed nearby.

“You were watching?” Ilea asked.

“Yes. Not that you were easy to spot. I don’t know if I should be impressed or terrified.”

“There’s far worse out there than that lightning,” Ilea said with a smile. She hadn’t experienced anything worse personally, but she knew there was worse.

Maro looked up at the skies and nodded. “Probably. And you’ll probably try and face that too.”

“Probably,” Ilea said. “Now help me with more Death Magic Resistance while we continue.”

## NINE

# A Relaxing Vacation

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Over the next few days, Ilea and Maro traveled through the northern landscape in a vaguely southward direction.

Ilea spent copious amounts of time training with the Miststalkers at night and in the storms by day, though she tried not to get hit by any direct lightning strikes anymore. Training methods that wouldn't be recommended for most adventurers if they didn't have very strong defenses and, more importantly, a powerful ability to heal their mangled damn near corpse.

They took a break one night after Ilea had gotten another level in her ash Class. Maro sat nearby and read a book, having already given up on raising his resistances. She didn't bother him about it, looking at her own messages instead.

***'ding' You have defeated [Miststalker – lvl 420] – For defeating an enemy one hundred and ten or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted.***

...

***'ding' You have defeated [Miststalker – lvl 428] – For defeating an enemy one hundred and twenty or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted.***

**‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 308 – Five stat points awarded**

...

**‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 310 – Five stat points awarded – Third-tier skill point awarded**

**‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 311 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 307 – Five stat points awarded**

...

**‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 310 – Five stat points awarded – Third-tier skill point awarded**

Ilea considered the thirty points she had to spend. She found that while her main stats still had the most impact on her resilience and pure damage output, her secondary stats were starting to fall too far behind. Her low Strength, Dexterity, and Endurance had finally started to hold her back.

Those resulted in torn muscles that she had to heal, punches that she felt could be quicker, stronger, and more frequent, and reactions to attacks that she could see but couldn’t move fast enough to deal with. So, she decided to get them up to speed until they felt more balanced and she could focus on her main stats again. She added the points to Vitality, Endurance, Strength, and Dexterity.

The time she’d needed to reach three hundred-eleven in Azarinth Sentinel was a whole lot longer than the previous level, letting her know that hunting the Miststalkers was already getting less and less efficient. She had been able to tell, as she’d already found herself thinking about other things while she fought them. It wasn’t a challenge anymore.

She did feel a little disappointed that the fights had lost their appeal so quickly after the far longer time she’d spent fighting the Centurions and Knights of the Rose, but she supposed not every monster could live up to her expectations. She would just have to find another.

Ilea looked through the other skill level gains before deciding on her new third-tier abilities.

**‘ding’ Absolute Destruction reaches 3rd lvl 15**

**‘ding’ Absolute Destruction reaches 3rd lvl 16**

**‘ding’ Sentinel Reconstruction reaches 3rd lvl 15**

**‘ding’ Sentinel Reconstruction reaches 3rd lvl 16**

**‘ding’ Azarinth Awakening reaches 3rd lvl 13**

**‘ding’ Blink reaches 3rd lvl 12**

**‘ding’ Azarinth Fighting reaches 3rd lvl 12**

**‘ding’ Azarinth Reversal reaches 3rd lvl 4**

**‘ding’ Azarinth Reversal reaches 3rd lvl 5**

**‘ding’ Azarinth Reversal reaches 3rd lvl 6**

**‘ding’ Armor of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 14**

**‘ding’ Armor of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 15**

**‘ding’ Aspect of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 9**

**‘ding’ Keeper of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 7**

**‘ding’ Arcane Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 12**

...

**‘ding’ Arcane Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 16**

**‘ding’ Death Magic Resistance reaches lvl 14**

...

**‘ding’ Death Magic Resistance reaches lvl 20**

**‘ding’ Heat Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 14**

**‘ding’ Mist Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 9**

**‘ding’ Mist Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 10**

Ilea knew the skill level gains would slow down more and more as she got used to the Miststalkers and her own Class levels closed in a little more. Nevertheless, given the ease of hunting them, it felt a little like a vacation. Just focusing on training without much danger.

The storm training was now the most exciting part of the traveling, but with her perception and instant recovery, even the dicey moments were getting increasingly manageable. Getting hit by lightning once was scary. Twice was a bit tricky. But three times and more, it was slowly becoming routine.

And her stat points were slowly increasing as well. Every point in Wisdom made her mana pool bigger, her recovery a tiny bit higher. Every point in Vitality made the lightning just a little less effective. Every point in

Intelligence made her enemies fall just a tiny bit faster. The same was even more true for every skill level of both her Class skills and her Resistances.

And while she felt the gradual increase in her power, she was now looking at two third-tier points, and so far, those had been some of the more interesting increases in her toolset.

She summoned a meal, as was customary now for any major level-ups or evolutions. Not one made by Keyla, sadly. Something she'd have to remedy once she was back.

*I do hope Claire managed to get the Golden Drake. And I hope Keyla made it back to Ravenhall.*

**3rd-tier skill points available [The Azarinth Sentinel]: 1**

**Skills available for 3rd-tier advancement in [The Azarinth Sentinel]:**

- **Sentinel Sphere**
- **Sentinel Core**
- **Azarinth Perception**

**3rd-tier skill points available [Kin of Ash]: 1**

**Skills available for 3rd-tier advancement in [Kin of Ash]:**

- **Avatar of Ash**
- **Heart of Cinder**
- **Eyes of Ash**

Ilea smiled. There were more skills available than last time. She leaned back and focused, thinking about her Azarinth skills. Her Sphere and Perception were still more passive bonuses. While they were incredibly important to her survival, she just couldn't see them adding anything major to her arsenal with a third tier. Maybe they would, but it felt less graspable.

However, the change Sentinel Core got on its evolution was massive. She wanted to know how it would improve. *I think that one is clear for me.* She selected Sentinel Core, the corners of her mouth moving into a massive grin as she read through the notification.

**'ding' Sentinel Core reaches 3rd lvl 1**

**Passive: Sentinel Core – 3rd lvl 1:**

**Your body was changed by magic. All pain is reduced greatly. Your body is 40.5% [364.5%] more durable. You heal even fatal injuries without the**

***help of healing magic. Your natural Health regeneration is improved by 120.5% [1084.5%].***

***2nd stage: The magic of Azarint settles inside your body. Your resistance to magical damage is increased by a static 25% [225%], and your bones are three times as heavy and dense.***

***3rd stage: Your body has been battered and forged by magic. You absorb a portion of mana from enemy spells that hit you. Efficiency is determined by enemy mana used and your resistance to the type of magic. Mana cost for all skills is reduced by a static 25%.***

***Category: Healing – Body Enhancement***

“Twenty-five percent... Oh God,” she murmured.

Maro looked up from his book. “What did you get? Oh, you reached my level. Congratulations. Third-tier skills?”

“Hit me with some magic,” she said, ignoring his disinterested questions. She was excited.

A purple beam slammed into her face a moment later, ever so slightly decaying her skin. She counter-healed the damage and watched her mana, forming ash around her as well as charging up her Absolute Destruction.

*That’s insane. Everything is so much cheaper. Well. Twenty-five percent cheaper. How is this a side benefit of a third-tier skill? This Class is fucking crazy.*

She grinned and motioned for him to stop, her skin reforming immediately.

*And I’m absorbing mana from spells that hit me? Based on Resistances? God, I have to go and train more resistances. Resistances resistances resistances.*

“Sure you didn’t just lose your mind? You look a little crazy,” Maro said.

“I lost twenty-five percent of my mind,” Ilea said.

He nodded slowly, then sighed. “I feel like my magic does less to you by the day.”

“You know what you could do,” Ilea said, but he just smiled and waved her off.

“I’ve had my days of adventuring, thank you.”

“Use a more powerful beam.”

He obliged.

Ilea counter-healed, finding her mana not dropping at all. “Yes, good. Let the anger flow through you, Maro. Give me your mana.”

He stopped immediately. “No, you didn’t... really? You got a mana absorption skill?”

“I did,” she replied, his spell ending immediately.

He murmured something about life being unfair and taking unreasonable risks.

“You can join me in my storm training if you want to,” she offered with fake coyness.

Maro laughed. “Fuck off. Here, take some more.” He smiled and sent more death magic her way.

Ilea thought on her second third-tier advancement as she counter-healed the ancient necromancer king’s horrible, horrible death magic.

*Wait, with a twenty-five percent reduction... I can heal myself constantly now, without losing mana. As long as Meditation is up, at least.*

She tested her Absolute Destruction on an ashen copy of herself she quickly formed, finding that willing seventy-five points of mana into the skill yielded a punch as powerful as if she’d used a hundred. She did find that she couldn’t go over the limit of the skill. If she wanted maximum power, it just seemed to use seventy-five percent. The power remained the same.

*Coupled with the absorption.*

*More mana means more healing as well as more uses of my attacks before I have to retreat or slow down to regenerate.*

It all stacked, too: the reduced cost, the mana she got back, as well as her Reversed Destruction that gave back a chunk of mana with each hit. The time she could fight at her full power had just increased by much more than a fourth. It depended on enemies too, of course, and her resistances to their magic.

She felt giddy, not having expected something quite that good. Now she was nervous about the upgrade for her ashen Class.

*Avatar of Ash, Eyes of Ash, or Heart of Cinder. Avatar has an amazing second tier, making me tougher for each resistance I have... but the AoE of Heart of Cinder is... just so fucking cool. And useful. Nothing else I have is particularly good for groups of enemies.*

She was already on the verge of choosing Heart of Cinder, but she was interested in both of them. So, she summoned a coin, only to see it

immediately decay and turn to ash due to the still-present beam of death magic.

“Can you stop for a moment?” she said.

Maro cracked his wrist after he stopped his attack.

Ilea summoned another coin and tossed it upward. She watched it turn and turn, knowing the result before it even landed in her hand.

*Damn perception skills.*

The spin made her realize her heart had already decided anyway. She almost changed her mind after the accidental pun.

Almost.

**‘ding’ Heart of Cinder reaches 3rd lvl 1**

**Active: Heart of Cinder – 3rd lvl 1**

***Increase the heat in your body and release it in a blast around you.***

***2nd stage: The embers run deep. The heat you may reach is only limited by your very life.***

***3rd stage: Focus on your release to change the blast into a cone of destruction sent out of either arm.***

***Category: Body Enhancement – Ashen Magic***

Ilea immediately started to store heat, holding one hand out toward Maro. “Can I try something?”

He glanced at her, his book vanishing before a glowing purple shield made up of runes appeared before him. Ilea smiled, then focused and released.

An uncontrolled beam of heat, fire, and pure energy extended from her arm, burning through the air before it slammed into the shield. The necromancer stood unconcerned as the heat slightly singed his hair. Flames flickered in the air behind him before the residual magic disappeared.

“You unlocked a fire beam?”

“It’s more a heat and energy beam,” Ilea said, smiling wide as she looked at her hand, then raised it in front of her.

*I can shoot beams now.*

“You’ll be able to fight with a bit more distance between yourself and whatever monster you find next.”

She glanced at him. “I can shoot beams.”

“One beam.”

“I can shoot beam,” Ilea grinned.

“I don’t know if it’s a good idea to give you a beam.”

“My beam,” Ilea said and charged her heat. She snickered as she felt the growing power within her, holding out her hand toward a nearby chunk of rock. “Beam,” she said, releasing the stored-up heat, focusing everything through her hand and out in a broad cone of burning energies. It lit up and smashed into and past the rock, leaving a singed and slightly glowing surface on not just the rock but everything around it.

“Your beam,” Maro said, as if to confirm.

“Ready to continue?”

“Sure. Ilea, the south isn’t a barren landscape like here, is it?”

“What do you mean, Maro?” Ilea asked in the most innocent voice she could muster. “It’s just the storms and Miststalkers that aren’t there. Instead, we have Wergs and Kiln. The landscape is the same. We live in caves.”

Maro rolled his eyes. “Caves,” he said. “Sure.”

She smiled at him.

He did smile back. “Honestly. I’ll be glad to meet other people. Soon.”

“Can’t be the hottest one around if I’m there, I get it.”

“How are you hotter than me, exactly?” He held up a hand. “No. Don’t say it.”

She nodded. She didn’t say it.

The suns were shining down on them again, arcane storms raging over the land and forcing them to stay within the crevices. Ilea was confident about moving through the storms by now, but Maro didn’t fancy the idea. She didn’t mind. It was a nice change of pace from her training.

*Sitting on a wagon while reading sounds even nicer,* she mused.

Thinking of reading, she found a comfortable rock to lean against and summoned the diary Elfie had translated, flipping through the pages to see what remained.

*‘... Most of the humans are focused on themselves; those who do move their eyes our way are more than willing to take the gold we provide for their silence. Eregar’s mercenaries, the Azarinth order, and even Lyrian’s newly formed empire, all of them weakened, are now focused once more on their internal struggles. It is suspected that the two small orders might not recover at all, not with the shaking of the world. The only ones left who have the numbers and the ability to move quickly are the Elven domains.*

*Our common enemy is gone, and those who move first will be the ones to thrive...'*

Ilea was surprised to find Eregar and the Azarinth order specifically mentioned. *The Shadow's Hand must have come from those mercenaries. Perhaps after Eregar died.*

She read the next page.

*'... The enchanters' and engineers' technology we uncovered in Kohr, if the rumors are to be believed, will present solutions to previously impossible problems. Time is of the essence, surely, but with unlimited energy, who is there to stand in our way? The Ascended are destroyed, the few survivors scattered to the realms they deem their own. Should they look at Elos once more, we will be prepared...'*

*The Ascended... deserve the most arrogant name award. So they were the common enemy that led to this alliance between humans, dwarves, and elves?* Ilea thought before moving on.

*'... It was inevitable, the elven mages too numerous, their monarchs and oracles too powerful. There remains no other way, premature and untested. The Taleen will not yield to those wretched creatures. We will stand and fight, even if it takes each and every one of our lives.'*

*So they fought the Ascended, and the human groups were weakened by that? And then they did something that required them to pay off the humans? The elves somehow found out and attacked them? Technology and unlimited energy. Seems like they were still overwhelmed by the elves.*

She thought about it and summoned a meal, then shared what she'd learned with Maro.

"Do you think this is related to Rhyvor?"

He read the diary entries and sighed. "A common enemy from beyond this realm, managing to unite humans, elves, and dwarves. And it very likely happened after my time. I don't know if it's related, but if it is, it would have been way too big for us to deal with." He seemed thoughtful for

a moment. "Quite a historical find. But, ultimately, in the past. Whatever happened between these peoples, the world today is different."

Ilea looked at the diary again. Of course he was right. These events were likely so far in the past that learning about them would hardly change anything. Some of the factions had been defeated, others were simply no longer around.

And still, she found herself intrigued. Maybe it was because the first Taleen ruin had left such an impression on her or because she now counted a few elves among her friends. Either way, she wanted to find out more about what happened between those factions so many centuries ago.

Setting the book aside, she let her thoughts wander to the Taleen ruin and her way westward. She closed her eyes and let the suns warm her face.

*I wonder what Roland is up to. If he's alive.* She thought back to her first and so far only caravan to Salia. *Back when the western cities were standing and the war hadn't broken out. Well, we did get attacked by Nazarks and a Basilisk.*

Ilea sighed, looking through the crack in the northern lands. Lands she had come to in an attempt to get away from all the conflicts in the Plains, all the death, revenge, and grief. Lands she had entered as a mercenary of the Shadow's Hand.

She wondered what was waiting for her.

She hoped the war was over and that no other threats and conflicts had cropped up in and around Ravenhall, Riverwatch, and Lys. She hoped that Kyrian was back and that her friends were safe.

She hoped for the best, but now, with her evolutions and the arsenal of weapons and armor in her storage items, coupled with all the gold and the Taleen Gate Key, she sure as hell was prepared for the worst.

\* \* \*

When the next night of travel came to an end, Ilea could finally make out the distant Naraza mountain range, rising higher than the nearby lands. Ilea was pretty sure it didn't come close to the altitudes of Hallowfort or Tremor.

"Like a wall," Maro said to her side, the two speeding toward the snowy mountains.

Looking back, Ilea found her assumption true. The mountainous territory behind them stretched upward, growing higher and higher, far more so than what lay ahead. Toward the south, it sloped downward slightly before once again rising into the Naraza range.

It took them another two hours of flight to reach it, the two landing at the very top as the suns started to rise. Behind them, the mists started evaporating, the arcane storms of the north starting to form, the distant sound of cracking lightning still faintly audible.

Further south, the Naval forest stretched as far as her eyes could see, curving off to the west. The clear weather also allowed Ilea to see the massive body of water, which she assumed to be a lake or ocean, bordering Karth.

The water had been visible from Dawntree too, but she hadn't learned about its nature or how big it was. It was possible nobody really knew, considering the nearby Elven forests as well as the monsters likely lurking in the waters below.

She felt a shiver move through her at the thought. Noticing it, Maro looked over as he built a small campfire with wood he had taken from his ring.

"Scared of going back? Or did you think of the Soul Rippers?" he chuckled.

Ilea threw him the fire rune sphere. While Maro certainly didn't share her enthusiasm for facing danger and working on his skills and resistances, she still enjoyed traveling with him. Precisely because he knew when to take a break and set up a campfire, even though neither of them was in any way affected by the cold weather.

It just felt right.

"Scared to go back? No," Ilea said. *Not anymore.* "A little nervous, maybe. I think it's been nearly a year since I left."

*Time really flies when you immerse yourself in fighting Knights and Centurions.* She looked down at her right hand and made a fist, then smiled. *I felt... a lot when I left.*

"No, I was actually thinking about the monsters lurking under that lake or ocean." She pointed at it, her bone armor replaced by casual clothes and her ashen armor receding.

The cold winter winds flowed through her hair. Ilea turned as she moved two massive rocks with her ashen limbs, carefully putting them

down near the fire to provide a windshield for the flames. It was freezing up here, the very ground cracking as she walked.

Snow covered most of the summit, the two having chosen one of the highest points, a small plateau allowing for the fire and some rest. Ilea closed her eyes, taking a deep breath of the cold air.

She sat down on the stony ground. Her hands stretched out toward the flames as they started consuming the dry wood. She chuckled, leaning forward to get closer to the heat. Amazing what could be done with a simple fire rune.

“What’s so funny?” Maro asked. He was facing the south, gazing over the lands stretching before them, but turned to look at her, his helmet gone and a casual smile on his face.

Ilea watched the flames dance, persisting despite the cold air and high altitude. She had no idea how high up they actually were. The air was thinner, but it didn’t feel like it impacted her at all. It was a side effect of either her Vitality or perhaps some of her body enhancements.

“I was just thinking back. Once upon a time, I would have been collecting small sticks and building a tent-thing with them, using newspapers to set the bits of wood aflame before bigger pieces could be added. Now I have a magic flamethrower ball.”

Maro sat down beside her, crossing his arms as he breathed deeply, his eyes closed. “Yeah... that’s why you always have a fire mage with you, even early on. It’s not like they’re a rare breed.”

“I meant on Earth,” Ilea said. “Though I suppose there were somewhat easier ways to make a fire there too.”

“It’s still quite hard to get my head around a world without magic. I suppose humans would find a way somehow, especially without monsters.” He frowned for a moment, glancing at her as a thought seemed to cross his mind. “We should be fairly safe from anyone listening in up here, but your secret is safe with me as we travel.”

“Honestly, at this point, it hardly matters,” she replied. “Nobody seemed to really care about me being from another realm.”

“There will always be beings that defy our imagination. If one such being is interested in realm travel, it could spell trouble. I don’t think you need to be paranoid, but I wouldn’t spread it around thoughtlessly either.”

“Well, if it doesn’t come up, it doesn’t come up.” She looked over the broad mountain top, the hills and rocks sloping down slightly on either side

for hundreds of meters.

Next, Ilea summoned two meals and handed one to Maro. She was looking forward to having Keyla's cooking again, but she was trying to stifle her excitement and hope. Things could've changed, and she didn't know if everything had worked out the way she'd been hoping.

Ilea pointed eastward, the suns breaking over the horizon, their light shining onto the lower altitudes both north and southward. Their spot on the summit was still cast in shades of gray, as if the lands below were flooded by color but the waters had not yet reached this high.

"We will move over the mountains until we hit the ocean. The coastline will be easier to traverse than the Plains," she said.

*Less shit to get involved in.*

"You're the guide."

A disturbance in her sphere made Ilea swivel. Something was approaching.

"We've got company. An ice spirit of sorts," she said, looking at the distant creature. It looked vaguely humanoid, though she couldn't see any legs or features on its face. She remembered it from one of her lessons with Liam. "Spirit of Winter, I think." Ilea summoned her monster encyclopedia and checked. "Low three hundreds, usually. Powerful ice magic. I'll check it out."

They looked at the ethereal humanoid a hundred meters away. It was definitely watching them.

Ilea didn't wait for the creature to attack, blinking a few times until she reached it. The being spread its arms, the air that surrounded it freezing into hovering crystals.

Ilea wasn't bothered, leaning in as her bone and ash armor covered her once more. She could feel the creature's magic, but it wasn't significant.

### **[Spirit of Winter – lvl 308]**

"Oh, you're a cute one," she said, pausing for a response. "You don't understand me, d—"

A gust of freezing cold hit her. She saw the attack coming, of course, but the resulting damage wasn't worth acknowledging and easily healed. She advanced through the magic and smiled under her helmet.

*Can't even get through my ash. Oh dear.*

Ilea stopped in front of the creature, which retreated slightly, then sent a few ice lances her way. She didn't dodge. None of them pierced her defenses.

Instead of responding, Ilea blinked back to Maro and sat down, continuing her meal.

Maro had set his bowl down, looking toward the creature. "You don't seem terribly impressed."

"I don't know how solid its defenses are, but I think I'm pretty well equipped against ice magic. Doesn't look like the fight would be much of a challenge. You want to try?"

"I've never seen one, but other spirits are highly specialized... I wouldn't be so casual about them, but then again, you have a resistance against everything it seems."

"Not yet," she commented through a full mouth, the man laughing in turn. "I'd like to stay a little longer, half an hour or so?"

Maro nodded and stood up, then walked past her, antlered helmet back on. The spirit was getting close now, a few ice lances already flying their way as the air grew colder.

"I'll protect the fire," Ilea called out.

Maro casually closed in on the spirit, turning his head her way. "Gives me the creeps, that one."

She smiled, turning northward and enjoying the warmth of the flames. She drew a deep, frigid breath into her lungs before she exhaled slowly.

The sound of battle died down a couple of minutes later, by which point only embers of the fire remained. Standing up, Ilea spread her wings and moved, and a single long jump aided by her wings brought her to Maro.

The man was standing over the remains of the winter spirit, frost all over him. The snow crunched underfoot as she walked toward him and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Oh no, Maro. You killed Christmas."

"Gave me more trouble than the Feynor. Bloody ice," he murmured. "If this is Christmas, I hate it."

Ilea flew up and twirled around. "Come now, don't be such a downer. I know you can't wait to be around a million people again. It's not far now."

He nodded before flying up to her side. "Lead the way, then, ashen warrior of the north."

She chuckled and sped off, the two rushing over the mountain range with incredible speed. If any animal or monster turned its head, or whatever protrusion they used, to see, hear, or sense the humans flying overhead, none moved to intercept. It didn't take long for them to reach the ocean, both slowing down as they descended to the shoreline.

Ilea had a house overlooking the endless sea, but it'd been nearly a year since she had last been there. The feeling she had when looking out over the waves was one thing that was nearly identical to how it had felt on Earth. With all her growth, all the power flowing through her, the sight still somehow managed to make her feel small.

*With the potential to grow.*

She sped up, heading overland, with Maro to her side, trying to keep up with her. As soon as the first settlements started to become visible, the two of them flew higher. Mages and archers would likely have a hard time at this distance, even someone like Navalis, the ranger in Sulivhaan's team.

Ilea wondered how Navalis was doing, if she'd passed her in levels or if the ranger had managed to keep up. She doubted it, but she certainly wouldn't be mad about a surprise.

Hours passed as they flew over the easternmost part of the human Plains, Baralia, Asila, and the Empire of Lys. She tried not to think too much about the siege that had started when she'd left. The war.

The thoughts grew more distant when she saw the southern mountains rising high over the Empire's lands. She smiled. "Couple hours and we're there," she said to the man flying in silence next to her.

Maro simply nodded, the two mages picking up speed once again as they crossed the last stretch of their long journey. One Ilea could have done with a single third-tier blink. Of course, she couldn't have brought Maro along with her, but he wasn't the only reason she'd chosen to fly instead.

She was happy to have used her wings instead of her blink. Her adventures in the north were far from over, but it felt good to see the distance, to feel it. To understand how far she'd come.

As they landed on the mountain range overlooking the clear, frozen lake near Ravenhall, Ilea sighed with relief on seeing the city unscathed.

The suns shone onto the town, whose three dark walls rose high, its streets busy in the distance. Wagons and groups of adventurers were making their way to the north gate.

"Ravenhall."

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## Priorities

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The necromancer standing next to her had a mischievous look in his eyes and a big smile on his face.

“Impressive defenses. Flying in without detection won’t be possible. Do you think we’ll have to teleport through the walls?”

Ilea glanced over at him with a frown, her armor of ash moving to her back. She summoned a dark green cloak, covering her bone-armor helmet partially with the hood as she handed a second one to Maro.

“I have a badge, so it shouldn’t be a problem to get in. Even with a Necromancer.”

“Necromancer king,” he corrected.

“Former.”

“Who knows?” he mused.

Ilea rolled her eyes. “Get on your cloak, corpse daddy.”

“What?”

She glared at him.

He sighed.

Maro couldn’t get the cloak over his helmet, so he decided to switch it out with another one that didn’t have antlers. The cloaks managed to somewhat obscure both their armor and helmet.

The two walked down the mountainside, jumping parts that were too steep. The road below seemed well walked, much of the snow trampled by

the many merchants, adventurers, and travelers making their way to and from Ravenhall.

“Any idea how far winter is along?” Ilea asked. She’d lost track of the exact amount of time she’d spent in the north.

“How would I know? One of the suns is missing. I assume winters last much longer these days,” Maro said, his voice sounding excited as they neared the gate.

“Fair enough,” she said, looking up at the new height of the walls. *Extended again.*

A team of bloodied adventurers with dented armor and hung heads entered before them. The guards waved them through. One was wearing black gear, a Shadowguard under the command of the Shadow’s Hand. The other wore imperial colors. The city gate was open, showing a broad and busy square beyond. Ilea wasn’t quite sure what that meant in regard to the war.

The guards eyed them, glancing at each other with uncertainty in their eyes.

Ilea summoned her badge and held it up. The Shadowguard nodded, but the imperial one looked at them for a while.

“Can I see the badge?”

“Of course,” Ilea replied, throwing the thing his way.

**[Warrior – lvl 152]**

**[Warrior – lvl 81]**

The imperial guard was considerably lower leveled.

*Still, at least they have a garrison in Ravenhall,* Ilea thought. Either that or the city guards had initially been soldiers and just kept the gear and colors.

“You’re fine. Is your necromancer friend also part of the Hand?”

Ilea was about to answer when Maro spoke up, bowing lightly. “I intend to join. Maro is the name.”

He lifted his hood and made his helmet vanish. Ilea rolled her eyes at his smile and sparkling eyes. Her urge to hit him was overcome with a burst of Meditation.

“S... sure,” the imperial guard said, handing the badge back to Ilea. “You’re new in town, then?” he asked Maro.

“Are necromancers even allowed in?” Ilea asked the Shadowguard in a low voice.

Maro was already laughing at something the imperial guard had said before launching into a story about some adventure that probably happened thousands of years ago – or not at all.

“The Empire mostly lets the cities decide. Half the nobles wouldn’t be allowed in most anywhere if they banned blood arts, death magic, and such.” The man chuckled. “Honestly, though? If he were below level eighty, it would have been difficult.”

“Are you coming?” Ilea asked Maro, interrupting the other two. Maro had his arm around the man’s shoulder and was pointing somewhere to the horizon. She was sure the guard was already in love.

Maro turned his head and smiled her way. “You do your stuff. I’ll explore the city and have some fun before joining the Hand. Do find me when you’re done.” He winked and continued his story.

*Already lost him.*

She sighed, then smiled and shook her head.

*Back in Ravenhall. Now, where to go first?* She raised her eyebrows as a thought hit her. *Yes. I think Claire can wait a few more hours.*

A grin spread on her face as Ilea entered the city, feeling the magic in the walls. Her sphere revealed plenty of enchantments. Powerful ones too, as far as she could tell.

The snow here was just sludge, and smoke was rising from many of the buildings. She saw a few kids chase a six-legged furred animal that looked close to a dog. She stood there for a moment and breathed in deep, a little overwhelmed by all the noises, crying babies, and shouting merchants.

It seemed busier than the Ravenhall she remembered from before the invasion, but maybe she’d just been hanging out in the north for long enough to forget what a city felt like.

Maro appeared behind her, his hands coming down on her shoulders. “It’s beautiful,” he said, letting go as he paused beside her. “Come on, can’t be that bad. You’ll be out and about again in no time.” He grinned and disappeared back into the crowd.

*I hope Claire’s dealings have been successful. If so, I’ll reserve an entire floor of a restaurant myself,* Ilea mused, the thought calming her down.

The smells of thirty different dishes, hundreds of people’s odors, blood, gear, and magic mixed into an overwhelming cocktail that made her miss

her previous sphere and its ability to lessen her senses somewhat. Now it added *another* layer with its ambient magic perception.

*Fuck this.*

Ilea blinked up before spreading her wings, taking her up and over the city. Her bone armor went into her necklace before Ilea dismissed her wings, diving down and landing with a slight bend in her knees in the street where the Golden Drake had been located. Her first and most important destination.

People steered clear of the maniac that had suddenly landed among them, but there wasn't a lot of fear or respect left for high-level people here in Ravenhall. Some even muttered about crazy mages as they went on with their daily business.

Ilea wasn't identifiable as a member of the Hand in her brown pants and white shirt. She was just a higher-level healer that most people didn't take too much notice of. Some higher-level adventurers did a double take, but nobody approached her as she strolled toward her favorite establishment. She hoped that Claire had found her. And that Keyla had taken the job.

It was busy. People were standing in line to get in, some coming out again with dejected expressions.

*Business is going well, it seems.*

Ilea took a spot in the line and checked her imaginary watch.

*Maybe I should check to see if she's around before I wait out here.*

She left the line and walked inside, looking around.

“Ma’am, please wait in line to be seated.”

The voice, firm but professional, came from a man behind a counter. He was an older gentleman, with gray hair and a well-kept mustache. His finely made clothing, a gray vest with a black shirt underneath, looked high class but not quite too much. A golden Drake’s head was sewn onto the vest. As she stared, he vanished and appeared two meters away from her.

“And if you don’t have a reservation, I suggest making one. We are booked out for the next two months.”

## [Mage – lvl 128]

*Guess that's needed to keep the raving masses in check.*

Ilea smiled at the man. “That’s a nicely done Drake. The artist must have seen a real one before,” she noted.

He raised his eyebrows, then squinted. “It is. What is your name?”

“Why is she cutting the line?” someone in fancy clothes asked those around him with exaggerated outrage. It was spoken in a practiced whisper to make sure everyone heard it, including Ilea.

*Claire told me she'd inform people about my name – to build a brand, so to speak. Secret owner of restaurants?* She felt giddy, a smile coming to her face. *Let's see how she did.*

Ilea schooled her expression as best she could, barely keeping her smile contained. Then she leaned in closer to the gentleman and whispered, “I am Lilith.”

The man nodded professionally. “Please follow me, ma’am.” He gestured to a shut door leading to a small office behind the counter.

Ilea followed him inside, amused at hearing some annoyed and some intrigued whispers behind her. Someone even criticized her ‘common’ clothing, which made her chuckle.

The man shut the door and looked her up and down.

“I do hope you don’t send people away if they’re not wearing fancy clothes,” she said. “That wouldn’t be my style.”

“We do not, as a matter of fact. As long as other guests aren’t disturbed by smell, monster remains, or excessive nudity, there is no problem. The manager insisted – to the annoyance of many and the joy of many others. To some, it is amusing. To me, it is just a rule.

“Now, you claim to be Lilith. You are at a high level, and your behavior fits the description I’ve been told, but I’ll need further proof.”

“How can I prove to be me?” Ilea asked, cocking her head to the side.

The man had the slightest smile on his lips. “I was told you wielded ash.”

Ilea grinned, then checked the office space and spread her wings, careful not to disturb any of the papers and shelves. She summoned her ash armor as well and breathed out, rolling her shoulders.

“Do you want me to show you more? I could take you out on a short flight.”

The man took a deep, hurried breath. “That won’t be necessary, ma’am.” He bowed his head slightly. “Welcome to the Golden Drake. How may I be of service?”

“Lunch sounds quite nice,” Ilea said.

"Of course. I'll have the private dining room be made ready immediately."

Ilea did a little shoulder dance. She'd fantasized about being the secret owner of a fancy restaurant, but now that she actually was, it felt even cooler. "Wait. Who's the manager? Did Keyla accept?"

"Keyla Aranoth is indeed both the manager and head chef of this establishment. Should I have her join you?"

"That would be... wait... no. She can bring the food, I want to surprise her!" Ilea said. "Don't mention it's me," she said and smiled.

The man didn't seem to react in any way.

"Sorry. What's your name, by the way?" Ilea asked.

"Ovian, ma'am. And it's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"Ovian. Good to meet you too. So yeah. Let's do that, with the dining room. Oh, and how big is the menu?"

"Six starters, six main dishes, four desserts. The experimental menu is for dinner, but if you like, I can ask Keyla if she'd be willing to have it prepared for a special occasion," Ovian suggested.

Ilea considered that. "Hmm. Yes. That would be nice. I agree. All that then."

"The experimental menu?"

"Yes, but everything else too. All of it."

He nodded sagely. "Wings of ash, high level, black hair, blue eyes, will likely order the whole menu. Welcome back to Ravenhall, Lady Lilith."

Ilea didn't have to wait long for the dining room to be readied for her. She followed Ovian up the stairs, noting that the previously dark wooden walls had been painted over with white. Generally, the atmosphere had changed from an almost haughty feel to something far more inviting.

She was led to the uppermost floor, the fourth one, though she saw that the roof also had seating, likely not used at the moment due to the late winter temperatures.

The other guests looked like a healthy mix of people. Some were obviously adventurers, armed with weapons, while others were wearing imperial colors, and others still were in more common attire, though everyone seemed to have tried their best.

*Probably quite a feat to get a reservation here. Especially if everyone is allowed in.*

Ilea garnered quite a few whispers and looks from the many patrons as she was led past them and into a separate room. Light flooded in through the numerous windows and enchantments activated when the door was shut, cutting off the sound of the other guests' conversations.

She breathed deeply and stretched, then switched to her bone armor and sat down at the head of the table.

"Any drinks before the food arrives?" Ovian asked.

Ilea sighed, leaning forward and supporting her head with both hands. "Ale. Local ale. Anything that doesn't taste like sewer piss."

"I'm happy to inform you that all our ale is above the grade of sewer piss," Ovian said, entirely serious. "I will be back shortly," he said, then vanished.

*Teleporting waiters. Now that is convenient.*

Ovian and two other waiters reappeared mere moments later, bringing with them a selection of local ales and other beverages from throughout the Plains.

The first bottle was a brewing masterclass. The initial sip made her think back to a summer long past, the hot sun burning down on her as she drank a cold beverage. She smiled, looking at the bottle.

*As if I'm in some kind of ale commercial. I wonder how that would look with my bone armor on?*

She hastily summoned her helmet onto her head when the door opened. Ilea tried to lounge back in her chair, taking in the cook she'd first met years ago in this very establishment, though she hadn't been the manager then.

Keyla stood with a straight back, holding two dishes in her hands before she shut the door behind herself with her heel. She wore a set of perfectly white chef's clothes. Her reptilian-like features were no longer hidden away, her scales reflecting some of the light. Her cat-like eyes were narrowed, and her teeth were showing slightly.

"I don't normally serve food. Why did Ovian tell me to come up here with these dishes? Who are you?"

Ilea leaned forward again and smiled below her bone helmet. "Don't you recognize an old friend, Keyla?"

Keyla's eyes went wide. "You're back," she whispered. She took a sharp breath, then set down the plates on the other side of the table. She

walked over, a broad grin spreading on her snout-like face. Her sharp teeth looked threatening, but her eyes were almost sparkling.

Keyla stopped a few steps away, then moved with a quick and practiced motion, drawing a chef's knife from her belt and throwing it straight at Ilea's face. With force.

Ilea caught the blade with her hand, then smiled and stood up. She stored her helmet and winked at her favorite chef.

"It really is you," Keyla snickered, walking over before she grabbed Ilea in a hug. "You dunce. Lilith is such a stupid-sounding name."

"It really isn't," Ilea said as the two separated.

"I thought it was you. For an administrator to seek me out like that and offer not just the position of head chef but head manager too." She shook her head.

"You're obviously qualified," Ilea said, trying to sneak past Keyla to get to the two meals that the chef had placed on the table.

"Your food will arrive shortly," Keyla said. "But you've been away for a while, I hear. You must've run out."

"I did," Ilea said. "Can you join me for lunch? Or are you busy cooking?"

Keyla considered. "It will be fine. I've taught the others well. Perhaps it's time for a bit of a test." She snapped her fingers, and two people dressed in black appeared behind her. "I'll be having lunch with Lady Lilith. Tell Celia to take over in the kitchens."

The waiters bowed and vanished again.

"You planned that," Ilea said, pointing at her. "No way you can just snap your fingers and two waiters appear."

Keyla had a smug look on her face as she took one of the two plates and gestured for Ilea to take the other.

"It's been nearly a year since I took over. And trust me, I've had a lot of thoughts and ideas on this establishment for as long as I've worked here. Now that I've become the manager, I can realize those ideas."

"You've been busy," Ilea said as she dug in. She was momentarily lost in the mix of cold cheese and vegetables, roasted nuts, and something that tasted like pesto.

"I have," Keyla said. "And you as well. Judging by that terrifying-looking armor. I thought some upstart competitor had sent an assassin to do me in."

“Oh, I’ve had quite the adventure,” Ilea said, reminded to change back into more casual clothes. She squinted at Keyla. “Might be an offensive question, but are you Feynor by any chance?”

Keyla’s eyes narrowed. “No. But I have heard of them. In... my youth.”

Ilea could tell there was more, but she assumed the topic wouldn’t be quite as cheery. “I fought a bunch of them in the north. They worship dragons.”

Keyla smiled. “Still out there, and using words like that so easily. You haven’t changed.”

“I have changed,” Ilea said with a full mouth. “I’m much stronger.”

“Exactly,” Keyla said, eating her own food. She sighed after a little while, relaxing in her chair. “It’s good to know it was you. Lilith. Whoever is buying up all those places for you has done a wonderful job at making you some kind of mysterious figure in Ravenhall.”

Ilea leaned back, trying to look like some kind of noblewoman. “What do... the people think of me?” She wanted to eat a grape, but there weren’t any.

“The establishments are run well, the jobs pay well, there are no annoying or arbitrary rules, and any reported abuse, by staff or customers, is swiftly punished. I don’t know if the mysterious Lilith is more loved or feared, if I’m honest. You are respected, that’s for sure.”

*Claire, what kind of monster are you setting me up as? If you keep going like this, my evolutions won’t be enough to live up to the hype.*

Ilea smiled. She trusted Claire.

Just then, the two waiters reappeared, bringing more plates to be delivered.

“The next starters,” Keyla said. “You’ve been gone for a while, friend. Eat your fill.”

As she tucked into the next plate, Ilea forgot whatever questions she’d wanted to ask.

*I am back indeed.*

## Catching Up

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Ilea told Keyla about the north and her adventures, during which a number of delicious dishes arrived and were consumed, then plied the cook for her stories as well.

“My time here was nowhere near as exciting as what you’ve gone through,” Keyla said. “I can’t even begin to imagine that lightning... and those monsters.” She shuddered. “I know you disagree, but I like that they added more walls to the city, and more guards, for that reason.”

“I understand the need for security,” Ilea said, not about to start arguing with her friend. “I also know your fear comes from recent experiences. I want to hear about them. You survived the demon summoning, and you managed to reach, then escape from, Virilya?”

“I did. Had to fight off a few of them too, but I managed to join a group of adventurers who led us through the underground of the city and then out over the walls. I really could’ve done without that experience. Virilya was easier.

“As soon as I heard the Shadows had retaken Ravenhall, I left. Too large of a city for my tastes, and the restaurant business felt far too entrenched. Going back to Ravenhall felt like the better choice, and it paid off. Thanks to you.”

“Thanks to your skill and name. And thanks to Claire. I just told her about you,” Ilea said.

Keyla's eyes went wide. "Claire. She claimed to be an assistant of Lilith. Hmm. I did note that she was quite focused and quick. You two make a dangerous team."

"We're not just a two-person team," Ilea said, but she didn't elaborate further. She thought of Kyrian and Trian, and of Eve. She wondered how things could've gone differently, then dismissed those thoughts. They were here now. She would do the best that she could.

Keyla seemed to sense the shift and moved on. "The first few months were rough. Even with the budget I was given, there was just so much to be done, let alone the repairs on the building. Everyone was clamoring to get capable earth mages and architects. For the first three weeks, we served food without windows."

"The horror," Ilea said.

"Not quite Soul Rippers, I know. But it stressed me out, you know? I wanted to make sure the customers were comfortable."

"I'm sure they were," Ilea smiled. "You could serve your food in the demon realm and there would be people traveling there to pay for it."

"The flattery of a glutton," Keyla said. She got a little more quiet and looked down. "I... I met someone too."

"Oh?" Ilea said, raising her glass of red wine to her lips. "Spill the tea."

"I don't know," Keyla said. "It's quite fresh."

"At least tell me what Class and level they are."

"Of course you'd care about his Class..." Keyla rolled her eyes. The cook looked a little tipsy, but Ilea didn't feel anything. She didn't care much. The taste was still nice.

"He's tall, strong, and handsome. Yet when we're alone, he's sensitive and vulnerable, Ilea. He's such a dear friend. I see the way he looks at me too, but still, he hasn't asked me out. I'm beginning to wonder..."

"Don't wonder. Ask him instead. Have a dress or armor made, for you or him, get some flowers or a sword, whatever he would like, and just ask him. Life is too short to worry about it. I'd think a man would be flattered to get asked out."

"How do you know? You're not a man," Keyla said defensively.

"Oh?" Ilea raised her eyebrows, moving closer to the cook. "Are you afraid too, then? I know because every time I asked a guy out, he either said yes or told me he had no interest. And the few who couldn't deal with a

woman asking them out are a no-go anyway. What's the point in wondering when you could know?"

"You make a compelling argument," Keyla said. "Okay... alright, I'll... think about it."

"You should." Ilea raised her glass.

Keyla cleared her throat. "I'd been hoping to meet Lilith, actually. I was going to suggest that she open more restaurants. The staff here are ready. They proved it today. At least three of them could be head chefs."

"Why don't you do it yourself?"

Keyla winced. "I don't have those kinds of funds. My salary here is excellent, but I'm still an employee, not an owner. Still, I've had my eye on a few locations, and this place practically runs itself now. With enough gold, I could help you and Claire expand."

"I can talk to Claire. I'm sure she could spare enough to support your idea," Ilea said.

*And if she can't now, she will be able to with all the gold from Tremor.*

"That easy?" Keyla asked. "We're talking about prominent locations, capable staff, expensive ingredients. It wouldn't be cheap."

"Did you forget that I'm Lilith?"

Keyla grinned. "It's hard to believe. And a little disappointing, to be honest. But you really are her."

"Disappointing? I'll have you know that I've killed over three hundred undead Knights of the Rose, even Kingsguards."

"A mysterious benefactor is no longer a mysterious benefactor once their identity is revealed. Even less so when it's my friend Ilea. A friend who is not at all disappointing," Keyla said. "I would love to have a chat with Claire to get things rolling. Though it's going to be a lot of work."

Ilea sipped her wine, feeling very much like a not-disappointing mysterious benefactor called Lilith.

Keyla seemed to have lost herself in her plans. "Now, if only I could take out that baker..." she murmured to herself.

Ilea enjoyed her wine as she turned and looked out the window, the top floor of the Golden Drake having a view over much of the city. Many of the distant buildings seemed new to her and certainly higher than before, but she supposed that with the city walls established, the people had nowhere to build but up or down.

*Could add another wall... She wondered about the logistics and nearly got a headache. Leave that with the builder brains. Focus on punching and healing things.*

She smiled, finishing her wine. Noon had passed, and she had a couple more things she wanted to do that day.

“It’s been wonderful, Keyla, but I’ll have to check in with Claire soon, now that the most important business of having lunch is concluded.”

“I won’t keep you. It’s good to see you alive and well, Ilea.” Keyla got up, walked over to Ilea, and grabbed her in a hug. “And if anything comes up or anyone threatens you, let me know. I’ll help however I can.”

“Can I place an order?” Ilea asked.

Keyla grinned. “One of everything for however large of a storage device you own?”

“Yes. That.”

“It will cost you. Even if you own the Golden Drake.”

“How about I pay with one Golden Drake then?” Ilea suggested.

Keyla looked at her with confusion. “What do you mean?”

“You’re the manager already. How about owner too?”

Keyla shook her head. “That is too large of a gift. I mean, I have a few ideas, and I could certainly do more if I had access to more of the Golden Drake’s revenue. We could partner on the new locations, the popularity here would raise their profile too...” She trailed off. “But no... I couldn’t.”

“Why not? You’re the one who’s poured her heart and soul into this place. You’re already the owner, just not on paper. I’ll have a chat with Claire. And I’ll throw in a storage ring as well, once I’ve decluttered its contents. Can’t have a head chef of your caliber walking around without a storage ring.”

“Ilea, I can’t take that, it’s—”

“Please,” Ilea said, “call me Lilith.”

She enjoyed the mix of emotions on Keyla’s face before she vanished and reappeared above the restaurant. *It really is fun to be back.*

She looked over to her right to see a black flag with a golden drake head on it fastened to a pole on the building’s roof, fluttering lazily in the cold winter wind, the suns shining down on the city.

*Now. Let’s see how my partner in legal activities is holding up.*

\* \* \*

Claire was finally done with the new permits: an additional chunk of Eregar's Haven would be restructured for food growth.

*At least the population is finally stabilizing. Took long enough.*

Refugees were still coming in, but compared to the initial flood of the first four months, it was barely a trickle now. Sulivhaan wanted to keep Eregar's Haven Hand-owned; imperial mages were still not allowed down in the underground caverns.

Which, in turn, meant the Hand had to hire nature mages or train them to take care of all the fields. If any kind of food shortage had come up, the imperials and any smaller factions within Ravenhall would've had grounds to push past the wishes of the Hand and seize control.

But the Haven produced more than they'd expected, enough to keep things stable, and now, slowly, they were producing more than they needed, their food storage gradually filling up again.

It had been one of the major goals of the Hand's leaders – Sulivhaan, Dagon, and now Claire – to be able to supply Ravenhall with food from their own sources. The mountainous territory, even with nature mages, would not yield enough; until now, Ravenhall had very much been dependent on traders from Lys and Kroll.

*With this, we may be able to start supplying the Empire instead.*

It was a delicate balance, of course. Imperial administrators had only arrived several months after the recapturing of Ravenhall, and since then, they had been simply overwhelmed, more than happy to let the Hand take on more and more responsibilities.

Sulivhaan's suggested clause in the initial contract to allow the Hand to offer permits and buy grounds on their own to help rebuild and revitalize the city had paid off ridiculously well, and both his and Dagon's relationships with the imperial administrators were better than ever.

All the while, Claire bought up whatever she could, allocated more and more resources, hired staff, and got people working. With the uncertainty of the war in Lys, it was clear that people were looking for stability. She didn't miss the irony of the demon invasion having devastated the city, but it seemed the retaking was more on people's minds than the invasion itself, and the choice between a country at war and a city on the upswing seemed an easy choice for many.

Claire didn't have the numbers, the war preventing the Empire from even collecting them, but she had no doubt Ravenhall was already one of

the largest economic strongholds in all of Lys. Given its recent history, it was more than she'd hoped for.

*I should check on Trian again soon, see how he's doing,* she reminded herself.

She breathed in and glanced over at Cless. The girl was immersed in her painting. She seemed to like the office space and the view it had.

Claire knew she had neglected her relationships, barely able to make time for her mother or Cless, but opportunities just kept presenting themselves. And not small things either.

She had known back then, after the demon invasion, hearing of the brewing war in Lys, that this was a one-time opportunity – for her, for Ravenhall, and for the Hand. It could've gone any way, but they had steered the city to what it was starting to be.

A self-sufficient stronghold, governed and protected by the most powerful mercenary organization in the Plains.

*Not officially.*

*Not yet.*

She grabbed another set of documents – routine work by now, all of it. She'd almost forgotten that she'd once been going on missions for the Hand, fighting wild creatures and outlaws. She would do it again, if she had to, but there were plenty of others out there. Plenty of capable fighters, rangers, rogues, and mages. She was not an exceptional fighter... but here? Here, she felt unmatched.

Suddenly, Claire tensed, then shot up and rushed over to Cless, throwing runed stones around her before she drew a single rune in front of her, her mana thrumming to life before a barrier flared up within her office. Something had appeared in the building, activating the alarm enchantments. A team of Shadows would appear in less than a minute.

Cless looked up from her painting, showing neither fear nor confusion.

"Don't move," Claire said, raising her chin when she saw a being appear in the middle of her office. It wore jagged and vicious-looking armor made of bone. Claire's mana sight let her know that this was the being that had triggered the enchantments, dense arcane energies exuding from its form.

*Is Verena back?*

*Or is it an assassin?*

## **[Battle-Healer – lvl ??]**

She locked eyes with the woman, then raised her eyebrows.

“Hey, Claire,” Ilea said. “Been a while.”

“Ilea!” Cless shouted and rushed forward, stopped by the barrier.

“Sorry for the fright,” Ilea said, her helmet disappearing to reveal a grin on her face.

Claire furrowed her brow and dispelled the barrier. “You’re not sorry at all.”

“I am a little bit,” Ilea said, switching her armor out for a casual outfit. She smiled and caught the running Cless in a hug, then lifted her up and spun her around.

*She’s different.*

*Or more herself?*

Claire had wondered when Ilea would return. *If* she would return. When Ilea had left, she’d seemed frustrated, angry, grieving. She’d wanted to get out, get away, from the loss of Eve, the fate of Trian’s family, Kyrian’s disappearance. Claire had wondered if Ilea hadn’t simply chosen to live the life of a drifting adventurer, going from place to place, fighting whatever monsters she could find. But here she was, almost a year later.

She looked calm. Confident, in a way that Claire had only ever seen her during fights.

*She’s no longer looking for her place in the world, it seems.*

Claire smiled.

*Guess that makes two of us.*

“You’re back,” she said. It was all she could manage.

Cless giggled and rushed back to her painting, picking up her supplies, as Ilea walked over toward Claire.

As she neared her, several Shadows appeared in the room with their weapons at the ready. They glanced between Claire and Ilea, unsure what to do now that they felt the atmosphere.

“False alarm. My apologies,” Claire said.

“Are you sure?” one of them said. Viper, Claire recalled after a moment.

“I’m sure,” she said. She couldn’t help but note how calmly Ilea stood next to her.

The Shadow nodded and vanished, the rest following suit.

“Are you okay?” Claire asked, glancing at Ilea.

Ilea turned, giving her a look. “I would’ve liked to fight them, see how I’d do against a full team.”

Claire nodded. A year ago, she would’ve found the thought amusing enough. Just another one of Ilea’s antics. But now? With the way she held herself, the way she’d looked at those Shadows...

*Could she? Fight a full team on her own?*

Claire shook her head and turned her mana sight back on. She saw the familiar glow around Cless’ paintbrush and canvas. The girl’s magic was growing by the day. Ilea, on the other hand, was covered in runes, shining bright. A spot near her back shone with a dark red glow.

*She’s evolved. So she’s at three hundred. In that small span of time. I guess it really isn’t too surprising, knowing her. But seeing it?*

She followed Ilea’s gaze to Cless’ painting, which showed a man in spiked armor, needles floating around him as he faced down a horrible winged creature with a hideous distorted face.

*Gargoyles... so he’s still in that castle.*

“Quite the talent our little painter has developed,” Ilea said, her gaze focused on the mage depicted. The girl smiled as she heard the praise but focused on her magic, likely wanting to add more details before her mana ran out.

“She’s not just painting,” Claire said. “She’s scrying.”

Ilea looked at her with a confused expression. The look made Claire smile. This was the Ilea she knew, not the Lilith she’d built up as a myth within the city and beyond. *Maybe I started to believe the stories myself.*

“It’s a powerful ability, rare and usually reserved for wrinkled old oracles,” Claire replied.

Ilea leaned in closer. “Is that...?”

“Kyrian, yes,” Claire said. “He’s not returned. But he is alive.”

“That’s... crazy,” Ilea said. “You’re quite the little painter, aren’t you?” she added, ruffling Cless’ hair.

The girl beamed. “I painted you too! You fought knights. Knights knights knights!”

“I did,” Ilea smiled. “Wait, so you spied on me?” She narrowed her eyes at the girl, who suddenly found the floor particularly interesting.

“I didn’t know until a few months ago, when she told me her secret,” Claire said. “I think she was frustrated with you fighting so many knights.”

“That’s what got you to spill the beans?” Ilea laughed.

Cless stuck out her tongue.

"I fought Centurions too, you know," Ilea said as she crouched down.

Cless rolled her eyes in an exaggerated manner, then slumped down to the floor. "Boring green machines," she murmured.

Ilea smiled. "Looks like we've got a lot to catch up on."

Claire looked at the painting of Kyrian. She'd looked through Cless' paintings once the girl had told her about her skill. The depictions of Kyrian had changed throughout the months. Something was different, but she hadn't been able to put her finger on it.

Now that Ilea was standing next to her, the feeling she gave off close to the myth Claire had built up about her, she knew what it was.

*They've both been surviving out there. Fighting. Growing in power.*

While she had built up her influence in Ravenhall, her teammates hadn't been idle.

She smiled, feeling calmer than she'd felt in a while. "It's good to see you, Ilea."

"It's good to see you too, Claire," Ilea said.

\* \* \*

Ilea looked at the painting of Kyrian. She could feel it. The weight. The magic. Somehow, Cless had captured it.

*He's out there. He's not returned. Why?*

"Do you know where he is?" she asked.

"No. We tried to find any references, but the place is unknown, as are the creatures he's fought – other than the usual guardians, that is. It doesn't seem like he's changing locations either. There may be an ocean too, but it's difficult to tell. Cless' skill has improved over time, but there remains a sort of haze."

"It's only like that with the skill!" Cless said. "I can paint much better when I don't use it."

"She can also only draw people she's met before," Claire said. "It's good to know that he's alive at least."

"No breakthrough from Iana and Christopher?" Ilea asked. "Are they still working on the Taleen Gate technology?"

"Not yet," Claire said. She gave her a look, then glanced at Cless.  
"We'll have a chat, Cless."

The girl pouted. "Ilea should stay."

"I'll be around for a while," Ilea said. "I'll be back to play."

Cless didn't seem satisfied, so Ilea leaned in closer. "I'll take you flying.  
With my wings."

The girl made big eyes. "Fly?"

"Yes."

"Like birds?"

"Among other avian creatures, yes," Ilea said. She furrowed her brows.  
*Am I an avian creature?* She glanced at Claire.

The woman gave her a look.

*Can you read my mind as well?*

"I'm getting more and more comfortable with you again, Ilea," Claire  
said.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I guess I missed you," Claire said, touching her shoulder. "Not that I  
would've had time to talk to you often. It's been busy. Come now, Cless, I'll  
set an audial enchantment so you won't hear any secrets, but we'll still be  
here."

"I can keep secrets," Cless said.

"No you cannot. Remember the Baralian spies you mentioned to a  
Shadowguard trainee who turned out to be a Baralian spy?"

Cless looked at the ceiling.

"Or the budget allocations you happened to read by accident and told to  
another Shadow for the price of three sweets?"

"It was four sweets," the girl said in a defeated tone. "I'll paint," she  
said, turning around.

Claire smiled before an enchantment flared up around the section of the  
room that Cless was in. She gestured for Ilea to follow.

"It's not easy to manage her," Claire said. "I guess that's another thing  
you have in common."

Ilea smiled. "What do you mean?"

"She's a realm traveler. Like you are. And from some bits and pieces  
that she's mentioned, it may be a place that's similar to your former home."

Ilea nodded. "I think so too. She mentioned a name before, a place, that  
I know."

“Earth,” Claire said.

“Earth,” Ilea agreed. “Yeah, that’s what it was called. Feels like a lifetime ago.”

“You don’t seem concerned? If she’s from the same place, then maybe this could be connected. Maybe it could mean something.”

Ilea formed an ashen chair in front of Claire’s desk, then sat down and summoned a bottle of ale she’d gotten from Keyla’s restaurant. “Maybe. Or maybe we just showed up by accident, for one reason or another.”

“At such a similar time?”

“Maybe. But we don’t know more. I’m just glad we found her in that dungeon. And until we find some kind of realm-traveling expert or oracle, I don’t think we’ll figure out more about our circumstances. I’m glad that I’m here, but yeah, maybe we could find a way back in the future. For Cless, at least.”

Claire nodded. “Perhaps. She misses her parents and her school, though she doesn’t mention them often. We try to keep her busy, and she’s made plenty of new friends here.”

“We?”

“William is helping out a lot. He’s teaching a lot of Classes and helps train the Shadowguard. Cless is taking part in a lot of that.” She breathed in deep and smiled, a tinge of sadness in her expression. “Even called him Dad once.”

“Hmm. Yeah. I’m glad she got some cool magic as well, though. I bet she can’t wait to tell everyone back home about it.”

“Do you feel the same?”

“Hell yeah, I could kick Mark’s butt now, let alone the locals or nationals. I’d be the heavyweight champion in all categories,” Ilea laughed. “And I wouldn’t have to worry about any injuries. It would be great. But unfair. And I’d have to really really pull my punches, which is not fun for anyone. Actually, scratch that, I’m not interested in any tournaments. At least non-magical ones.”

Claire smiled and leaned back in her armchair. “Level three hundred. Your Classes evolved, right?”

“They did. And yeah, it feels... awesome.”

“You exude magical power to those who know how to tell the difference. Is that why you decided to return?”

“It was one part of it. I felt... I felt like I’d been caught in different problems, fighting dangerous people. I felt like there were so many dangers out there, and there was a way to get stronger, so that’s what I did. But that’s not all. With Kyrian being gone, I did find something that might help.” She summoned the Taleen Gate key. “We fought two Praetorians, destroyed them.”

Claire raised her eyebrows. “You did. And that is what you found?”

“Yes. In the throne room of a Taleen ruin. But that’s not all. Not by a long shot.”

She told Claire about the Centurion facility, about what she’d learned about the machines. Then she told her about Hallowfort, about Rhyvor, about the north and its weather cycles.

“In Tremor, when I arrived, I met someone. A historian,” Ilea said.

“Is that peculiar for the region?” Claire asked.

“Maybe? I’m not sure to be honest. His name is Niivalyr, and he’s an elf.”

Claire’s eyebrows shot up. She’d been taking notes here and there, but now she looked stunned.

“Yeah,” Ilea said. “I learned quite a bit on my adventures. Did you know that there used to be three suns in the sky of Elos?”

\* \* \*

It took a while for Ilea to recount her adventures in the north and what she’d learned. Claire took more and more notes, occasionally asking questions.

“You’ve brought both opportunities and new headaches,” Claire said when Ilea was done.

“I assume that’s a good thing.”

“Very,” Claire smiled. “Guess I didn’t expect quite as many.”

Ilea thought for a moment. “Right. Oh, and the necromancer king I mentioned? He’s here, in Ravenhall.”

“Right.”

“Yeah. Just in case some strange reports come in.”

“I’ll keep an eye out. He’s not dangerous, is he?”

“Not in the way you’re thinking of,” Ilea said. “At least, I don’t think so.”

Claire nodded slowly.

"Oh, and Tremor, the former capital. After we got him and Elana out, I got to raid the vaults. I sold a bunch of metals to Catelyn, and now..."

She started summoning crates full of gold into the office.

"Ilea, please," Claire said. She pinched the bridge of her nose. "I need a moment."

"Oops. Did you break?"

"A little bit," Claire said in a whisper.

"Sorry," Ilea said, extending some ash to heal the woman's mind.

"I don't need healing."

Ilea leaned in and continued in a low voice. "I also have an entire nation's armory's worth of equipment. In case you needed it."

Claire closed her eyes.

"Right here, in my pockets," Ilea said.

"Mhm."

"I'll take a walk. Let me know when you want to talk."

Claire breathed out. "We'll talk more. With Sulivhaan, Dagon, and Elise present."

"Who's Elise?"

"A librarian from Virilya. More importantly, she's now married to Dagon. He left at one point to go to the capital, and he returned with her."

"He's been busy too, then," Ilea murmured.

"He has. I'll introduce you soon."

"Sounds good," Ilea said. "There were a few more things I wanted to talk about. First, Keyla. I visited the Golden Drake."

"You did? It's become one of the most popular restaurants in the city, if not *the* most popular. Good call with her."

"Yeah, I know. We own the restaurant, right?"

"We do. Well, mostly you do."

"I gifted it to her."

Claire nodded. "Sure. At this point, why not? We'll lose the cash flow, but I don't think it should matter in the grand scheme of things."

"She needs gold as well to open three more restaurants. Maybe you can make a deal with her there."

"Even more work."

"You sound both excited and dejected at the same time."

"That *is* how I feel," Claire said.

They were quiet for a long moment.

“How’s Trian?” Ilea asked. “Still hidden in the Haven?”

Claire smiled. “He does stay down there most of the time, yes. But he’s been training more, talking more. I think he’s slowly getting better, but I’m not sure where he’s at. Maybe he just needs more time.”

“At least nobody’s come looking for him, and you’ll be... content, maybe, to hear that the Birmingales have lost their status of nobility for the murder of the Alymies – by decree of Empress Alyris of Lys herself.”

“It’s official, then,” Ilea murmured. She thought back to their attack on the noble House.

“It is. I don’t know what happened with the remaining members, but I suspect they made some kind of deal to serve in the war. Alyris wouldn’t have made enemies with even one level two hundred fighter at this time.”

“The war’s still going?” Ilea asked. Deep down, she’d known it, of course. Keyla had mentioned it, and the guards had all felt a little too tense.

“It is, and it’s progressing slowly. We don’t have to talk about it if you’d rather not.”

“I don’t. But I think an overall picture would be helpful. Just to know what I’m dealing with in the Plains, in terms of travel and all that.”

“Sure. Virilya still stands. The central district seems impenetrable, and the siege of the city has splintered more and more. Any attempts by Baralian forces to get into the core of the city have lessened in both force and capability. Sulivhaan assumes that many of the higher-level Baralian nobles involved in the initial siege have already left to tend to their cities. It seems like Alyris’ decision to hunker down and wait has paid off. Much of the imperial army has moved to defend the closest cities, and attempts by Baralian forces to attack those targets have mostly been repelled.

“There are still plenty of Baralian forces moving within imperial territory. Some are thought to be independent at this point, bandit groups if you will, looking for bounty, for easy targets, or any way to destabilize the Empire. The roads are not safe to travel for the common folk, though for someone at your power, they should be. The troop and refugee movements are complex. There are many battle sites, and to be honest, I only keep myself updated on major events, of which there have been few in recent months.

“Sulivhaan’s general opinion is that Baralia’s invasion has been a complete failure. It’s debated if Alyris’ decision to hunker down instead of

immediately striking back in open battle was the right one. That said, opposing voices are turning silent as the pressure from Baralia seems to be slowly fizzling out – all major imperial cities are standing, and only the capital is still under siege. Information from Baralia itself is scarce, but it's very much assumed that their internal situation is worsening by the day. But who knows. War is ever so complex.”

Claire sighed. “We’ve had some spies from Baralia, some early efforts to try and bribe or buy mercenary help from the Hand, but the recent battle against the demons gave most members a sense of fellowship that we assume only very few have answered in favor of greed.”

Ilea wondered how Felicia, Aliana, Edwin, and Maria were doing. They’d remained in the capital, after all.

“Sounds like a mess,” she said after a while.

“Wars always are,” Claire said. “We’ve been working hard to build up Ravenhall as a stronghold against that chaos and uncertainty. And many have come to find a new home here.”

“A city on the rise harbors a lot of opportunities... I think those were your words,” Ilea said.

Claire smiled. “That’s what I said. And it’s true not just for me but also for everyone that comes here. And those that come to Ravenhall, we will welcome.”

Ilea liked the idea, though perhaps it was too idealistic. Had Alyris tried to do the same when she became the Empress of Lys? And now her empire was at war, her people hiding behind walls or fleeing to Ravenhall.

“Seems like tough work.”

“It can be,” Claire said. “But it is also quite safe, compared to fighting monsters in the wild, unearthing treasures, rescuing ancient necromancer kings, and befriending elves, of all things. We’re all doing our part in a complex world. I try to help, and I think the same is true for you.”

Ilea looked at the ceiling. Was it? Was she trying to help? She mostly wanted to travel around, see the world, find interesting things.

*But when Alice asked for help, you helped. When you found those people in Salia, you helped. When Dagon called for the Shadows to retake Ravenhall, you were there. And when Elfie asked you to go and help the young Cerithil Hunters, you did.*

It just felt right. And the more power she got from all the fighting and training, the more she could change, the more she could support her friends

and allies. Ilea had no ambitions to rule anything or to change the world at large. She knew she couldn't change people. But when people she cared about were in trouble, yeah, she would be there.

"The Shadow's Hand is not just a group of mercenaries," Claire said. "It's a name. A name that is known and feared throughout the Plains, like a specter hanging above Ravenhall. Here we stand, and here we fight for this city and its people. At least, that's what I'd like to think, though the name is old, and many don't see it as something good, something hopeful. Dangerous warriors looking for gold or the next brawl, a sign of danger and uncertainty, or greed. But it is a name, the Shadow's Hand. A powerful one at that." Claire paused and looked at the ceiling, then back at Ilea. "Lilith is becoming a name as well."

Ilea summoned another bottle of ale, lounging in her ashen chair as she looked at Claire. "You're asking what we could make out of it. You know I made it up as a joke?"

"I know. But now Lilith has become a mysterious force in Ravenhall. And you've become a level three hundred warrior. Not a mere Shadow anymore, but one of the most powerful humans in the Plains. And depending on what name you use when you interact with people..."

"That's what Lilith will become," Ilea smiled. Being this mysterious benefactor... She liked that. It was fun. But what Claire was suggesting here was more. *And I can choose whenever I want to be Ilea or Lilith. Hmm. Yes. I do think I like that.* She grinned wider and drank from her ale.

"Lilith," she mused. "We'll see what comes of it."

"We will," Claire said, pouring herself a drink as well. "Do you plan to stay for a while?"

"Yes. I've got some ideas for training. And I want to visit everyone."

"Training. I see. Let me know if you need anything. I can probably provide most everything that you need."

"I will. Do you want me to dump the gold and all that?"

"No. Let's wait with that until we meet with the others."

"Whatever works." Ilea stood up, stretching. *Lots of talking. I should punch something soon.*

"Before you go, the Gate Key. We should get it to Iana and Chris as soon as possible."

"I can leave it here. I'll visit them later." She summoned the key and set it down on Claire's desk. "Give them my regards."

“Ilea’s or Lilith’s?” Claire asked.

Ilea laughed. “Do you know if any arenas are available in the city?”

“For what exactly?”

“A little bit of sparring.”

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## Sparky

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Ilea felt chipper, almost skipping through the drab streets of Ravenhall, dodging past busy people, shoppers, and adventurers. She had an address. For an arena. Well, more than one arena. An entire group – and all below ground! That alone was cool.

She reached the massive wooden double doors leading into the complex and passed through them, one of the doors already slightly ajar.

Inside, she found a spartan entrance hall, spacious but not particularly inviting. A single counter sat opposite the entrance, and behind it, she saw a bored-looking warrior in leather armor cleaning her nails. She had her boots up on the counter.

Ilea glanced at her, then looked around the hall. She saw a few oil lamps hanging from the walls, and a few banners too. She recognized the one of the Hand and one that she thought was an adventuring guild. The local one, she assumed.

“Got lost or something?” the woman asked.

Ilea looked over and smiled. The woman had mid-length brown hair with a reddish tint to it, but that could’ve just been the lighting in the room. She had a few small scars on her face, and she looked like she could stand her ground in a fistfight.

“Hey,” Ilea said.

The woman narrowed her eyes. “You’re a high-level healer. Are you looking for employment here? Not with one of the orders?”

## [Warrior – lvl 130]

*Employment?* Ilea couldn't help but snicker.

The sound made the warrior narrow her eyes further, so Ilea tried to explain. "Sorry. I'm just having a really good day."

"I'm not. And it's actively getting worse. What do you want?"

"An arena."

"Everything's booked out. Maybe you can join the adventuring guild's slot. What's your name?"

Ilea leaned in closer, very much aware of the stupid grin on her face.

*Fuck, man, I need to be cooler about this.*

"Does Lilith ring a bell?" she said, her ashen wings spreading majestically from her back.

The woman took in a deep breath and closed her eyes. "Mother, please forgive my sins..." she murmured, then opened her eyes. "You're the owner."

"I thought you'd be delighted to learn that," Ilea said, her wings dissolving.

"Look. This job is good. If I'm honest, I don't give a flying fuck about some mysterious Lilith person. If you're the boss, you're the boss."

"Hmm. Yes. I like you."

"Great."

*Not impressed in the slightest. Necessary for this job, I'd guess.*

"All the arenas are booked out?"

"You're the boss, so if you need an arena, I can give you an arena. Good one too, with enchantments. Battle-healer seems strange, but I guess you're not just a wuss who stays in the back lines. Anything else you need?"

"I don't want to take up people's slots. But I have this idea. Been doing it at a smaller scale, but here... here in Ravenhall, with the Hand and so many adventurers and guards in the city."

The woman watched her.

"I'll need a bucket," Ilea said. "And I guess I don't need a full arena. Maybe you can talk to whoever is renting the best arena you have. For a collaboration of sorts."

"And what would you need a bucket and a collaboration for?"

Ilea smiled. "Resistance training."

The woman seemed interested for the first time in the conversation.

“Resistance training?”

Ilea nodded.

“And... you’d be healing?”

“That too.”

“Healing and...? Attacking?” The attendant looked at her, then raised her eyebrows. “Defending?”

Ilea shook her head.

“You’d just... stand there... take it... and heal yourself?”

Ilea nodded.

The woman looked at her, then past her. She nodded slowly, then looked into Ilea’s eyes.

“I’m Lyza. And I gotta see this. What’s your level? Just out of curiosity, I won’t mention it to anyone.”

“I’m past three hundred,” Ilea said.

“Yeah. I thought something was off about you. Gave me a fright when you came in. First time that’s happened since that one time...” She got up. “I’ll get your bucket, Lilith boss. And I’ll make sure people know what you’re offering.”

“Thank you, Lyza,” Ilea said with a satisfied grin.

\* \* \*

Viper sighed as he entered the adventurer’s guild. He took in the inn and its occupants in a moment, registering a couple of interesting individuals and a couple of dangerous ones as well. A fiery flash shot through his eyes as he felt a magical pulse from one of the people. Realizing, with disappointment, that it was only someone working on a weapon’s enchantment, he continued and walked to the board listing the most prominent jobs.

The four people standing near the board made space after they noticed his approach, as none of them were Shadows like him. Of course, there were people wearing black who weren’t part of the Shadow’s Hand, but when you were in Ravenhall, you were better off assuming everyone in black was part of the Order. Offending a Shadow wasn’t a smart move these days. It never had been, but with the demons and now the war between the Empire and Baralia, such a move was becoming more stupid by the day.

*Perhaps today, he thought, glancing over the jobs he had already gone through. More construction and guard jobs. There was the arena, but people at his level rarely participated. He wasn't sure if sparring would be beneficial for Philipp anyway. The man hadn't been the same after the demon summoning. Stories of war, and the resulting refugees, weren't helping. But with the city on the upswing again, he hoped the relative safety might give his friend time to recover.*

Viper was about to leave when his eyes caught a new posting. One without a reward, so he hadn't immediately taken notice of it.

*'Train your magic against Lilith herself. Healer ready. One silver coin per hour per person.'*

*Lilith.* Had he heard that name before? He wasn't sure.

"I was looking at that one too," a voice nearby said.

Viper turned to find a pair of adventurers muttering excitedly to each other. One was tall and heavyset, the other shorter and leaner. He could hear them easily despite their hushed tones.

"The Lilith one?" the taller one said.

"Yea. Do you realize who that is?" the short one whispered.

"I hear she's rich. Owns a bunch of restaurants in the city."

"Not just restaurants. Smithies, workshops, even a few orphanages."

The tall man frowned. "Why is she offering to let people train their magic against her, then?"

Viper breathed in. Could it be?

*A healer is ready. Is she really going to do resistance training and ask for silver in return? In Ravenhall? That's quite a bold move. Could make her a laughing stock in no time.*

He raised his chin. *This isn't some backwater town, even if you own a bunch of places. There are Shadows here.*

There was a location as well. One of the training halls below the small arena in the second ring of the city. *Might be something for Philipp too. He can let loose a little without having to spar.*

*Alright, 'Lilith'. Let's see how you hold up against some proper magic.*

\* \* \*

The now nearly thirty people watching cheered as a stone the size of Ilea's head smashed into her leather-armored chest, the light damage nearly immediately healed as she brushed off the remaining pebbles.

She was wearing her bone armor helmet, mostly to conceal her identity, given that she was using her alias for this little bit of training. Otherwise, she used leather gear – and none of her defensive skills – to make sure the adventurers actually managed to deal at least a tiny bit of damage.

The circular arena was surrounded by a stone wall, dozens of cracks already visible from all the spells and magic that had glanced off her form. Above the nearly two-meter walls were stands for spectators.

“That’s shit!” one of the drunk adventurers watching shouted to the red-bearded stone mage, who was now staring angrily at Ilea.

“You’re shit!” the mage shouted back, then focused on Ilea again.

Magic coalesced as a piece of stone was ripped out of the ground before it twirled like a drill and was sent her way. This time, he aimed for her knee, but she simply braced for the impact and let it happen. There was a loud crack, followed by wincing from the spectators.

Of course, it was the rock that had cracked, not Ilea’s knee. Even without the use of any of her active skills, it wasn’t nearly enough to knock her off balance.

The mage before her was dressed in leather armor as well, his face red and puffy, sweat dripping down his brow as a vein throbbed on his forehead. The man was at level one forty-four, but his damage output wasn’t exactly anything to worry about.

“Are you done?” Ilea asked the man light-heartedly. She wondered if he saw her blue eyes sparkle in glee as she watched him finally snap. Nearly all of them did. At some point, they would all use whatever attack they usually thought too dangerous for a sparring match.

Ilea noticed a new face in the crowd and smiled on seeing the black robe the man was wearing as he appraised the scene in the arena with sharp black eyes.

Her feet prepared for the next impact, pushing against the sand and stone below. The stone mage had switched to rock spears – his anger pushing him to a more deadly variation of his abilities. A worthy change, but with what little damage he’d done thus far, Ilea doubted this would bring much of an increase in danger.

She watched the stone spears crack and split as they became smaller and started to spin, reminding her of her own ashen lances. And then they came, shooting toward her as quickly as the Taleen machines sent out their projectiles. Not impossible for her to dodge, but in this case, it didn't matter anyway. She was here to improve her resistances and nothing else. Plus, she already knew the damage the attacks would do.

She would hardly need to heal.

The spears punched through her leather armor and dug a small way into her flesh, barely drawing blood. A cloud of dust and pulverized stone floated before her as she ripped out the pieces still inside her chest. The minor wounds closed with her natural regeneration alone, pushing out the fragments of rock she hadn't gotten with her hands.

"Nice try," Ilea said, watching the man's eyes go wide. Relief filled his eyes when he realized she was fine. Regret often followed these anger-fueled 'unsportsmanlike' attacks, no matter how many times Ilea told them she would be fine with whatever they could dish out.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to..." he said and swallowed.

"That was the first attack worth your silver. Calm down, come back, and lead with those attacks. I'm here until around eight. Again tomorrow evening. One silver per hour."

Ilea smiled at the man. He was seemingly a little overwhelmed by the situation and nodded quickly before walking to the stairs leading to the seating.

"You fucking useless shit stick, I bet four silvers you could at least get one fully through her body! What about the story of you defeating a troll with that spell?!" an adventurer shouted from the stands as he charged after the exiting mage before two others stopped him. It seemed in good fun though as they all started laughing right after.

Ilea had endured nearly all of their magical attacks already. It was frightening in a way. To see how far she'd come. Their spells were laughable compared to what she'd endured in the north. She'd been thinking about letting groups of five or even ten attack her simultaneously, but now that she'd attracted her first Shadow, she'd hold off for a little bit.

*Might even have to use my ash. Hmm.*

Ilea glanced over when she saw the man in question move.

His black robes fluttered slightly as he jumped down into the arena. He walked over to the bucket sitting a little to the side and let a silver coin fall

into it before coming over to face her.

"Oi, lads, give this one a look!" someone called out. "Get your bets in!"

"Welcome." Ilea identified the man and found him to be at two twenty. "Please start with weak attacks and go from there. I'm not wearing my good armor," she said for the first time since arriving at the arena.

"Lilith. Do I know you?" the man asked, his black eyes flashing a fiery red below his hood.

"I don't know. Were you here when we retook the city?"

He didn't react for a moment. "I was. So you're a Shadow too?" Suddenly, recognition flashed in his eyes. "There was nobody at your level there. Other than Verena. But... if you were there... How?" He looked at her for a little longer. "It couldn't be, could it? The healer girl. The battle-healer."

Ilea nodded and smiled below her own helmet. "I fought the demons too."

*Wait. I identified as a warrior back then. So how...?*

"That's not what I meant," he murmured, shaking his head. "It was Riverwatch, wasn't it? The group of survivors we found in the forest, hunting for elves. You were there, weren't you?"

Ilea arched an eyebrow. *He was one of them?* She remembered the group, but they'd all been wearing concealing helmets and hoods. "You remember that?"

"How could I forget a low-level battle healer looking ready to fight a team of Shadows?" He seemed amused. "So you did make it to Ravenhall after all. Quite a journey. I'm Viper."

"Lilith."

"Sure, Lilith..." he said and chuckled. "Let's see how you hold up, then. Seeing your level, I'm less inclined to think you're just an arrogant fool. But I've been wrong about people before."

The air around both him and her grew hotter. Ilea wondered if she should activate her Armor of Ash but held off for now.

He flicked his hand, and a flaming beam of light hit her stomach a split second later, burning through her leather armor in seconds before hitting her skin.

She could see his eyes widen slightly. As the beam grew hotter and more precise, the arena quieted entirely, silent save for the sizzling sound of burning flesh.

The fire surrounding the beam of light grew more intense and chaotic but focused on a smaller spot, finally getting through her skin and flesh beneath. Ilea smiled and started healing.

Some more time passed before the beam subsided, Ilea quickly healing the residual damage. She had to admit that his magic was impressive for someone at his level. Had he faced her before going north, she knew it would've been a tough battle.

Viper's black eyes glared at her. He began forcing a large amount of mana between his hands, adding more and more to it for a solid minute.

Finally, a beam of white light surrounded by white flame flashed out and hit her stomach, burning the very air on its way. She saw the incoming damage, her grin growing wider.

*Very nice!*

Her skin burned away, the beam burning through her entire midsection, flowing beyond her and melting the stone wall behind her. She healed against it, but something felt off. Her healing was nowhere near as effective as it should've been.

“You win,” she said, a layer of ash armor flowing into existence and stopping the beam of burning white flame as both Ilea’s skin and body were strengthened drastically by her defensive spell. The ash alone was enough to tank Viper’s attack, at least for a time.

The beam subsided. It had damn near gotten through her ashen armor too.

“You were just playing,” Viper murmured. He didn’t seem annoyed though, quite the contrary. “Always wondered how I’d do against one of the Elders.”

“I’m not an Elder,” Ilea said.

“No. But you’re as tough as they are. I’ve only met a handful of people who could stop what you just endured with their bodies alone. Two of them elves.”

“Was that the strongest you had?”

He just gave her a look. “How long will you be here?”

“Until seven or eight, I think,” Ilea said, glancing over at the silent adventurers in the stands who had watched the exchange. A bubbling sound could be heard from the molten stone behind her. “Think I’ll change to having them attack as a group soon.”

Viper laughed. "Seems like that's the only way this is going to be effective for you. I'll join again later. A friend of mine might be of service to you, and you might be of service to him." He vanished.

*Yes, go and get your Shadow friends.*

"Now come on, lads, let's keep this thing going," she announced to the silent arena. "You get to take out ten silver pieces from the bucket if you draw blood, how about that?"

\* \* \*

Viper wasn't sure if it was a good idea. But he'd tried a lot of things to cheer his friend. The man was troubled, distant. Ever since they'd lost half their team. Even after his injuries had healed. Viper still heard him cry out at night, and by now, the 'I'm just recovering' excuses had run out.

Philipp was scared of leaving the city walls. He was afraid of any kind of danger, any kind of monster, any kind of injury. He was a Shadow only in name and level.

Sparring hadn't been fruitful either, his friend unable to react as soon as any kind of pressure was put on him. But this? Maybe it could build at least some confidence.

"Are you sure? My arrows are very dangerous," Philipp said, staring at the madwoman. The arena stands were slightly emptier now as many had realized they simply weren't up to the task of causing more than a few scuff marks.

"I'm sure I can take it," Lilith said.

Philipp didn't seem convinced. He took out one of his arrows and aimed.

Viper watched with bated breath, seeing his friend's arm shake as he held his bow. The bow he'd used thousands of times to fire unerring shots from hundreds of paces. He was one of the most accurate rangers Viper knew. Or he had been.

Philipp loosed his arrow.

And missed.

Lilith didn't react, her eyes remaining focused on the man.

Philipp lowered his bow. He started breathing faster.

“That s’posed to be a Shadow?” One of the onlookers spat and laughed. Those still in the crowd were spectators and gamblers. Heavy drinkers not shy to share their minds.

“You’d better stop talking in the stands or I’ll come up there and show you what a Shadow can do to a level one hundred and twenty-six adventurer,” Lilith said, her voice steady.

There was a quality to it that Viper hadn’t heard yet today. The drunk sat down with impressive speed. Viper would’ve done the same, but seeing his friend like this was hard. He’d been trying for so long, waiting for him, trying to help.

The onlookers were silent as Lilith walked closer to Philipp. Viper watched as a single strand of ash extended outward from her hand.

“Do you mind if I heal you?” she asked.

“H... How is that supposed to help?” Philipp asked. His breathing was still fast.

*He’s scared still. He’s about to run, and she’s only walking up to him.*

“You say stop, and I stop,” Lilith said, the strand of ash touching Philipp’s chest.

Viper watched his friend tense up for a moment, then relax. It looked like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders.

“Again,” Lilith commanded.

Philipp breathed. Slower. He took out another arrow and aimed. His hand shook ever so slightly. He fired.

The arrow landed with a thud, and Philipp winced. It had pierced Lilith’s leather armor, its payload spreading to the skin and tissue below.

*Corrosion. It should be liquefying her organs*, Viper thought, thinking back to the many times he’d seen the nasty effects of his friend’s magic.

Lilith simply ripped out the arrow and looked at it. “Feels like I’ve experienced that before,” she murmured, then threw the arrow back at Philipp. “Again. Don’t hold back. Show me what you can do, Shadow.”

Philipp looked calmer. He nodded slowly, then with a little more confidence.

Viper watched the scene with mixed feelings. He knew Lilith was powerful, but the problem was that she’d held back against him at the start, so he assumed she’d hold back against Philipp too.

And now Viper saw the arrow that Philipp took out. He listened to her. He didn’t hold back. Philipp nocked the arrow, pulled back with a practiced,

smooth motion, then loosed the arrow.

Viper raised his hand in front of his face. The splintering explosion was devastating.

Anybody else, himself included, would've been ripped apart by that one arrow, very much dead. The green and red flames were still raging, smoke rising in a sphere around the woman.

*By the gods, Philipp. I hope you didn't just kill another Shadow.*

*But she could take my fire. That shouldn't have been enough to take her out, right?*

Still, Philipp's combination of curse, bleed, explosion, and corrosion enchantments was nasty. Something that had given their team the upper hand in many an encounter, even when they had been out-leveled.

“She said not to hold back,” Philipp said, his voice shaking slightly.

The smoke finally cleared. Viper gulped.

There she was, looking down at her ripped-open stomach, nowhere near as bad as Viper had expected. Bits and pieces of the metal barb had splintered and cut through, but the wound was only the size of his fist. Pulsing red and black veins had started spreading outward from the point of impact, blood dripping to the sand-covered stone floor. Her skin around the wound looked singed in the strange way that blood and curse magic affected their targets.

*The veins aren't spreading further. But she should be paralyzed, at least. And the pain alone would—*

“Nice,” Lilith said. “That's a fucking nasty arrow. Is that a skill?”

Philipp looked at her with his mouth hanging open.

“You didn't hold back, did you?” Lilith asked. She sounded almost disappointed.

*She's fucking with him. It's worse than my fire, at least as a single direct hit. And against the flames, she used her ash armor. Is she using it now too?*

Viper couldn't make it out, even with his perception skill. Maybe if he saw her fight and use her abilities, he could figure it out, but as it was, he had no clue.

*But she's healing at the very least.*

“I did not,” Philipp whispered.

“Well, you did draw blood,” Lilith said, checking the wound with her hands and picking out bits and pieces of the corrosive and blood-magic

cursed metal. Shard after shard fell to the ground. “Difficult to heal this one too, I’ll give you that.”

Viper glanced over at Philipp. *You told me nobody should be able to even move, let alone remove the shards of metal. Once the arrow hits—*

“Once the arrow hits...” Philipp murmured. He sounded intrigued more than anything.

And then Viper saw him smile. It was a small thing, easy to miss, but to Viper, it was like seeing his friend finally return after a long absence.

*When did I see him smile last?*

Lilith pulled out another few pieces, then looked some of them over as the wound on her stomach and the singed skin slowly healed up.

“Drawing blood means you can take ten silver coins out of the bucket.”

Philipp nodded. He breathed in slowly. “Can I try again?”

“Sure. And I’m fucking with you. Even I can’t shrug off something like that without help. I had to use a defensive skill to deal with that one. That was the strongest attack so far today, so maybe use something a little less powerful. If I use my defensive skills, the attacks will be ineffective for my training.”

*Her training*, Viper thought. He breathed out and realized that he was smiling too. *Feels exciting.*

He walked over to Philipp and touched his friend’s shoulder. “Good shot,” he said.

“Barely scratched her,” Philipp said.

Viper smiled and turned to face Lilith. “Then why don’t we try together, what do you say?”

Philipp nocked another arrow. A less dangerous one this time around. “That sounds like a start.”

Viper grinned, giving Lilith a slight nod before he charged up his heat and fire. *Guess I’ve been hiding behind these walls for a little too long as well. Healer girl managed to pass me in less than a year.*

He glanced at the watching group of adventurers. More had joined them. “Why don’t you guys and gals come down here and join us? Tough hunt this one.”

One of them cheered, a few others soon joining in.

Lilith spread her arms. Viper knew she was smiling below that vicious-looking helmet made of bone. *Crazy that one. Glad she joined the Hand.*

\* \* \*

Ilea walked into the entrance hall of the arena complex and gave Lyza a nod. She'd seen her come and watch from time to time, but the woman hadn't stayed.

"Done for the day?" Lyza asked.

"Yeah," Ilea said, setting the bucket down on the counter, the coins inside clinking. "Can I leave this here for tomorrow?"

"Already booked you in. And I wrote a few more notices, told those Shadows to hang them up in Viscera and the elevators to the Haven."

Ilea smiled. "Appreciate it."

"Anytime, boss," Lyza said as she put the bucket away. "You don't expect me to count these, right?"

"I don't. Let's see if I can fill it up by the end of the week."

"I could live off just this for a few months."

"Speaking of which, you don't plan on quitting anytime soon, right? You seemed pretty bored when I found you, but you've been a big help. Plus, I like you."

"I'm stuck here for now," Lyza said. "But if you have any more interesting positions on offer, I'm all ears."

"I might ask around. For now, you can guard my bucket."

Lyza shrugged, a slightly crooked smile on her lips. "Sure thing. Not the worst job I've had."

"See you tomorrow."

Lyza gave her an unmotivated salute, then went back to reading her book.

Ilea passed a group of adventurers. She made for the door and smiled when she heard Lyza's voice.

"You just missed her, but she'll be back tomorrow. If you want to place any bets now, I'm all ears."

*Lyza, Viper, and Philipp. Guess this isn't the worst place for meeting people either. No new resistances, but at least I got some levels for the existing ones.*

It would take time, mostly due to the comparatively low danger, but Ilea had enjoyed the endeavor. At the very least, the variety of magics in use was high.

*More resistances to collect, more levels to gain*, she thought, looking up at the dark sky above Ravenhall.

She sighed. Claire would've shared her info by now. She wanted to know if Iana and Chris had found out anything about where Kyrian had gone and if the key would be helpful in their research.

But first, she wanted to visit Trian. It felt like it'd been ages.

*All the shit that's happened.*

As she started on her way to Viscera, she realized she didn't even know what to hope for, didn't know how to greet him. *Hey, Trian! Look at my cool new powers, my cool new levels. With this, maybe I could've prevented all that horrible shit.*

Ilea glanced at a group of laughing teens running past. She smiled and kept walking.

Before she knew it, she was on the elevators down to the Haven, the stone walls passing before she looked out onto the fields, the hills, the lake, and the bright sun beyond.

The landscape had changed. At least a third of the space closest to the elevator had been repurposed into cultivated land. She could see mages tending to the densely growing plants, and as she walked past, she could quite literally see the plants growing.

One of the mages nodded her way. Ilea remembered her – she was one of Arthur's former employees. Or slaves. She still wasn't sure what kind of relationship they'd had; she was just glad she'd gotten them away. Ilea nodded back, but neither initiated a conversation.

She thought about Felicia and Edwin as she crossed the fields, soon coming up to the hidden entrance concealing the space where Trian and the Alymie survivors were located.

*Should've asked Claire how I can even get in here.*

*"I'm over here."*

She turned her head toward the voice, shaken from her thoughts. Trian. He was sitting with his back against a tree. They locked eyes.

He smiled, ever so slightly, then closed the book in his hands and stood up. He was wearing nicely cut clothes, having cut down on his over-designed clothing: a black vest over a doublet of the same color. Embroideries in red had been weaved into parts of the doublet, and a black leather belt held up his pants. He'd shaved, and his brown hair was styled and a little longer than he'd worn it a year ago. All in all, a good look.

Ilea walked over and stopped a few paces before him. “Been a while,” she said. “You look good.”

“You do too. Stronger. More dangerous.”

Ilea closed in and hugged him.

He hugged her back.

“It’s good to see you,” she said, the two slowly separating.

He nodded. “Didn’t think I’d be able to keep up with you, but three hundred? Already?”

“You can tell?”

“Not everyone’s Identify skill is as abysmal as yours, Ilea.”

She smiled. “Doesn’t matter if you’re higher leveled than everyone else.”

“Sure, and judging by your level, you’ve mostly found out about the strength of your enemies by killing them.”

“The three marks helped judging as well. More dangerous than two marks.”

He smiled.

“How have you been, Trian?”

He looked past her and sighed. “Mind if we walk a little?”

Ilea nodded and joined him, the two making their way through the Haven. It really did feel like they were out in some kind of meadow, yet Ilea knew it was night outside.

*Eregar’s marvelous magical cavern*, she thought, sending a quiet thanks to the mythical figure. She assumed he’d had a ton of gold to burn to build this place for the Hand.

“The first six months were tough,” Trian said after a while.

Ilea nodded.

“Felt a lot. Cried a lot. It was good – still is good – to have Aurelia, Samuel, and Orthan here. Claire and Cless too, even though Claire is insanely busy. She’s become kind of the head administrator of the city, you know?”

“Are we surprised by that?” Ilea asked.

He chuckled. “No. Nor is it surprising to see you at that level.”

She gave him a questioning look.

“Ah, you know. Guess I thought of you as a rival for some time. Feels like a long time ago.”

“You don’t plan to go north and catch up with me?”

He laughed. “I thought about it from time to time. To go and look for you. Or to go and look for Kyrian. Especially once we found out about Cless’ paintings. But... I guess it didn’t feel right. I didn’t feel ready. And even then, I don’t know what exactly it is that I should be ready for. Fighting monsters and getting to a higher level to increase my personal power...” He shook his head. “Just doesn’t sound quite as appealing anymore.”

Ilea glanced his way.

“You’re disappointed?” he asked.

“A little bit, maybe. But I’m glad that you seem a little better. And I have your back no matter what you plan to do, you know that.”

“I do,” Trian said. “I... I’m sorry. For everything that happened. Even though you agreed to help, I know it probably didn’t feel like much of a choice back then. I couldn’t think straight, felt overwhelmed.”

“I think we all were. But if I could choose again, I would choose the same.”

He nodded, his face twitching slightly as his eyes became a little watery. “Yeah. Thanks for saying that.”

She tapped his arm with her fist. “Did I mention I can shoot fire beams now? But not like flimsy focused beams of fire like those fire mages, like a proper beam.” She tried to illustrate the point by spreading her arms wide.

“Been a while since we’ve had a bout. Why don’t you show me?”

Ilea grinned. “Trian. I would kill you in a single blast.”

“Then maybe try to hold back a little,” he said. “For an old friend.”

“Neither of us is old. Nor are we just friends.”

He raised an eyebrow.

She tapped his chest with her fist. “We’re teammates. Now come on, none of the mages today used lightning.”

“What mages?”

“I’ll show you tomorrow. Now get on your armor, Sparky. I’ve been away for too long, and look at you, barely any levels. I hope Kyrian is pulling his weight for the both of you.”

Trian smiled. “You’ve got that covered all on your own.” Lightning sparked around his hands as his armor appeared on his body.

They quickly found an open space, Trian teleporting to make some distance.

“No need to hold back,” Ilea said. “I’ve gotten a few upgrades.”

Her ashen limbs formed and spread behind her, her bone armor appearing before it was covered with ash, wisps of the nearly black element swirling as if touched by wind.

Trian took a step back. "I'm not so sure about this anymore," he joked. "I've already fought one of the Elders of the Hand before."

Ilea smirked and rushed at him, her limbs spreading out as they slashed with hardened spear-like tips. His lightning was ramming into her ashen armor, nearly completely ignored.

She activated Heart of Cinder, teleporting where she felt him appear, her senses and speed enhanced enough to catch him on his first teleport. *My poor Vampyr.* She slammed a fist into his stomach, and even without using any mana intrusion spells, she sent him stumbling.

He caught himself, coughing up blood as she slowly landed a couple of meters away from him. "Your punch sure has improved. That was strength alone?"

Ilea nodded. "The evolutions were pretty nuts."

Trian smiled and crouched down, red lightning flaring up around him, reaching even his eyes. His health and mana drain reached her before he vanished, reappearing above her as a lightning strike slammed down onto her face, clearing away a part of her ash that quickly reformed. He flew around her, slamming lightning attacks into her time and time again while dodging the ashen limbs that lashed out.

She started to add lances of ash into the mix, forcing him to teleport as well. When her Heart of Cinder started to damage her, she lifted her hand his way before cocking her head to the side. She switched her aim to the line of trees around twenty meters to her right before she released the spell.

Trian's eyes bulged as he watched the cone of fire and embers engulf the treeline, leaves and trunks destroyed in an instant. The spell lasted for a little over a second before all the heat was expended. Cinders glowed where the trees had stood, mere blackened skeletons remaining, a cone-shaped hole left in the underbrush.

His lightning vanished, and the man laughed out loud as he watched the fading wisps of flame. "I get what you mean. That's a beam."

"Right? Maro just doesn't get it."

"Maro?"

"Right. Got some stories to tell you. How are Orthan and the others? Should we have dinner?"

“That should work, yeah. Any restaurants you can suggest?”

“Trian, I’ve been back for literally one day.”

“Yeah. Yet I bet the first thing you did once you were past the walls was get food.”

She glared at him.

“So?”

“The Golden Drake is good,” she said. “Really good.”

“You got seats there? At that short notice?” he asked, then raised his eyebrows. “Oh... don’t tell me...”

“Yeah,” Ilea said and pointed at herself with both thumbs. “Lilith.”

## THIRTEEN

# A Breath of Fresh Air

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Ilea used her third-tier Blink from the dining room in the Golden Drake. She'd eaten a little too much to feel like flying the distance to her house.

When she appeared, she instantly teleported to her upstairs bed, switched out her clothes, and fell into the pillows. She groaned a moment later, adding a copious amount of ash and a bit of heat to the environment. Turning onto her back and seeing the stars through the large glass ceiling, she sighed and smiled.

*Back in Ravenhall.*

She looked at her closed fist. It'd been a long day, and there was more to come tomorrow. She wanted to talk to Iana and Christopher and find out how Aki and Balduur were doing. And she wanted to do a bit more resistance training while she was in the area.

*And I promised Cless I'd fly with her.*

The sound of the waves that continuously broke upon the cliffs below eventually lulled her into a slumber.

Ilea woke up a couple of times throughout the night, only able to sleep lightly with her untiring body. At least the ashen blanket was incredibly comfortable, and Ilea found it didn't dissolve even during her sleep.

*A cocoon of ash for the hibernating dragon Ilea...*

The thought was hazy in her mind...

She cuddled her blanket closer and stopped herself from adding more heat to her ash in case her house caught fire.

*I'll need a lair or something...*

\* \* \*

When Ilea next woke up, the suns were not yet visible on the horizon. She could tell it wouldn't be long until they rose, twilight upon the land.

She rubbed her eyes, her auras flowing through her constantly, lines of fire from her Aspect of Ash visible on her skin. Her ashen armor was a small patch on her back. Ilea turned in bed, her ashen blanket moving to cover her. She formed a tiny Taleen Praetorian with her ash and set it to fighting a group of Kingsguards all made of ash, her thoughts given form.

*If all else fails, I can become an ash puppeteer.*

She smiled, willing the Armor of Ash on her back into the form of a rose similar to the one on her bracelet, thorns growing from it. She noted that if she gave the armor a little more area to expand, she could flatten the ash enough for it to be more akin to a tattoo than anything else.

*Possibly less obvious that a skill is actively being used, she thought as the Praetorian halved one of the knights with its scythe. Not that it would matter either way.*

After quite a bit more lounging, Ilea decided to get up. When she went to open the door to get some fresh air into her living room, she heard a growl outside and smiled.

### **[Swordmouth Tiger – lvl 102]**

“Oh, you’re still alive? Wait... weren’t you higher than that?” she asked, pretty sure the one that had lived in the cave was at least level one fifty. Her eyes went wide when the monster jumped at her. “You’re one of the pups!” she exclaimed, catching the ferocious two-hundred-fifty-kilo murder machine with open arms and a laugh.

Claws and teeth scratched against her skin, leaving thin marks that instantly recovered without her healing skill ever activating. She wrestled it down in a playful manner and cuddled the rough furry creature.

It let out a desperate howl, lashing out with sharp claws as long as Ilea’s fingers, not quite drawing blood from the hard skin. Its attacks ineffective, it turned to the cave and tried to run off, only to find itself unable to move.

Ilea laughed, holding onto one of the monster's legs. "My name is Ilea, I live here," she said.

When two more cats shot out from the nearby cave and rushed her, she quickly extended her ashen limbs. Ten seconds later, the three tigers were all growling, pushed to the stone floor by her ash as she looked for something to eat in her necklace.

"I don't suppose you'd appreciate Keyla's cuisine," she sighed.

When she looked around, she saw a group of birds flying above. Ilea formed an ashen lance and fired it off. The unluckiest of the three avian creatures was skewered and fell quickly. A one-meter-long gull-like monster with sharp talons splatted against the stone nearby.

### ***'ding' You have defeated [Raptor Gull – lvl 101]***

"Do you like to eat birds?" she asked, moving the corpse closer. "Don't eat too fast."

She released the three youngsters and smiled, the sounds of flesh ripping and tearing not quite as disturbing as they probably should have been.

The cats finished their meal quickly, leaving Ilea barely enough time to hunt another bird. They looked at her and growled, two stalking to her sides.

Ilea rolled her eyes and formed her ashen limbs again, the cats stopping immediately at the sight of the magic. She held up the second dead bird. "Me – friend. Not food." She tossed the bird to them and watched them eat with a proud smile.

*I do hope the mother is fine.*

She remembered fighting the beast before choosing the spot for her house. Having them around would be a good deterrent to adventurers or random explorers.

She ruffled the head of one of the massive cats, which were a little bigger than adult tigers from Earth. They already seemed to understand that she wasn't food, leaving her alone after finishing their meal.

Other than the bed she'd slept in last night, Ilea found her house untouched. She stretched and sighed, looking at her living room. Ilea appeared two floors down in the armory and started looking through her storage items.

*Hmm, some of the ornamental stuff might be nice.*

She decided to display one of the used-up and battered stonehammer armor sets first. “Perfect,” she murmured, looking at the beautifully fucked up armor.

*A memory.*

She smiled as she looked at the Taleen weapons displayed in her armory. *Wish I had a Praetorian head to display*, she mused, conjuring the thought of an adventurer invading her home and finding that before fleeing in fear. *Let’s be honest, deadly traps would be more effective. Or good locks. Otherwise, Kyrian might return from his adventure only to tragically die of poison.*

She started looking through some of the more ornamental treasures from Tremor. Weapons and gear she thought wouldn’t be particularly useful to Claire or the Hand.

*I wonder if, in ten thousand years, someone will invade my home to kill my skeletal undead remains, taking all my stuff and moving it somewhere else.* She laughed at the thought, already excited for the fight. *I probably wouldn’t die around here anyway, I’d be looking for something exciting out there.*

Ilea wondered if there was a point to hiding more of the treasures but she decided against it after a moment. With all the skills people had for finding hidden spaces, she assumed a high-level scavenger or rogue wouldn’t have an issue getting it anyway.

It took her twenty minutes to find a few interesting-looking pieces that didn’t seem particularly useful, then filled all the gear onto prepared brackets on the walls. She kept a few of the ordinary pieces to fill the weapon racks already in the room.

When she was done, Ilea smiled and crossed her arms, nodding at the sight. The magical lights illuminating the room beautifully reflected off the various metals, a colorful palette of displayed wealth and power. She had no idea what most of the weapons were called, and she was even dubious about how to use some of them.

The next items she summoned were her heavy olvor gauntlets. She lifted them easily by now; all her recent offensive upgrades made the weapons pretty much useless. Her ash could pierce better than her blue steel gauntlets ever had, and given how light the supposed heavy gauntlets felt in

her arms, she doubted they would add anything to her ridiculously enhanced body.

*And they prevent me from using Destruction.*

She summoned her olvor war hammer as well, but after swinging it around a few times, she decided to keep it for now. While it wouldn't be particularly useful in a real battle, she still intended to learn how to wield it more efficiently at some point.

*How much fucking Strength did that Awakened have?*

She shook her head with a smile, placing her hammer back into the necklace. The gauntlets she placed in a prominent spot, each a part of her journey.

Ilea laughed when she saw the heavy dark steel bow in her necklace, reminded of a hobby she hadn't really practiced in a year. Her heavy archery skill was still at level four. She stored it again, intending to at least try to work on the skill a little more in the future.

Looking at the whole array of weapons and battered armor on display, with some of Cless' paintings on the walls behind, she liked the image, but something was missing.

*I think I need more skulls*, she thought, tapping her cheek with a finger.

Sadly, the Undying Lord's skull had been molded into her current helmet, Blue Reapers weren't that nice to look at, Miststalkers left no corpse behind, and the undead knights were human. Ilea decided to hunt for some aesthetically pleasing monsters to add a more imposing atmosphere to her armory.

Done in the armory, Ilea blinked down into the library and walked over to her bath, activating the enchantments. Her clothes vanished into her necklace a couple of minutes later before she stepped into the steaming water. She gave a deep sigh, relaxing in the heat. There was just something about a steaming bath that nothing could replace.

So far, at least.

\* \* \*

She yawned and stretched sometime later, clothes appearing on her before she blinked and appeared in one of the house's lower training halls. Ilea didn't trust the construction enough to go crazy down there, but it was

perfect to hide her training with her Armaments of Trials. Doing so outside would be fine, but the tigers would probably claw it up if she stayed there for hours.

*Maybe I should get one of those cat trees.*

*Alright, let's try this.* She jumped up, summoning the Armaments of Trials around herself. Her senses cut off immediately. *My sphere barely gets through.*

She noted the weird effect she usually associated with enchantments designed to block her skill. Even with her added magic sense, she simply saw nothing. Her eyes brought little too, only the faint light of her buffs illuminating the tight space in front of her face.

*Glad I'm not claustrophobic. Here goes nothing...*

She started trying different skills, but Destruction didn't activate, and her hands were unable even to form fists. What she could do, however, was release healing magic into the steel, as well as the reversed ability. The same was true for Storm of Cinders and Heart of Cinder. The magic wasn't reflected off the steel but instead flowed into it somehow.

Nothing happened for a couple of minutes, but as she continued pushing both healing and reversed healing into the steel, she saw a faint glow in her sphere, the blue light of her Azarinth mana but subdued, dulled as if she were in thick fog. She concentrated on her perception, trusting in the skill completely as she closed her eyes and tried to think only about the magic around her. She turned her destructive reversed healing off, leaving only her non-reversed version active.

The pulse was noticeable, becoming ever so slightly brighter with each minute of meditation and healing. The next three hours were spent using various skills inside the big bulky armor while she analyzed every little change, flow of magic, and enchantment within. Compared to using her skills freely, the armor helped her focus on the more minute changes.

Ilea's magic sight was still untrained. Of course, her sphere skill was at the highest current possible level, but that didn't mean she had nothing to learn about it. Her experiences with Ash Creation and Ash Manipulation had proven as much.

When she was done with the training, she took another bath for good measure.

This world really was full of possibilities. Storage items with fresh food and a bed inside. Magic runes that could collect water and heat from their

surroundings. Wings. Ilea still ranked the wings pretty much at the top. Flying was just *that* satisfying.

Dressed again and fresh from two nice baths, a couple of hours of sleep, and a hearty breakfast of four of Keyla's meals, Ilea blinked up onto her roof. She spread her arms wide. Cold air surrounded her. A moment later, she spread her wings, the ashen protrusions moving first up and then down, their strength surpassing that of most men.

Seconds later, she was flying past the cliffside, rushing over the dense pine forest. Her legs occasionally touched the tip of a tree as she twirled and laughed, speeding onward to the only major city for miles and miles.

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## City Life

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Ilea found Claire in her office and asked where she could find Iana and Christopher.

Claire got up and switched out of her casual clothes into her armor. “I’ll join you and show you myself if you don’t mind. I’ve had a thought about how we can use the gold, armor, and weapons you mentioned.”

“Which is?” Ilea asked.

“Iana and Chris are in a facility that I bought in your name. The façade is a normal house, but there are several underground floors with stone halls that can be used for whatever we’ll need. Most of it is still empty, so I think it’d be a good place to store and sort through the things you’ve brought. Away from prying eyes.”

“Sounds good. So it’s like our own underground base?”

“I knew you’d like that aspect of it,” Claire said with a smile.

“The mysterious Lilith, bringing treasures from distant lands to her friend’s secret underground facility, where enchanters work on secret projects,” Ilea grinned. “How can I not like that?”

“I suppose if you frame it like that,” Claire said. “They needed a place to work, and the prices for large surface workshops have been rising by the week. I thought something like this would be somewhat future-proof. Of course, I bought it for potential use by myself, you, and maybe Trian and Kyrian as well.”

“Or in case we find more estranged enchanters.”

“Or any elves and former necromancer kings you bring back to the city.”

“Oh, I forgot to check on Maro.”

“I’ve had a few guards have a look, and he’s mostly been exploring bars and underground clubs. Other than his very high personal power, he seems mostly harmless. No different than other high-level Shadows.”

“Are there a lot of Shadows above three hundred?” Ilea asked. She’d never checked, but the battle for Ravenhall suggested that if there were, they hadn’t stood out enough for her to notice.

“As far as I’m aware, only some of the Elders boast such numbers, but there are quite a few Shadows who haven’t reported back to Viscera in years or even decades. Some of them may have reached three hundred.”

Ilea raised her chin and smiled. The thought made her want to go out there again and train.

*Have I always been this competitive? Maybe I just want to fight them, see how I’d match up. I think if I take Viper and Philipp as normal Shadows in the low to mid two hundreds, I could take on a full team of those already. But a team closer to three hundred? Hmm.*

It was a short trip through the city. And the entrance to their super-secret underground facility really did look like any other house, though Ilea could see that there were enchantments in place to protect and conceal it. Perhaps even more densely packed than in Claire’s office.

“Lots of enchantments,” she commented. “You bought it like that?”

Claire went inside, greeting two Shadowguards lounging in the spacious but somewhat spartan-looking entrance hall.

“There was a simple alarm enchantment in place. But other than that, everything else is Iana’s and Chris’ doing.”

The wooden walls were dark and lacked any sort of decoration. The place didn’t exactly look run down, but it wasn’t far from it.

“Is security that important?” Ilea asked, nodding to the two guards, who greeted them back.

“Not anymore,” Claire said, leading her past the guards and down a broad wooden stairwell.

They went one floor down, then two, then three. There were hallways leading away on every floor, but it seemed like Claire had a place in mind.

“But when the war broke out, things weren’t nearly as stable here. There were lots of opportunities here, but those opportunities extended to any kind

of opportunists, deserters, spies, assassins... It was a little bit too exciting. I'm much more comfortable here now that the Shadowguard is more established. Sulivhaan and the Hand certainly helped keep the city clean during that time. Mostly."

Claire stepped out on the third floor and went to a large set of steel double doors. She pushed them open, then went inside and touched a rune near the doors. Six bright magical lamps on the ceiling lit up a simple but spacious hall with stone floors, walls, and ceilings. It was at least fifty meters far and wide.

"Sounds like things in Ravenhall weren't quite as simple as you suggested," Ilea said.

"Yes and no." Claire stopped a few meters into the hall, then turned to look at her. "There were some incidents, but the reputation of the Hand likely kept a lot of people from trying anything. And where reputation wasn't enough, well, action followed. You may have seen monsters in the north that most Shadows cannot face, but here in the Plains, both people and monsters are rarely quite that dangerous."

Ilea walked past her and smiled. "Yeah. Just glad things worked out."

"It was a lot of work, from a lot of people. I do think that retaking the city with everyone present gave us Shadows something more to connect over. I joined when you did, but I've talked to many of them now, long-time members too. Over the last few decades, Viscera and the Hand has turned into more of a resource, not really an organization that had a lot of unity. Sulivhaan thinks that much of that had to do with the Elders."

"You think so too?"

"I've got my own opinions, but we've found plenty of evidence that suggests at least Wallace Urn tried hard to push the Shadow's Hand into something more fragmented. A bunch of individual mercenary teams and mercenaries rather than anything with cohesion."

"He's the one who died during the demon summoning?" Ilea asked.  
"The one with the super long speech."

"Yes. And... though I suppose it doesn't matter much anymore, keep this to yourself. There were plans to take him out of the picture. During that very tournament."

"By whom?"

"Adam, if you can believe it. Either as a distraction or he truly wanted the man out of the picture, knowing that he would be gone from Ravenhall

as well.”

Ilea nodded to herself. “He did talk about the Hand an awful lot when we fought him in the demon realm.”

“Yeah. His betrayal was a surprise to many, and it hit those he was close to especially hard. I think that’s a testament to his hard work before the summoning.”

“We still don’t know why he did it?”

“Just theories. I tend to lend credit to Dagon’s thoughts, and he believes that Adam was dissatisfied with the Order. Perhaps he saw it as a challenge for the Hand, and as much as what he did was horrific, there’s a cold and pragmatic perspective that says that the summoning did forge the Shadow’s Hand anew. I’d like to think that the people now at the helm are responsible, but I can’t deny that the catalyst for all this change was the summoning itself.”

“His actions led to nearly the full city being slaughtered. You think it was a challenge for the Hand? If that’s the case, he’s lost his mind entirely.”

“It’s just part of it. Perhaps it was how he could justify his actions in the end. But Dagon didn’t think him mad. On the contrary, he assumed the real reason he conducted the summoning was to get into the demon realm. And for that, sacrifices were required. Sacrifices that Dagon thinks Adam would’ve only accepted for some kind of greater good, or for someone very dear to him.”

“Someone he knows went to the demon realm?” Ilea asked.

“Now those are just theories. But Adam did have a daughter. Octavia Strand. Dagon knew her, knew that she wanted to go out there and explore, but her father wanted her safe and protected.”

“A story as old as time. I’m sure she’ll be overjoyed to hear he had to sacrifice the population of a city to get to her.”

“All just theories. Adam had his hands in a lot of things. It’s possible everything that happened was due to reasons unknown to us. But perhaps his daughter who ran from him was asking for help in some way, or maybe he finally gave in to his guilt and wanted to find her. Perhaps he’d thought her dead, or he knew where she was and had prepared to get to her. The guilt and love of a father. It just so happened that he was an Elder of the Shadow’s Hand. I suppose this way of thinking could be comforting to those who were betrayed. I don’t know.”

“We’re here now,” Ilea said. “No matter the reasons.”

“Exactly,” Claire said. “And if he ever does show his face in the Plains again, he will be brought to justice.”

Ilea nodded. She walked a few steps away from Claire. “Should I just dump everything?”

“Yeah. This hall has excellent enchantments, so it should be safe to keep most everything here for now. I’ll take the gold with my own storage item.”

Ilea smiled and started emptying her storage necklace, bracelet, and the rings she’d gotten.

First came the crates of gold, far more than she’d gotten from the Taleen ruin, though she had no clue how it compared to the wealth that Claire had built in Ravenhall and beyond.

Then came the rows and rows of armor and weapons. Half-plate, full-plate, swords, halberds, and spears. Stonehammer steel most of it, old but, all in all, in good shape. Many even sported enchantments to make them lighter and more durable.

Claire stored the gold and started taking notes, following Ilea as she slowly filled the hall. It took a while, but given how quickly the storage items could be used and how accurately things could be placed on the floor, it wasn’t much of a hassle.

“You weren’t kidding,” Claire said when Ilea was done. “This is more equipment than the entire armory of the Hand and the Shadowguard combined.” She looked over the rows and rows of gear and breathed in slowly. “The others will be pleased, to say the least. It might even speed things up.”

“Speed things up?”

“There have been talks. Among the more senior members of the Hand. You’ll be initiated soon as well. You’re trustworthy. We had already discussed if Lilith should be on the council, but with these contributions and your personal power, it’s pretty much certain at this point.”

Ilea narrowed her eyes. “What are you talking about, Claire?”

Claire breathed in deeply. “After we retook Ravenhall, all the clean-up and rebuilding efforts, all the work and gold put back into this devastated town. There’s been a feeling of unity among the members of the Hand that had not been present before. And certain thoughts and wishes have begun to surface. Talks of becoming more independent. To have Ravenhall secede from the Empire, for us to be self-governed, the Shadow’s Hand in power here, contracts in place with Lys instead of the tense and ineffective

relationship we've had for the past few decades. It feels right, like the natural progression after we fought for Ravenhall, retook it, and freed it from the demons."

Ilea looked at her friend. "Ravenhall, governed by the Hand? Wouldn't that mean war with Lys?"

"Not necessarily. A more united Ravenhall and Shadow's Hand will harbor both opportunities and dangers for the Empire and the other nations in the Plains. If we become entirely independent, we would also not be bound by the entrenched bureaucracy of Lys. A fast-moving government led by the Shadow's Hand, with no desire to expand beyond the southern mountain ranges. Offering readily available support for any monster crisis in Lys, and potentially even support in the war efforts. Though we'd want to keep that part as small and discreet as possible.

"Right now, each member of the Hand makes their own decision on how they will be involved in conflicts that come up, but as a more unified entity, we could back the Empire or other nations far more effectively. We know that Baralia's invasion of Lys has failed, and we know that Alyris doesn't plan to sit idly once the remaining Baralian forces in Lys have been captured, killed, or retreated to their homeland. We think that Lys will invade Baralia. If they can have a unified Shadow's Hand at their back, it will dissuade any other nations and factions from taking action while they are engaged with King Baron. And it could inspire the outlying cities of Baralia to reconsider their ties with their king, to know that Lys is open to negotiations for relative independence."

"Relative?" Ilea asked.

"Yes. There would be contracts between us and Lys. We will have to buy our independence with gold, trade, and support rendered. Otherwise, Lys would never agree to have a city split from their Empire."

"Sounds like a lot of ifs," Ilea said. "I won't be killing imperial troops if they come knocking."

"Few Shadows would. And few nobles in Lys would wish for war between our factions. If things go even remotely according to plan, there won't be any bloodshed at all. At the end of the day, it's just a matter of resources." Ravenhall has been home to the Shadow's Hand, but other than that, it's needed to import a lot of its food and equipment. I believe the city has been thoroughly mismanaged, but most of that stems from the fact that its government and the Shadow's Hand have always been two separate

entities, with neither imperial nor Hand resources used to the fullest. Nor was there an interest from the Hand or imperial governors to shake up the status quo.”

“And now there is?” Ilea asked.

“You’ve felt it, haven’t you? Fighting alongside the other Shadows to reclaim the city, all the rebuilding efforts, the Shadowguard, the haven that this city has been for refugees from both the western independent cities devastated by elven attacks and the war in Lys. Ravenhall is on the rise, and we’re at the helm.”

Ilea couldn’t deny it. The settlement with the most support and unity she’d been to so far had been Hallowfort, a town of scavengers and survivors. A necessity, perhaps, to work together in a hostile environment. Had Ravenhall turned into something similar? It did feel different than back when she’d been training with her team.

“As for the council, you wouldn’t fill a governmental job. Every Shadow and other individual part of the new government will have voting rights. Many council members will have veto rights, as well, on any decision that may come up. In retrospect, too, so if you return after a long journey, you can review any major decisions made. This way, we’ll be able to incorporate more people and create more unity amongst the Shadows and other citizens that will be involved.”

“So I’d get the power to lock things down or reverse changes?” Ilea asked.

“Essentially. More practically, the hope is that a compromise could be reached when one or more of the council members disagree.”

“And who else would be on that council?”

“Myself, Dagon, Sulivhaan, William, you, five notable Shadows that I don’t think you know, and Verena.”

“She’s returned?”

“And left again. But she supports Sulivhaan and Dagon in this endeavor.”

“And you’d want me for my power?” Ilea asked.

“The power justifies it, seeing how you’re not interested in taking part in governing in any major way. And then there’s Lilith and all your assets to consider. While I manage all that, it mostly belongs to you, and having your name among the council members will add a lot of stability and support from people associated with our establishments.

“Your contributions here will also add a lot of support from the others. It’s undeniable that your efforts during the demon invasion and your contributions in terms of wealth and equipment have been a cornerstone of the new Ravenhall. One of many, myself included. And we want to include as many people as possible.”

“A veto right,” Ilea murmured. “I don’t dislike the idea. Just, with all the shit that has happened in the capital, and with Trian... I guess I’m apprehensive.”

*Or am I outright scared?*

Ilea thought about it for a moment. She found that the idea didn’t sound terrible. She knew a lot of the people involved and trusted them deeply. If Sulivhaan, Dagon, and Claire claimed that this was the right path for Ravenhall and the Hand, then she would support them.

“I know,” Claire said. “I’m anxious too. I hope cool heads prevail, but you know that I care about the team, about the Hand, and about Ravenhall. Leia is here now too. This is my home, and I want the best for those close to me. And I think with this, we can make Ravenhall into a place beyond the machinations of imperial noble Houses, Baralian slavers, ancient healing orders, or secret societies like the Golden Lily. Only time will tell how things will develop, but with the war as it is, we have a chance to establish ourselves as something more than just a city housing a dangerous mercenary order.”

“And what’s the end goal?” Ilea asked.

Claire smiled. “Stability. Stability in the south. Safety and opportunities for those who choose Ravenhall as their home. Perhaps I’m an idealist, and yes, the way my parents were treated by local governments, how easily Lord Felt bowed to the influence of a distant noble House from Dawntree of all places, all that has shaped how I think. But I want things to be better. I think we can *do* better. But to achieve that, we need gold, we need power, we need connections, we need walls, and I think we need you as well, Ilea.”

“You know I have your back, Claire. And I’ll fight too, if it makes sense to me. I just don’t want to be part of preventable bloodshed.”

“That’s all I hoped for. We’ll talk with the others too. We hope that a few signed contracts will be all that is needed for the changes we want, and we’re close to that already.”

“A new government in Ravenhall,” Ilea murmured. *And they want me to be part of their council. I can see Catelyn’s smirk already.*

It felt a little strange to her that none of it felt wrong. Back on Earth, she'd just lived in an apartment, occasionally voting but not getting particularly involved or interested in local governance.

*Because it didn't really feel like a community, or like home.*

*Ravenhall does.*

Most of her friends were here. She'd trained here, fought to retake the city, and now she'd put most of the gold and equipment she'd found on her travels back into Ravenhall. And she could tell that she'd fight for it.

Maybe not if Sulivhaan declared himself the Grand Ruler of Ravenhall and started enslaving people or some shit like that, but if they genuinely cared and worked to improve the lives of everyone here, then she would answer the call and fight to defend the city.

*Is that what Catelyn meant?*

She could imagine the fox grinning at learning that Ilea had joined a council of sorts as well. And she could imagine herself taking part in the same way that Verena was. Leaving the actual governing to those willing and capable of taking on those responsibilities.

It felt reassuring that those same people wanted to have both her and Verena involved, and other high-level Shadows, with veto rights. Of course, they needed their power, but that power would keep them in check all the same.

She could imagine a balance where things could work out well. Not a bunch of squabbling noble Houses with the highest-leveled and most powerful people at the top, but a bunch of good and capable people at the helm, part of and backed by the power of the Shadow's Hand. And with veto rights in the council, there would be no way for one single person to steer everything in a completely different direction.

“Yeah,” Ilea said. “I think I’m in.”

Claire smiled. “Good. I’ll let the others know and will invite you to the next meeting, probably later this week. All the information and resources you’ve brought from your journey in the north alone are grounds for one.”

“Sounds good. I’ll be there. But I don’t want to have weekly meetings or anything like that.”

“Verena is part of the council, and she’s been gone for months. I think you’ll be fine,” Claire laughed. “While I’m glad you two will be part of the council, we can’t wait for you to return from whatever distant adventure you’re taking part in to vote on any decisions.”

“Yeah,” Ilea said and nodded.

“Enough politics. I know you didn’t come here for this.”

“It’s fine. I’ve been avoiding the south for long enough, and I knew there would be things piling up. I’m just glad the city is still standing and Baralia hasn’t taken over half the Empire.”

“Me too. Now come on, let’s see what Iana and Chris have been able to find out about the key you brought back.”

Ilea followed Claire to the lowest floor of the underground facility, where they found another large steel gate. This one was heavily enchanted.

Claire touched a rune to the side of it. The gate didn’t open for a while, but then a sizzling noise came from the steel, and the massive entrance shifted. Ilea watched as the doors opened up, Claire entering a moment later.

Following her inside, Ilea found herself in a long hall with several doors leading away on the left and right. The ceiling was a little higher here than in the hall above, and there were far more lights. There were workbenches and tables, toolboxes, shelves, and carved-out sections of flooring filled in with various metal devices and shapes that Ilea couldn’t determine the use of.

Deep within the chaotic and cluttered workshop, they found the two enchanters. Iana and Christopher were bent over a broad table covered with what looked like engineering plans of some kind.

“Do you mind if we intrude?” Claire asked, but neither of the enchanters reacted.

“They’re busy.”

The voice came from a nearby table.

Ilea smiled and teleported closer. “Aki!”

“Ilea, you’ve returned after all. And I’d bet half my gold on your demise!”

“I’m happy to see you too,” Ilea said, looking down at the dagger. “Mind if I pick you up?”

“I don’t,” Aki said. “It’s good to see you too, Ilea. Your find has left my caretakers in some sort of haze. They’ve not been this absorbed in months. I can barely decipher their mumblings.”

Ilea took the dagger and spun him in the air, then caught him with an ashen limb.

“Nice trick. I do hope you’ve come back with a few interesting stories.”

“You have no idea,” Ilea said with a grin. “Hey, Iana, Chris, you’ve got visitors,” she added, stepping closer to them.

Iana rubbed her eyes. She had bags under them. Looking up, she stared at Ilea with her glowing blue irises. It looked like a mesh of runes was living inside them. “Ilea. Is that you?”

“In the flesh,” Ilea smiled.

“You look... different.” Iana opened her eyes wide. “The key. The... the key you brought. It’s—”

“Marvelous!” Christopher said. “The key, it’s the key!”

Ilea raised her eyebrows.

“We haven’t slept,” Iana said.

“I can tell,” Ilea answered. “Why don’t we have a drink? A break might help you two relax a little.”

“A break, yeah. You know, that does sound reasonable,” Iana said.

“I’ve been telling them that for hours,” Aki said.

“Your magical presence is more easily ignored,” Iana said offhandedly, then leaned against one of the workbenches. “Holy shit, Ilea, you’re practically glowing with magic. You’re at three hundred, aren’t you?”

“I am. Got new evolutions and some new tricks to show off,” she grinned.

Claire summoned a few drinks and some snacks before sitting down on a chair she’d found somewhere in the chaos.

“I might have a new trick as well,” Aki said.

“Oh?” Ilea asked.

“Aki, we don’t know if it will work,” Iana said. She sounded a little worried.

“But she’s here. If anyone can provide a test subject, it’s her,” Aki said.

“A test subject? Do I need to stab myself in the chest with you?” Ilea asked.

“Yes, exactly that,” Aki said.

“No,” Iana murmured, rubbing her brow. “That is not at all anything you should do. Aki is... far more complex than I could’ve imagined from those first few inspections I did. The construction of his form is Taleen-made, and the runes are Taleen, but there are so many layers to it. It’s fascinating. Fascinating and terrifying to think that these dwarves were so far ahead of anything we know about enchantments.”

“Did you find out what he is?” Ilea asked. She’d speculated on some kind of artificial intelligence, or maybe a soul trapped in a dagger?

“No. Not the core of it. He’s too complex. But we’ve studied the Taleen runic system and its use in their battle-machines, teleportation gates, and other more minor uses. We found out that Aki’s framework overlaps with what we understand of the runic systems of the Guardians. There is a *slight* possibility that he could be connected in some way to an intact Taleen battle-machine.”

“Connected?”

“You stab me into one of their machines,” Aki said. “Do you have any with you?”

“Damaged ones?” Ilea asked.

“Inactive ones but not too badly damaged.”

“I don’t, I’m afraid. But maybe Maro kept a few? I’m not sure.”

“We... don’t know how either Aki or an inactive Guardian machine would react, but we could at the very least learn from the experiment,” Iana said.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Ilea said. She liked the idea of Aki being able to move around. But it didn’t seem like Iana was certain as to what would happen.

“I’d like to try as well,” Aki said. He sounded anxious. Ilea wasn’t sure if she’d heard him anxious before.

“We’ve also managed to solidify his current personality. There was a system in place to let a wielder affect him through the mana they provided once they wielded him. It’s been a learning experience.”

“So you’re more Aki now?” Ilea asked, looking at the dagger.

“That’s the hope,” the dagger replied.

Ilea twirled him in the air. “Still can’t believe the Taleen made an intelligent, talking dagger.”

“He’s so much more than that,” Iana said. “And the key you brought. It’s been frustrating to study the gate technology. But with this... we’ve already found so many answers.”

“And just as many new questions,” Christopher said.

“Any idea if you could find out where Kyrian went?”

“Your friend,” Iana said. “I can’t give you any assurances right now. I’m sorry. But we’ve only had the key for a single day. It will take time to study it, to find out how it interacts with an actual Taleen gate.”

“We could actually manage it,” Christopher murmured.

“The gates?” Claire asked.

He nodded. “This is a major piece of the puzzle. If we could rebuild a long-range teleportation gate.”

“We’re nowhere near that level of understanding,” Iana said.

“I know... I know,” Chris said. “It’s just felt like we’ve been circling around the same questions for so many years, but since we’ve been here in Ravenhall, studied Aki, and now the key, after all this time, maybe there’s a real possibility. That’s all I’m saying.”

Ilea smiled, looking at the dagger. “Good thing I didn’t listen to your screaming and leave you in that dungeon.”

“That was.... yeah, you know... a little embarrassing,” Aki said.

Ilea laughed and set Aki down on a nearby table. “We all have our moments. Hey, while I’m here, I had a few questions that came up. But maybe you two should sleep first.”

“I don’t think we’ll sleep anytime soon,” Iana said. “Shoot.”

“I’ve got this new set of armor,” Ilea said, summoning it onto her body. “And you’re my go-to enchantress.”

Iana stepped closer, then touched the armor. “Very interesting. This is not my father’s work.” She looked up. “You found a smith better than Balduur,” she smiled. “He’ll be furious, and he’ll want to meet this master.”

“Is he in the city? Or did he leave for Induur?”

“He’s here – with everyone else. Not that he’s too happy about that,” Iana murmured. “This bone is of timeless quality. Where did you find this?”

“We fought a death magic spirit in Lisburg, an ancient Rhyvor city in the north, now occupied by Awakened. I hear they once made some really good wine.”

Iana looked at her, then nodded absentmindedly. “I think I can add two enchantments. I think your previous equipment had weight reduction and durability on it?”

“Don’t think I need the weight reduction anymore,” Ilea said. She barely felt the weight, and what little she felt, she liked. “Supposed to be light armor anyway, for one of my skills.”

“I see. You use mana intrusion abilities, correct?” Iana stepped around her, checking the armor here and there.

“I do.”

“We could make the material more resistant against heat or ice, or various other schools of magic, including a common enchantment to increase its resistance against mana intrusion abilities. But for you, I’d recommend the opposite. A mana flow enchantment. The material is already not particularly resistant against intrusion abilities, but with the enchantment, your mana intrusion abilities will flow right through it.”

“I do normally punch stuff,” Ilea said.

“I know. But your shins are covered, as are your elbows and your brow. Can you not use your abilities with those parts of your body as well?”

“Right. Yeah. That sounds good then, so durability and mana flow?”

“Yes. If you leave it here, I can get it done in the coming days. Or do you plan to leave again soon?”

“Not that soon,” Ilea said with a smile. “Thanks, Iana. Oh, do you have a storage item already?”

“They’re rare and expensive, and I don’t have the ability to make a true one myself, so no.”

Ilea took off one of her rings. “You can have this one,” she said.

Iana’s eyes went wide. “No, no, I can’t accept a g—”

Ilea gently took her hand and slid the ring onto her finger. “Oh, look, you can!”

Iana sighed, then looked over at Claire, who just smiled and shrugged.

“Thank you, Ilea,” Iana said. “I’ll put it to good use.”

“That’s why I gave it to you,” Ilea said.

“The mark on your mask,” Aki spoke up.

Ilea turned to look at the dagger sitting on a table. “What about it?”

“It is... familiar. A guardian of... Guardian of Cerith? Was that it? Strange.”

“It’s Elvish,” Ilea said.

“Is it?” Aki asked.

“It’s possible that your previous wielder knew it,” Iana said, taking a closer look at the carved rune. “There’s no enchantment on it, but it looks... pretty.”

“I do like the flair,” Ilea said as she touched it. “Do you know what it means exactly? An elven friend added it to the armor.”

“Elven friend? What exactly have you been up to in the north?” Aki asked.

“I told you I’ve got stories,” Ilea said with a smile.

"Right. And no. I... the rune feels familiar to me, but its meaning escapes me."

"Do let me know if you figure it out," Ilea said, placing her armor on one of the workbenches.

She checked to see if she still had other helmets for her resistance training. There were a few, but she'd have to make sure they didn't get damaged badly.

*Another challenge, I suppose,* she thought with a smile.

"Last thing I wanted to ask about are these runes," Ilea said, summoning the late Guard Captain Rhyker's last report. "Found in a dungeon somewhere in Rhyvor."

Iana opened the pages and looked at them, Chris stepping over as well. "These are powerful runes. Similar in design to the runes Claire shared with us, from what you and Trian found in the demon realm."

"Demonic runes?" Ilea asked. "Could Weavy know more about them?"

"No, the Mind Weavers use a different system, far less advanced. This may be even more complex than what the Taleen used. I've not devoted much time to their study as our objectives are with the Taleen runic system, but it's on the list. Can I add these to the collection as well?"

"Sure. Let me know what you find out about it. But yeah, finding Kyrian takes precedence."

Iana nodded. "I'm sorry we haven't made progress in that regard."

"He's still alive. Fighting monsters, somewhere out there. And we'll get him back – in time. I just hope he won't be stronger than me by that point."

Christopher laughed.

Iana smiled. "The priorities of a Shadow."

"You've grown as well," Ilea said, identifying the enchantress.

### **[Enchantress – lvl 162]**

"As a result of my work," Iana said.

"Same as me then," Ilea said and winked.

"Sure, Ilea. Sure. Anything else you wanted to discuss?" Iana asked. "I'd really like to get back to studying the key. And I'll let you know if we find out anything else. About Kyrian, those runes, or Aki."

"Nothing else, and thanks. I'll be back again in a few days."

“I’ll have the armor ready. Thank you again – for retrieving that key, and for bringing it to us.”

“Only took a few Praetorians,” Ilea grinned.

“You did it,” Aki said.

“Not alone, but yeah,” Ilea said, stretching her arms. “I’ll be on my way then. Got to take a girl flying.”

“You’re actually going to do that?” Claire sighed. “Be careful, okay? She’s not as resilient as you are.”

“Not yet,” Ilea said with a smile. “Want to come with, Aki?”

“I’m torn. I could be useful here, and I’m quite invested in their research, if I’m honest,” Aki said. “I don’t think you’ll die anytime soon. And Ilea...”

“I’ll check if there’s a Guardian somewhere,” Ilea said. “Hope we can have an adventure again in the future though.”

“Hopefully.”

Ilea left them to their work, Claire joining her on their way back up through the underground stairwell.

“Need better lights in here,” Ilea said. “Kind of feels like a secret underground laboratory or something.”

Claire snorted. “I do agree, though with just the two of them working down there, it’s hardly worth the work right now.” She smiled.

“What?” Ilea asked.

Claire stopped on the stairs and stretched. “I’m glad that not all the work you bring is piled on me alone. It’s good to have some capable assistants and associates.”

Ilea smiled back. “You know you don’t have to manage everything on your own. You can delegate.”

“I know that. Intellectually, it’s hard to let go of control. Tried a few times. Sometimes it works, other times the work I delegate is done sloppily, and I have to clean it up, which takes three times the time. But yeah, I’m trying. Don’t you worry about me.”

“You worry about me when I’m out there,” Ilea said. “So I get to worry about you here.”

Claire narrowed her eyes. “That does sound fair.”

“Maybe you could take a day off sometime?” Ilea suggested.

“When you stop facing the most dangerous monsters you can find.”

“That’s not a fair deal.”

“No? And here I thought we were trying to work less.”

“It’s not work if I love it,” Ilea said and winked.

“Well, there you go.”

“There’s no arguing with you. Well, as long as you enjoy it.”

“I mainly want to reduce my workload so I can spend more time with Leia and Cless. It’s important to me, but so are Ravenhall and the Hand.”

“Let me know if I can help in any way.”

“It’s good to know a level three hundred battle-healer has my back, I’ll tell you that,” Claire said. “And all the things you’ve brought will help more than you know. I know you don’t value treasures and gold a whole lot, but here, it will change a lot of lives.”

“Once you distribute and use it,” Ilea said as she started walking up the stairs again. “Good to know the team’s still around. Feels nice to know there’s always a place to come back to.”

“I agree,” Claire said. She made to speak but then shook her head. “It’s good to know you’re around, Ilea.”

Ilea just smiled. “Any idea where Cless would be at this time?”

\* \* \*

“And that concludes our morning lesson on the importance of proper preparation. If you have any remaining questions, consult your guidebooks or ask your seniors in the guard,” William explained, glancing over at Ilea, who was leaning against the doorframe of his classroom. His purple eyes were not the only ones focused on her. “Again, do not bother the members. More often than not, they used unconventional means or abilities to gain power. They were the lucky ones.” He was full-on talking to her now.

Ilea smiled at him, arms crossed in front of her. She ignored the people looking her way. Most were trying to be sneaky, but nothing eluded her sphere. The wooden doorframe creaked when she pushed away from it.

“Fancy seeing you alive and well,” William said, confirming his views on most members. “I see you have attained still more power.”

“I have. How have you been? Teaching the Shadow Guard, I see,” Ilea said, not missing Cless sneaking up behind her.

Cless drew something in the air, holding her spell book in her other hand. Focus was apparent on her face. Finally, her magic condensed and

formed a small bolt of energy that came to life in the air before her. Then came a smirk as the sneak attack was launched.

Many in the class were watching, some confused as to why the young girl dared mess with a member of the Hand. Others looked confused as to who Ilea was and why she was even here. Some simply ignored everything.

Ilea watched the attack unfold through her sphere, watched the spell form from the runes in the girl's book. She could tell the spell was arcane in nature. Slow but precise. The young mage was getting a good foundation. Her lips tugged upward as she looked at William. Azarinh Fighting told her what she needed to know.

The spell hit. *Power spreading through my back, bursting my organs and bones. Heart ripped to shreds, brain powering down.*

Ilea fell to her knees like a puppet whose strings had been cut. It was too late for healing, the spell so powerful that her perception increase hadn't even been triggered. An attack that bypassed all her defenses. Easily. A groan of pain. The last her punctured lungs would give before she fell to the floor, eyes blank.

Cless fumbled with her book before it fell to the floor. Her little steps were quick. Panicked.

"Ilea... Ilea, are you ok? Come on, heal yourself!"

"I'm afraid it's too late for her," William deadpanned, shaking his head in regret and sorrow. He was not a good actor.

Cless shook her, on her knees now. Her little blue eyes started to tear up when she was suddenly dragged down by powerful arms.

Ilea hugged the kid. "Fool!" she exclaimed. "You have left your most powerful weapon behind!"

Cless giggled as she was held up and spun through the air. Tears gone, her laughter filled the big classroom.

People shook their heads, though some chuckled as well.

"I have been well. Ravenhall is developing splendidly, as are the Shadowguard and the Hand," William finally replied, having waited for her to finish the dramatic play.

"Grab your book," Ilea told Cless. "And don't let it go. Also, make sure your enemy is dead before you stop attacking."

The girl nodded fiercely and rushed to get her spell book.

"Your level..." William said.

“Been on a journey,” Ilea said. She caught Cless, once more equipped with her book, as she ran back to her, then maneuvered her up and onto her back. “Now we’ve got a mission to complete.”

“Onward!” Cless shouted. “To the skies!”

Ilea nodded, then gave the class and William a serious glance.

“To the skies,” she whispered.

\* \* \*

Cless giggled all the way through Viscera and Ravenhall, but when Ilea spread her wings and flew up to land on a three-story building, she quieted considerably. Ilea heard her gulp.

“Ready to fly?”

“I’m ready to fly,” Cless whispered. She was scared.

“You can say if you don’t want to. But I’ll keep you safe,” Ilea said. “Because I’m Lilith,” she added with a whisper.

“Lilith?” Cless whispered back in mock awe. “The myth of Ravenhall?”

“You just made that up,” Ilea said. She knew the girl was smart, and she was learning from both William and Claire. Sarcasm and wit would come to her easily.

“Maybe,” Cless said with a giggle.

Ilea moved her wings. “The myth of Ravenhall,” she murmured before she jumped off the building, grinning at Cless’ scream before she moved her wings and sped up, ascending up above the buildings and past the city walls.

She heard shouts from below but laughed. Cless laughed too as they made their way out and over the glittering lake before the city, sunlight reflected on its clear surface.

“More!” Cless shouted when they had landed on a mountain peak to take a break. She shivered in the cold wind. Ilea tried to find something to warm her up, then decided on a coat made of ash.

“It’s warm,” Cless murmured, touching the ash around her.

“You look like an ashen queen,” Ilea said, adding a bit more to the dress and then a crown.

Cless pouted, which made the image even funnier to Ilea.

“I don’t want to be a queen.”

“Why not?” Ilea asked with a smile.

Cless looked away.

Ilea crouched down. “Hmm?”

“Claire isn’t a queen,” Cless murmured, then glanced at Ilea. “And Ilea isn’t either. I want to be an administrator! Or a Shadow! A fighter! A mage!”

Ilea nodded gravely and stood up, then shifted the ash around Cless into a more battle-ready coating, though still with some flair. She liked to think that Cless being a paintress made her more of a graceful mage than a brute warrior like herself.

“How does that look?”

Cless glanced at her ashen sleeves, then flinched when an ashen staff appeared in her hand. She smiled, twirling the staff. “I love it. Can I keep it?”

Ilea made a sad expression. “I’m afraid not. My ash isn’t that good yet. But maybe one day. Or you could hound Claire about getting some equipment.” She patted the girl’s head. “But you’re still growing very fast at this stage. It would be annoying to make a new set of gear every six months.”

Cless pouted.

Ilea laughed. “Keep studying and training, and I’m sure, in time, you’ll become a great mage. And then, you can buy whatever clothes and armor you want.”

“Like Lilith?” Cless asked, looking up at Ilea.

“Yeah, like me,” she said.

Cless raised her hands. “More flying?”

“A little, but then I have to check in on my friend Keyla. She asked me for help. And then I have to go study too.”

“Ilea studies?”

“Yes. With adventurers and monsters.”

Cless nodded to herself. “Like in the paintings I did.”

“Yeah.”

“It’s scary.”

Ilea raised her up and onto her back. “It can be,” she said, spreading her wings before she started running to the edge of the mountain peak. Feeling the girl hold on for dear life, a broad grin on her face, she laughed.

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## Maximum Overbusiness

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“So this is the place?” Ilea asked, back in Ravenhall with Cless already safely delivered back to her classroom.

Keyla gave off more heat than normal, her eyes burning bright. “It is.”

Ilea looked at the line of people waiting outside. The establishment was more just a store, with people going in and out quickly. Some emerged with a slice of cake, others with crepes or a croissant filled with chocolate. The business took up a whole house. Not nearly as large as Keyla’s restaurant, though. Big pink lettering above the entrance revealed the bakery’s name.

*Big Ass Pastries... whoever this is, I can’t exactly fault them. I’m sorry, Keyla.*

“They’re the most successful food business in Ravenhall, next to the Golden Drake,” Keyla informed her.

“Did you ask Claire about it? And why are you so pissed off?” Ilea asked. “Your restaurant is still booked out for months to come.”

Keyla glared at her, and Ilea felt the hairs on her back stand up, her instincts moving the ashen armor on her back forward before she could consciously interfere. Bright yellow reptile eyes scoured her very soul, flames of hatred and power burning within.

“I thought you’d understand. Haven’t you told me about fighting all those dangerous beasts? This... This is my beast.”

The cook turned away, her scorching sight now aimed at the store window, where a dozen beautifully made and decorated cakes showcased

the capabilities of the baker. Ilea was surprised when the cakes didn't melt.

"And what do you want me to do about it?"

Keyla's yellow eyes focused on her again. "Burn it down, kill them all. Or hire the baker for the Golden Drake. I don't want to seem extreme."

*Had me going there for a moment.*

"I'll check it out. Maybe I own it already."

"Claire wouldn't tell me," Keyla hissed.

The two waited in line for a couple of minutes, Ilea watching two employees rushing back and forth between the back room and the counter, taking orders and bringing customers whatever they demanded.

When they reached the counter, the worker smiled at her. "Can I help you, miss?" Her voice was professional and pleasant.

"Yeah, is this store owned by Lilith?" Ilea asked, stepping closer.

"May I know who is asking?" the woman said, eyes going wide at the mention of the name.

Ilea spread her ashen wings behind her and smirked. "Potentially the owner," she replied.

"Yes, ma'am... Lilith... I mean, you *are* the owner," the woman said, her voice tense. "It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. What can I do for you?"

"Hey, I do own the place. Keyla?" Ilea looked back at her friend, who was pacing beside her.

"So, you're my competition," she said. "That does complicate things. But it may also provide opportunities."

"You're starting to remind me of Claire, Keyla."

The woman waved her off.

Ilea squinted at her. "I'd like to meet the head baker," she said to the employee, who quickly nodded and led them into a back room with a variety of pastries, baked goods, and cakes, as well as literal tons of ingredients.

"He's through that door, but it's very, very hot in there. I won't be able to follow you in."

"I think I'll be fine. How's your heat resistance, Keyla?" Ilea asked.

The woman rolled her eyes as she opened the door. "They tried to make me into a dragon, Ilea. I became a cook instead. How do you think my heat resistance is?"

Ilea smiled and stepped through the open door, a wave of intense heat immediately washing over her. Nothing dangerous for her, but she could tell this wasn't an average bakery.

Dozens of ovens lined the walls, timers and magical lights flashing. In the middle of the room, sitting on a tiny chair, was a man in heavy red full-plate armor. When he heard the noise of the newcomers' arrival, he turned his head, on which sat a helmet that looked wicked and dangerous.

"Ilea! You're here!"

*I'd already suspected it.*

She smiled brightly. "Hey, Popi, fancy meeting you here!"

"Do you know this monster of baking?" Keyla asked, the heat making her scales glisten.

"He's not a monster. He's a master, and he's a wonderful guy to boot," Ilea said. "How are you, Popi? Where's Maurice?"

The man walked over and hugged her. "Thank you! Thank you! I have my own shop! Look!" He let go, the force he had used enough to crush a lesser woman. The baker gestured around himself with such joy and pride that Ilea couldn't help but smile. "You gave me all this! The boom woman said it was you." He laughed, the sound echoing in the room.

*Boom woman? Claire?*

"Well, it makes me happy that you have all this. Do you have a place to live as well? And you didn't tell me where Maurice is. Is he ok?"

He pointed up. "I live up. But I like it more here. Maurice said the war is too dangerous for me, so he traveled here with me and talked to the boom woman." He nodded. "Maurice said to do a good job and become the best baker. The best baker of all."

"That's great," Ilea laughed. "Do you know where he is now?"

He touched his chin. "Hmm, I think... he said he wanted to work with the angry girls. Yellow eyes, like hers," he said, pointing at Keyla. "And purple eyes. Felicia and Maria. I thought about joining him, but now I have a shop. And you gave me all this."

Ilea smiled. "Claire did. We did. And you deserve it. I'm glad you don't have to fight in wars or be a guard anymore. Tell the boom woman if anybody or anything bothers you, I'll help where I can."

"Ilea... your ash..." Keyla said timidly.

Ilea only noticed then that her ashen limbs were moving behind her, that her armor had formed around her. "Oh... sorry."

She'd imagined someone bothering Popi, attacking his store or something, and the hell she'd bring upon them.

Keyla crossed her arms, looking around the room. "He's good. I'll give you that."

Ilea looked her way. "Popi, do you want to work with this woman? You can supply her restaurant with pastries. It would increase your diversity of supplies." She turned to Keyla. "Plus, the competition issue would be solved, him being your supplier. At least, I think it would."

"If he's part of the Lilith empire, it would be agreeable for me," Keyla said.

"Lilith empire?" Ilea asked. She smiled at that.

Popi seemed to consider. "Maybe... How many cakes do you need? I want to bake at night, but Melly says we don't need that many cakes. Stupid Melly," he added in a murmur, then covered his mouth as if he'd made a mistake.

"We could delegate desserts to you," Keyla said. "It would take off some of the pressure, but we'd have to make sure the quality is on point."

Popi nodded. "I don't really understand."

"If you really want to bake at night, I think you could," Ilea said. "Who's Melly?"

He pointed outside. *Probably one of the workers, then.* Ilea assumed Melly was the one working the cash register.

"I'll talk to her, Popi. Thanks. Oh, before I forget, did you choose the name for your shop?"

He nodded happily. "I want to be the biggest pastry seller! And I am big too."

Ilea laughed. "I think it's a great name. Well, we'll leave you to work, then. Glad to see you're happy. Again, just tell me or the boom woman if you need anything."

"Okay."

Ilea followed Keyla out, and the two found the attendant who had brought them to Popi. "You're Melly?" Ilea asked.

She nodded and smiled. "Yes, I am. I hope he wasn't too rude, though the Head Administrator informed me that you know him."

"He wasn't," Ilea said with a smile. "And yes, I'm glad he's out of the mercenary work. Make sure he's happy back there."

“I try.” She sighed, then looked at Keyla. “Popi barely wants to do anything else but bake. You’re the head chef at the Golden Drake, aren’t you?”

Keyla glanced around before she nodded. “I am.”

“Good. Stop stalking around outside the store – it’s creepy,” Melly said, squinting at the woman.

Ilea laughed. “Well, I used to own both. Now I only own this one, but Popi agreed to supply the Golden Drake. Do you think that would be possible? Keyla here is a little over-competitive.”

Melly shrugged. “If he can bake more because of that, then I don’t see the problem. I personally wouldn’t agree, but considering it’s for my boss, we can work out a contract. I won’t let him bake all night, mind you. If you try to overwork or use him, we’ll have a problem.”

“I won’t. I understand the value of well-rested and focused employees. When are you done working? I can make time,” Keyla said, sounding very eager.

\* \* \*

As the two strolled back to the fine dining establishment, Ilea glanced over at the cook, who was crunching numbers in a small notebook.

“Hey, Keyla, I’ve been thinking. You’ll be able to stash away meals for me more efficiently with this.”

She summoned the Ring of Holding she had left, adding thirty storage units to Keyla’s stock.

“You’re joking, right?” The cook stared at her, shaking her head at the ring Ilea held in her hand.

“Just take it. You have five seconds, otherwise I’ll find someone else who wants one,” Ilea said. “One, two...”

The cook snatched it up and put it on her left ring finger, glaring at the people walking by as if daring them to take her prize.

Some had glanced at the two, but most were too preoccupied with their own lives to notice. To assume an insanely rare and expensive item like a storage ring would be exchanged in the open like this was unthinkable anyway.

“It’s getting a bit old, people reacting like that whenever I try to share something with them. I have a ton of gold and rare items, fucking get used to it,” Ilea murmured.

Keyla huffed out some air, then smiled. “You’re crazy. But thanks. I’ll make good use of it. Storage won’t be an issue anymore, and I can save money on all the enchantments keeping things fresh. I’ll work hard to make sure you won’t run out of good food on your next adventure.”

She looked at the ring on her finger, then glanced back at Ilea.

“Also, I don’t think people will get used to it very quickly. If you hand out gifts like this to simple cooks, I don’t even want to know how rich you are.”

Ilea walked on. “I don’t know what you mean. Cooks are essential to society. Long hours, shit pay, difficult work. Everybody needs them. I hope, as an employer, that I can provide them with all they would ever need.”

“You really mean that. I think some gods must have heard our prayers, sending you in return,” Keyla said with a laugh.

“Well, yes, I am Lilith, the guardian of all cooks, nurses, plumbers, and garbage men and women. The pillars of the world.”

She was joking, of course, but then again, she didn’t really know how many establishments Claire had acquired by now.

*But nurses? Wouldn’t they be healers here?* She realized then that she hadn’t identified a single healer since her arrival in Ravenhall.

The cook smiled. “You should be careful with your sarcasm. With your power, there could already be a cult forming around your hidden persona.”

“Don’t make jokes about that,” Ilea murmured.

The suns were high on the horizon by the time Ilea and Keyla reached the restaurant. “Care to join me for lunch, Lady Lilith?”

Ilea rolled her eyes but smiled. “Sure, head chef.”

“Call me Keyla,” Keyla said and winked, cracking her knuckles as she entered her restaurant.

## Are You Not Entertained?

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Ilea spent the afternoon at the arena, magic raining down on her as more and more people joined in to try their luck against Lilith.

Slowly, her resistances grew, and the bucket filled with silver. In terms of Ilea and Lilith's wealth, it wasn't that much in the grand scheme of things. She simply enjoyed the process.

Being at a much higher level than most of the participating adventurers, she could reduce her defenses enough to make the training somewhat effective. Whenever any Shadows or adventurers over two hundred joined in, she occasionally had to use her ashen armor.

At this point, she'd attracted enough people to make sure there was a steady supply of spells coming her way. Still, after a few days of this, she realized that the training was nowhere near as beneficial as her time with the Blue Reapers or the Miststalkers.

The main difference, she assumed, was the somewhat controlled environment. Sure, she was injured by the spells and had to heal the damage, but even when she tried to endure the pain, there was really no risk of death. The danger simply wasn't high enough.

*Suppose it makes sense. Otherwise everyone with enough funds for a personal healer would do this. Wait... maybe not, because of the pain. Or the lack of defenses. Hmm. Well, either way, I guess I'll have to either find higher-level, more murderous training partners or go out again to find actual monsters at a sufficiently high level to fight against.*

She stretched, a fireball exploding in her face, bending her already damaged stonehammer helmet a little further out of shape. A set of ice crystals exploded against her shins. A crystal lance glanced off her stomach. A stone brick smacked against her shoulder, glanced off it, and ricocheted into the stands of shouting onlookers.

Ilea grinned. This, she enjoyed. The murmurs about Lilith, the battle-healer, the confident adventurers who joined in with their magic and soon left dejected. The excitement she felt whenever someone new joined in. The thrill of seeing if they were more powerful. She'd sparred with a few Shadows already, but the higher-leveled ones either didn't see a point in joining in or left after they'd watched everyone else for a short while.

*I suppose anyone with enough experience would know that this was futile. That or they'd worry about actually killing me in the process.*

Cowards.

\* \* \*

Viper and Philipp paid the entry fee and walked into the arena. Lilith the Shadow had apparently rented out the whole thing for a week. Not a cheap investment, but with the silver Viper had seen in the bucket, she was already making a profit. And not a small one at that.

The skill growth between attacking a tank's shield versus burning off their face wasn't that different, but paying a defender of sufficient level and power to take the abuse was impossible for most people.

Fire lightly singed Lilith's skin before it rapidly recovered, and lance-like projectiles of various elements and magics glanced off her body or, in some rare cases, managed to draw blood. The small wounds closed at a frightening speed.

*You'd have to finish her in a single blow. Taking her head would be the best bet.*

"Are you thinking about how to take her out?" Philipp asked as they joined the group of mages, warriors, and rangers waiting in the pit. Many of them were openly debating the same question. Either Lilith's hearing wasn't great or she simply didn't care.

*Probably welcomes it. We all had our own paths to get to level two hundred. The way she trains, she seems either too young or too reckless to*

*have traveled the path of safe mercenary work and gradual training. No. If anything, this training is probably going to bore her if nobody more dangerous shows up.*

“Taking her head is key, I think,” Viper said, scratching his chin as he watched her brushing off the magic of a group of nearly thirty mages, though admittedly, there was nobody above two hundred amongst them.

“The head? Yeah, seems like a good bet, but you’d have to ground her first. She’s an ashen mage, creator even, I think. From the little I was able to see yesterday. And she’s got wings,” Philipp said.

“You saw her use wings?”

“No. But there are plenty of rumors about Lilith. Her ashen wings are one of the few things people seem to agree on.”

“Think you’d be willing to spar against her today?” Viper asked, trying to keep his voice causal so as not to put too much pressure on his friend.

Shooting his bow at a living target again was one thing, but sparring with someone who could kill him was something entirely different. Still, it was something any Shadow needed to be able to do. It was the least that Viper wanted to see out of his friend before they could leave on a mission again.

For once, Philipp didn’t seem to recoil at the idea. “I can’t say I don’t want to see what she can do.” His eyes narrowed as he focused on the cloud of explosions and magic around the battle-healer.

They stood a little off from the waiting groups and watched as they switched, the initial mages having completely spent their mana. Their expressions as they left differed greatly. Some were lost in thought, likely looking at the gains in their skill levels, while others seemed to be contemplating their life choices given how little they could do against Lilith.

Viper had his own thoughts on the matter. He and Philipp could likely take on thirty to fifty of these adventurers in a fight, as could most Shadows. The increase in sheer power that the level two hundred barrier brought was substantial, more so than most of these adventurers would think, let alone the third-tier skills that would come into play.

Yet Lilith was past three hundred. Viper didn’t even know what that meant in terms of power, but he felt the weight of it just looking at her. If it came down to it, he would have to run, and he had an inkling that he wouldn’t get away.

“You still need to pay, even if you’re waiting,” Lilith said, and Viper raised his eyebrows when he noticed her looking at the two of them. Philipp smiled and went to the bucket, flinging two silver coins into it.

\* \* \*

Ilea watched another thirty silver coins being added to her treasure trove as the groups switched up. The bucket of silver was already half full, enough to buy basic food for several years or perhaps one piece of good armor.

The discrepancies between the cost of living and something like Balduur’s gear really bothered her. She reminded herself that a hand-crafted chair or table back on Earth was ridiculously expensive too compared to daily necessities.

*I wonder what hand-crafted armor on Earth would cost. Real stuff that could take a hit.*

Her thoughts were interrupted as a young girl, barely older than fifteen, raised her hands. A small splinter of wood was growing in the air before her.

Ilea’s smile widened as the splinter grew into a small spike before it was loosed toward her. It bounced harmlessly off her skin, dampening her mood a little, but it was still interesting to see. She’d gotten her Wood Magic Resistance in the north already.

A few people around the girl murmured about wood creation, but most didn’t seem very impressed. The girl looked a little upset, her face turning red when someone behind her chuckled.

“You laugh one more time and I’ll kick your face in, understand?” Ilea said to the man, then smiled at the girl. “You have a rare Class, it seems. You should be proud of yourself. Train as much as you want here – you don’t have to pay.”

She was happy to see some confidence return to the girl’s face. It looked like she was thinking about saying something, but she ended up just nodding and taking a step back.

The mage who had chuckled had a lightning Class, a broad and sizzling bolt of it impacting Ilea without even the slightest result. His smug smile was wiped away quickly.

His magic was impressive, Ilea wouldn't deny that, but it would take decades to reach Trian's levels. Or a couple of months of fighting alone against much higher-leveled monsters. The fact that the man was here and not fighting something out in the wilds right now made it clear that it would take him a while before he reached the level of a Shadow.

Another newcomer she noticed was a young man who looked to be in his early twenties. Of course, looks could deceive here; people past two hundred no longer aged as quickly. And still, what she saw of his body language and the way he glanced around made her reasonably sure that he wasn't particularly experienced.

He looked at Ilea before something gray formed before him, a dark whirl materializing and quickly moving toward her. As the whirl surrounded her, Ilea tried to figure out exactly what the magic was.

She used her sphere and activated her body enhancement skills to enhance her senses. Minuscule cuts formed on her skin, quickly healing as the whirl intensified. A minute later, it subsided, and the man was breathing heavily with an arm extended toward her.

*Oh. Seen that once before as well.*

She smiled. It was clear to her now that most people favored tried and tested paths. Either that or it was simply very difficult to get something a little more exotic.

There were so many earth, fire, wind, and ice mages around. Effective for sure, but at the same time, her resistances were already quite high against all that. And it was simply getting a little boring being hit by the same type of attacks time and time again.

“Was that ash?” someone asked.

“Dark magic, maybe?” another mage guessed.

“He wouldn’t show that off here, would he?” someone else said, but Ilea knew it was neither of the two magics suggested.

“You’ve seen it before?” the young man asked.

“Yeah, but not often,” Ilea said. “You also don’t have to pay.”

The session continued for another hour or so before Ilea had enough of it.

“That’s it for today,” Ilea said, motioning for the mages to stop. Most cut off their abilities immediately, but one wasn’t quite so controlled as one last rock hit her helmet with a clang. The mage looked around in fear before his eyes met hers.

“Careful there, tough guy,” she said with a smile. “Come again tomorrow if you want to continue the training. Have a good night.”

She walked toward the adventurers, some of them splitting off into smaller groups while others left alone. Two, however, remained where they were.

Philipp nodded her way. “Care to have that spar we talked about?”

Ilea could tell he was trying to sound casual. She could see Viper in her sphere as well, watching his friend closely. She knew this was important to them.

*He was scared to shoot me at first. Then, in our last session, he was regularly aiming for my neck and heart. Guess this would be the logical next step.*

Now that she was back in Ravenhall, she was enjoying having some time off. Getting a few more levels was nice, but right now, she was open to anything that seemed fun.

“Sure.” Looking over at the departing mages, she considered. “Wood mage, and you with the gray magic,” Ilea called out. The two young mages stopped and turned toward her, some of the others eying them with interest. “Stay for a couple minutes, if you will. Wanted to have a quick chat.”

The young man seemed more skeptical than the girl, but he waited anyway, arms crossed.

*Yeah, like this, it could be even more fun.*

“I’m gonna train with this guy over here,” she said, pointing at Philipp. “And I want you to join. Get your skills higher and maybe try to get you to actually damage me. My resistances against your magic are very low, so a few more levels would be nice. No clue when I’ll meet another wood or dust mage. Do you want to join?”

It was partially why she’d asked. Another reason was that the two seemed a little lost. If she was going to help Philipp with his training, why not add a few more people who looked like they needed it? Maybe they could train together as well. The young ones were at a low level, so getting a few pointers from a Shadow would be helpful. *Helpful for Philipp too, maybe.*

She could see that Viper agreed, giving her a small nod before he joined them.

“Y... yes!” The wood mage said and smiled before looking down.

The young dust mage looked at her for a while. “I want to get paid,” he said finally, which made Ilea laugh out loud.

“You’re a god-damned comedian, aren’t you? How much do you think your services should cost?” Ilea asked, quite interested now.

“Ten silver per training session,” he stated immediately.

“And how did you come to that number?” Ilea asked. He’d answered immediately, so he must’ve thought about it for a while. He didn’t seem like someone to randomly blurt out a number. That was the kind of thing she would do.

“That’s a secret,” the intense young man said.

That made Philipp laugh. “Are you sure? He seems rather calculating. Knowing all your abilities might be bad for future you.” Philipp smiled and looked at her sideways. “He probably realized you haven’t even checked the bucket over there, full of silver.”

“I kept hoping that someone would try to steal some,” Ilea said with a sheepish smile. “Would’ve been fun to call them out without even looking.”

“You’re ridiculous,” Philipp said.

The young girl smiled. The boy seemed confused.

Ilea looked at the girl first and smiled. “I’m Lilith. What’s your name?”

“Raphia... Miss Lilith,” she replied and bowed deeply, her brown braided hair nearly falling over her head at the gesture. Ilea could see burns on her back from the angle, just inside her shirt, given the girl was a lot smaller than herself.

“Nice to meet you, Raphia,” Ilea said.

The girl straightened, looking into her eyes and then at the ground again. She had dark skin and blue eyes. She couldn’t have been much older than fifteen.

“Are you willing to share your name, at least?” Ilea asked the thin young man, who was dressed in clothes just as cheap as the girl’s.

“Cornelius,” he replied and bowed slightly as well, surprising her. His previous attitude had reminded her more of a rebellious teenager. Now that Ilea looked a little more closely, she guessed his age was a little lower. *Might not be in his twenties yet.*

“But yeah, the bucket is mostly there as a joke. And to make the offer seem more legitimate,” Ilea said. “People would be suspicious if I’d offered training for free. “You’ll get fifteen silver for each session, but they’ll be six hours at least. Both of you, of course,” Ilea added, smiling at Raphia.

Cornelius looked a little irritated for some reason, but he didn't openly complain.

"I suggest we train in the Haven," Viper said.

"They won't be allowed into Eregar's Haven," Philipp said.

"With us there, it should be fine. Plenty of workers down there as well at this point," Ilea said.

She stretched, then grabbed her bucket for delivery to Lyza. The group of Shadows and young mages followed her. They reminded her of Niivalyr and the three young elves.

*Hope their training is going well too. How many Centurions have they destroyed by now, I wonder?*

\* \* \*

Entering the Haven, she looked out at the sun shining in the distance. A deep breath filled her lungs before she sighed at the lands before her. It was all artificial, though, or at least that was the story behind it.

As they neared the ground, she quickly jumped off the elevator.

"So, why'd you choose to have these two join in?" Philipp asked, gesturing to the two mages. "Just saying, 'cause they'll be in considerable danger if we train together."

They were both still below level fifty, likely having gotten their Classes somewhat recently. That or they simply hadn't fought a lot of monsters. Ilea didn't really know how people usually developed at early levels; she'd essentially been thrust into a Drake-infested forest right after getting hers.

*Would have been nice if I'd had an ashen lady to train and guide me back then. Still, I ended up here in the end.*

"They have rare magic. Perhaps the Hand will profit from it if we take them in early, show them the ropes before they go out and level. Might save their lives, and we'll have another two capable fighters," Ilea explained with a smile.

It sounded reasonable enough to her. She also wondered how she would do as an instructor after all her combat experience and all the lectures she'd had at the Hand herself. Could be fun.

Philipp nodded along, then turned to the younger two. "I remember when I was your age."

“I’m older than her,” Cornelius said, pointing at the wood mage. Philipp laughed. “Seems like she trained harder than you, then.” Cornelius opened and closed his mouth.

They flew out a little further, Ilea carrying the two mages with protests from the dust mage. They landed near an open field. Viper landed a little further off, motioning Philipp toward him.

“We’ll start with a bout of me versus Ilea. It’ll be good for them to see what’s possible. Philipp, go and protect them,” Viper said. “And afterward, it’s your turn.”

Philipp smiled and nodded, walking over to a small hill a short distance away, followed by the two mages. A stray magic blast could seriously injure or even kill one of the young mages, but Ilea trusted both of them to be coordinated enough not to let something like that happen. Still, even an experienced chemist wore safety goggles.

“Stand a little behind me. I’ll shield you should anything come this way,” Philipp said with a serious expression, and both Raphia and Cornelius took a couple of steps back.

“You don’t seem particularly enthused,” Ilea said as she looked at Viper.

He glanced over at his friend and the young mages, then smiled lightly and spoke in a quieter tone. “He’s doing well. The training with you has helped build his confidence. And he’s not been the only one. For some reason, seeing one’s magic impact a living and yet immovable object can be very inspiring.”

“You don’t seem inspired.”

“I want to get back to going on missions. But I told myself I wouldn’t bring it up with Philipp until he’s faced someone dangerous in a bout. And I can’t exactly do that if I don’t do it myself first.”

“Honorable,” Ilea said as she prepared herself.

“Try not to kill me, at least,” Viper said, his magic surging around him, the wild plants growing on the field catching fire and withering away.

“I’ll try, as long as you don’t hold back,” Ilea said.

\* \* \*

Cornelius held his breath, prepared to use his magic whenever necessary. Had he made it? To think an actual Shadow would take interest in him.

*Keep up your guard.*

The thought never left his mind. Not when Lilith had first talked to him during the supposed magic training session, and not for a moment since. He had decided to check out the arena after people in the adventurer's guild had talked about it. Unlike the many misleading job offers there seemed to be, this time, he'd found a real Shadow.

It turned out there were two more, and they were actually going to train together in Eregar's Haven, the legendary underground base of the Shadow's Hand. He was still suspicious, of course, ready to flee at any moment. Lilith had offered to train with them, something someone at his level could only dream of.

*If it's too good to be true...*

The words echoed in his mind, but he'd learned that, sometimes, taking stupid risks paid off. The wood mage next to him didn't seem to be concerned by any of his worries, a stupid smile on her face as she watched the two Shadows prepare on the field.

*Lilith was there to train resistances, and that was true. Why wouldn't she want us here? After all that effort, surely it would be a waste to hurt us? Can this be real?*

Questions flowed through his mind as he considered the possibilities. None of Lilith's reactions had been predictable. He had tried to gauge her with his blunt request for money, something no Shadow would agree to, but Lilith had – if that really was her name.

A powerful surge of magic made him focus, heat radiating from the robed mage that reached them even as far away as they were standing. The plants around the fire user were set aflame, but Cornelius couldn't make out a skill being used.

*Is it burning from his mana alone? And is that dust? Cornelius wondered, but the consistency looked different. Ash? So she's a creator as well.*

A beam of white light struck her form, and then she vanished. Cornelius looked around to find her opponent also missing, a sudden beam of light appearing in the air above, the two fighters teleporting time and time again.

*I can barely see them, he thought, his nails digging into his palms as he activated his magic. The timid man, the one with the arrows, glanced his way and nodded.*

It was a little easier to follow them now, but only in a general sense. He saw flashes where white flame appeared, saw an explosion of fire, saw black wings pop up here and there. Half of the field was on fire already, his eyes growing teary and his throat itching from the smoke.

A blast was fired into the air, but Lilith didn't follow, the fire mage vanishing and ash following behind him as the blasts became more frantic, quicker between pauses, until he somehow couldn't vanish anymore. Tendrils of ash were all that Cornelius could make out in the tumble of limbs that crashed to the ground with immense speed.

"And it's over. He did better than I expected," the arrow man said.

Cornelius raised his eyebrows before he gulped. He wasn't even sure who had won, let alone what had really happened. All he knew was that Lilith used ash and the man who had faced her used fire.

"The fires, I felt those explosions from here. He didn't use that in the training arena." Cornelius tried to make out the area where the two had impacted the ground.

"He focused his magic more, yes. But I'm afraid it needs a little more to take her down. It's hard enough to hit her at all, if she's moving."

Philipp made his way over to the fighters, unconcerned about the possible danger.

*Is he excited?*

Cornelius looked at the still-burning fires. He was trembling but couldn't stop himself from following the Shadow. Raphia looked at him and walked down as well, wiping sweat from her face.

"Is he still conscious?" Philipp asked.

"Give it another minute," Lilith's voice came from the fading fires.

Cornelius could see her standing there, the ashen wings on her back, the horns of her armor blackened. A savage monster, not a woman at all. He gulped and heard the girl next to him do the same.

So this was what was possible. And these people would help them train.

*I asked her to be paid in silver.*

The thought was terrifying now.

"Guess that means it's my turn," Philipp said.

\* \* \*

Ilea tried to play nice. She had to admit that Philipp's aim was spectacular, but her high resilience, coupled with her teleportation, ultimately brought their little bout to the same conclusion as the previous one. She looked at the beaten man, many of his bones broken as he tried to stand up and keep fighting her, blood covering one of his eyes.

*This really does feel like a nice Sunday excursion. It's fun fighting a Shadow after so many high-level beasts.*

"You certainly have fight in you," Ilea said, walking up to him. She dodged his sloppy attempt to stab an arrow into her eye, then caught his collapsing form and pushed healing magic into him.

Viper joined her a moment later. "Is he alright?"

"He was worse off than you were," Ilea said. Philipp rested on her shoulder, unconscious for now. "You can really take a beating."

"High praise, coming from you," Viper said and smiled.

"Will be interesting to see you two past three hundred."

"Yeah. We'll see if that ever happens, though I doubt it. I can't imagine the risks you've taken and the beasts you've fought to get there. The resistance training you did was one thing, but seeing you fight?" He shook his head. "You love it, don't you?"

"Love what? Fighting?"

"All of it. To be in the center of chaos, spells coming in from all sides, overwhelming enemy numbers, death lurking in every mistake."

Ilea smiled.

"Met a few like you before, but I suppose none of them were healers. Would've done them well."

"I assume they're dead?" Ilea asked.

"Dead or missing," Viper said. "With you, I guess only time will tell. Seems like you're as resilient as you are risk-prone."

"I hope I am," Ilea said. "And you two?" she asked, glancing over at the two young mages. "Enjoy the show?"

Cornelius stared at the ground.

Raphia, on the other hand, met her eyes. Her cheeks were flushed. "I'm ready!" she shouted.

"Ready for what?" Ilea asked with a smile.

"Ready for training!" Raphia shouted and bowed.

"Right," Ilea said, glancing at Viper. "You two mind staying for a while? I don't know how good I'll be with this stuff."

Viper nodded. “Sure. I think we’ll leave town soon though. I’ll have to look for a few more Shadows to form a team. But yeah, we can help these two for a little while. Maybe a few days.”

*Yeah, it is fun, but I don’t really plan on becoming a long-term teacher. Maybe I can connect them with someone who is.*

“Think William will pick them up?” Ilea asked, thinking the instructor might be interested in younger people with interesting Classes.

“For the Shadowguard?” Viper asked.

Ilea shrugged. “Or just to teach them some things.”

“Good luck asking him. I don’t know the man well.”

“Me neither,” Ilea said. *But I have a good feeling about him. Now that he’s teaching Cless as well. And Claire trusts him well enough.*

“Thanks… Lilith, I suppose,” Viper said. He gestured to Philipp. “It was a good idea too, with the kids. I think it’ll do him well to help out in the coming days.”

She nodded. “Sure. Next time, I hope the bouts will be a little more interesting.”

He laughed. “Yeah. I don’t think they will be, Lilith. You’ll have to find stronger sparring partners in the future.”

“Right,” Ilea murmured, glancing at the two young mages.

Raphia beamed, and Cornelius looked terrified.

“So, just a bit of sparring then?” she suggested.

“I’ve got some things in mind,” Viper said, looking at the wood and dust mages.

Philipp groaned, then coughed as he slowly woke up. “That was… that was awesome.”

“I’ll go and find William, see if he’s interested in joining,” Ilea said.

“Who’s William?” Cornelius asked.

“You’ll see,” Viper said. “Now, let’s teach you some of the basics.”

\* \* \*

Ilea found William in his office in Viscera, and she didn’t have to convince the old man to help out. He was interested in all kinds of recruits, and not just for the Shadowguard either.

"Philly, you'll have a few more people joining in on your training. It'll be good for you to work in a team," he said as he got up.

Ilea had wondered who the young ice mage was. Pale-skinned and with her black hair in a bun, she was at level one forty. Ilea squinted at her. *Have I seen you before?*

The girl avoided her gaze.

Ilea raised her eyebrows. "You were at the arena!"

The girl gulped and looked away.

William glanced at her. "Your resistance training has attracted half the town."

"I..." Philly started. "I met another girl. She can heal! Maybe..."

"Was she looking for a team?" William asked.

Philly nodded.

"Good. Find her and bring her to the Haven. Ilea, we'll evaluate the two new recruits you found," William said, already leading the way.

Ilea wondered if perhaps she'd been a little too quick to get him involved.

"You know they're not Shadows, right?" Ilea asked.

"Not yet," William said.

\* \* \*

Cornelius lay knocked out on the ground, bleeding from his head and dozens of small cuts on his body that William assured Ilea were nothing to be taken seriously. When she checked, she found his words to be right. The young man was fine.

*Only a few hours and they're already out. Man knows how to challenge people.*

Raphia was crying quietly as she hugged her knees.

"Are you sure you're up for this?" Ilea asked, sitting down next to the girl. She had wondered if William was being a little hard on them, but having fought plenty of monsters in the wild, she knew he had reason to be tough. It was either this or be killed by the first dangerous creature they encountered.

"Up for this... yes. Yes. I gained a point in Dexterity and two in Endurance. Ice Resistance as well. It's... good," Raphia said. "I'll miss

you.”

“You can stop at any moment,” William said. “I think you’ll look back on this training with hate and despair, those emotions fueling whatever destructive spells you bring down on your enemies.”

Ilea patted the girl’s head as she gave a sob. “If that is really what you want.”

“I want to... bring destruction down on my enemies,” the girl said, sobbing between words with snot coming out of her nose and tears in her eyes.

“That’s my girl,” Ilea said. She glanced over at the other new addition – a young ranger called Dany. Her second Class had healing capabilities, apparently.

She hadn’t exactly planned to put together a team for William, Philipp, and Viper to instruct, but now that everyone was here, she was just rolling with it.

“Ilea, while you’re still in the city, maybe you can help out with training exercises here and there. I find your overwhelming power to be a good substitute for a real monster,” William said.

“Oh? Sure, I’m happy to help out,” Ilea said.

*While I’m here, I can learn from William’s experience.*

*Playing the monster.* She could feel a grin coming to her face. The apprehensive looks of the young mages didn’t deter her in the slightest. “As long as everyone is there by choice.”

“Of course,” William said.

\* \* \*

Dany ran through the open field as fast as she could. Two of her hunter skills increased her speed, allowing her to stay close behind Philly, who somehow managed to be quicker still despite being an ice mage. A gray mist suddenly whipped out of nowhere and impacted Philly, knocking her from sight. The other girl screamed briefly before she went silent.

The mist froze as Dany veered to avoid it. A tendril shot out, forcing her to jump over it. She dodged right upon landing, the ashen limb following her as she continued to duck and weave.

She saw a figure in the mist, smashing her fist against a small barrier of ice. So Philly was still holding out, drawing attention away. But Dany heard it cracking... then the ash vanished. Blue eyes appeared in a cloud of mist a couple of meters in front of her.

She had to halt her sprint toward her goal, two lone trees standing at the other end of the field, as limbs of ash cut off all available routes forward. Her heartbeat accelerated as she turned and rushed to the side, seeing the final two mages – Cornelius and Raphia – following her.

Dany felt someone grab her shoulder, gentle but unshakable. Her body came to an abrupt stop, her limbs still carrying forward as her shoulder nearly broke. A wooden spear, surrounded by dust, sped past her and struck something behind her, the tug on her shoulder relaxing enough for her to wiggle free and jump to the side.

*Thanks, Cornelius!*

Those two distant trees became the only things she saw as she focused on reaching them with all her mind. She pushed herself to move faster. This time, she would make it.

Looking back, she saw ash enveloping Cornelius as he tried to fight back against the floating particles with his own dust. Then black wings smashed into his chest. He was flung to the side, unconscious and bleeding.

*Shit.*

Nearly stumbling at the sight, Dany focused again, her legs thumping across the ground as she trusted her skills to take her to the destination. A scream from Raphia echoed behind her before that too went quiet. The fifty-meter distance to the trees felt like an insurmountable obstacle. Her ragged breathing became the only noise she could hear.

She looked frantically from side to side, expecting to be met with an unavoidable gray mist. Instead, blue crystals were forming before her as William landed. Dozens of ice lances formed behind a complicated array of shields, the water they relied on forced up out of the ground.

*“Go on, healer, you’ve almost made it.”*

His words gave her hope, power surging inside her as her skills were pushed again to their very limit. She ran past the floating ice, glancing at their teacher for a split second and seeing him grin.

The lances started to move around her as she passed the man, the trees now only forty meters away. Another ten steps later, she heard the icy

lances shattering against something again and again, like a hammer crashing through a storefront window.

*Twenty meters.*

There was a resounding boom behind her, followed ten steps later by a single cough. Then silence.

Dany counted down the final steps.

*Five...*

*Four...*

*Three...*

There was a sound behind her, so she leaped and plunged toward the tree, feeling something brush at the back of her hair right before her chest slammed into the wood. She winced as all the air in her lungs was forced out.

Her chest was injured, she knew, so she quickly started her healing spell. Her legs were still touching the tree as she fell onto her back, gazing up at the sky of Haven and breathing hard.

The sound of quiet steps came from behind her before a woman clad in ash appeared above her, grinning.

*I'm dead.*

The thought was irrational, but she still felt goosebumps across her whole body before Lilith reached down to her.

“Congratulations.”

\* \* \*

“You might want to heal the others now,” Ilea said, looking into the shaken girl’s eyes. She nodded and ran off with a big smile. William joined her soon after.

“You let her win,” he said.

Ilea didn’t look at him but instead up into the trees.

“She was trying her best,” Ilea replied with a shrug.

William leaned against one of the trees. “Hmm. They should know what’s out there. But yes, she did.”

The wind rustled the leaves above them, sending a couple twirling down toward the earth. The two Shadows watched the young mages shout and congratulate Dany on her win before she took care of their light injuries.

“They’ll learn soon enough,” Ilea said. She thought about her own training down here with Claire, Trian, Kyrian, and Eve. She smiled and breathed in deeply.

“They have a healer with them,” William said. “It’s more than most adventuring groups have.”

“That hard to get a healer, hmm?”

He nodded absentmindedly.

They stood there for a long moment until William pushed off from the tree. “Claire asked me to invite you.”

“Invite me?” Ilea asked.

“To a meeting. With the leaders of the Hand,” William said, giving her a serious look.

“Oh? The council is gathering at last.”

“Why did I expect you to take this seriously?”

Ilea put both hands behind her head. “William, I haven’t the slightest idea.”

\* \* \*

Ilea expected some kind of seedy pub or a hidden room to be the location of their little meeting, but William simply led her into a large office in the heart of Viscera. An office like any other. It was nice, sure, but Ilea couldn’t help but feel a little disappointed.

They were some of the first there. She was wearing her bone armor set, her face covered with the helmet. She was here as Lilith, after all.

“Dagon, good to see you, old friend.”

The large man bowed, looking at her from behind his spectacles. His eyes were focused. She could tell he had a few questions on his mind.

“Lilith. We meet again.”

He laughed and stepped closer, grabbing her in a hug. She smiled, not bothered by his ridiculous strength in the slightest. When Dagon let go, he gestured to the woman standing next to him.

**[Mage – lvl 211]**

She had black hair, glasses with thin black rims, and somewhat pale skin. Not a fighter, Ilea could tell.

“Lilith, this is my wife, Elise. Elise, meet Lilith.”

They met eyes. Both raised their eyebrows.

“You’re everything he’s told me about,” Elise said and smiled.

“Is that a compliment, or should I be offended?” Ilea asked, shaking the woman’s hand.

“Does it have to be either?” Elise asked. “You met elves in the north?”

“We should discuss questions later,” William said from the side.

“I didn’t know you had a wife,” Ilea said to Dagon.

“It’s somewhat recent,” he said, scratching the back of his head.

“Congratulations,” Ilea said.

He leaned in a little closer. “It was quite an exciting endeavor. We’d been writing letters for years! She was a librarian at the Library of Souls in Virilya. With the siege, we were finally able to smuggle her out. Quite a tale!”

Elise shushed him. “A tale that shouldn’t be shared lightly.”

“Oh, dear. This is Lilith we’re talking about. We retook this very city together.”

“Most of those words didn’t mean much to me anyway,” Ilea grinned.

“But I’m glad your romance worked out in the end.”

“Secret romance,” Dagon whispered.

Elise sighed and glanced over at her husband, then smiled.

*Seems like they’ve found each other.*

Ilea remembered meeting Dagon in Virilya, how downtrodden he’d seemed then, betrayed by his long-time friend and with the task of retaking Ravenhall on his shoulders. He seemed almost radiant now.

“What is it?” he asked.

“I was staring, wasn’t I?” Ilea asked, grinning at him.

Before Dagon could reply, more people joined them – Sulivhaan, wearing his mask, and a group of Shadows, some of whom Ilea recognized. Charles was among them, a man she’d briefly fought with near the southern gates of Virilya. Navalis was there too, the ranger in Sulivhaan’s team.

There were two other Shadows, who introduced themselves as Varren and Anna. They didn’t share more than their names, and both wore armor that obscured their faces. Last but not least came Claire and, with her, Trian.

"That should be everyone today," William said and closed the door behind them.

"Introductions have been made already," Dagon said. "But to clarify, today we'll introduce the Shadows Trian and Lilith to our plans, and we will vote to accept Lilith onto our council, should she be willing to join."

There were a few confirming grunts, but most of the people present remained silent.

"As you two have been informed," Dagon continued, looking between Ilea and Trian, "the Shadow's Hand is looking to become independent. More so than we've already been. Ravenhall and the southern mountains will be integrated into our jurisdiction, and we will be self-governed. The people gathered here, as well as the not-present Verena Quil, soon to be former Elder of the Shadow's Hand, will make up the Council of Ravenhall, with veto privileges for any decisions made in the governing of the city and its territories. The governing duties themselves will be distributed amongst Shadows and allies of our city."

Ilea leaned against the nearby wooden desk while Claire poured herself a drink.

"Why now?" Trian asked.

Dagon looked at the man and then up at the ceiling. "Adam Strand and his summoning shook everything that we'd stood for. Our city was wiped out, the blood of its citizens pooled in its streets."

He paused. His voice had gotten considerably louder. He breathed and continued in a calmer tone.

"There was nothing in place to stop Strand. Nothing to detect his machinations. The Hand had become nothing more than a mercenary order to be hired, to be used. If not for his summoning, Urn's schemes to further split our order and use it for Baralia would've perhaps come to fruition.

"Had it not been for our continued presence and work, our gathered wealth and power, and the war distracting Alyris, then the city would've long fallen back into the hands of one imperial hawk or another."

Dagon paused again and shook his head. "No more." He stomped his foot, the stone walls shaking ever so slightly.

"This is *our* city. These are our lands. Lands we have fought for, lands we have called our home. It's been clear for decades, but events in recent years have clarified things further. The Elders of the Hand had little interest in governance, many of our Shadows had little interest in taking on

responsibilities in our city, and Lys has not ever considered Ravenhall more than just a decrepit fortress somewhere far away in the southern mountains, only relevant because it housed the Shadow's Hand. That has been our legacy. But no more, I say!"

"No more," one of the other Shadows whispered.

"Our battle against the demon hordes summoned by Strand has shown that we can be more than just a splintered group of mercenaries. Ravenhall was more to us than many may have thought. And now we are here to stay. And we'll make sure there is stability in the south, that Ravenhall can be a refuge to those who lost their homes and lives in the wake of chaos and war. Chaos and war that men like Adam Strand and King Baron of Baralia have brought upon us. We will be better. We *must* be better.

"Things have been in motion since we have returned. Claire, the Head Administrator of Ravenhall, has been working hard with her team to ensure our city is managed well, that there are equal opportunities for everyone who joins us, that there are contracts and laws in place. Sulivhaan and I have been in touch with Lys and other external parties to slowly guide us toward the independence that we think we need, that we think is best for the Hand, for everyone here, and for the citizens of this city.

"It won't be long now. You all, and every Shadow, will be included in making sure there is accountability. Lilith is the second member of our council to be over level three hundred. And, if needed, you will strike, even at our own – not at the command of anyone but because you deem it necessary. Once, of course, any kind of discussion has led to no avail. There will be no Elders, no single ruler. We are all here, and as the Shadow's Hand, including those of the citizenry we have included to vote on important decisions, we will govern this city as one."

"You've come to enjoy those speeches," Ilea said.

"He's very enthusiastic about all this," Elise whispered to her.

Dagon cleared his throat and smiled. "Of course I am. We should've done this ages ago, but I had too much trust and respect in the Elders. Urn betrayed us. Strand did too. Verena and Pierce preferred to be adventuring as far away as possible, and Lucas has been gone for decades."

"Oh, right," Ilea said. "I met him."

"You did?" Dagon asked. The librarian glanced at Sulivhaan.

"In the north. Yeah. I think he kind of gave up his position of Elder. He didn't seem inclined to come back anytime soon. He's living in Lisburg and

has chosen to live a peaceful life there – as much as is possible, I suppose.”

Ilea didn’t plan to share anything about his state of mind. Lucas hadn’t seemed perfectly balanced, but she did think he really was trying to do his best. Just far away from everything here.

“You trust her words?” the Shadow called Varren asked.

“We do,” Sulivhaan said, and that seemed to be that.

“It is no surprise,” Dagon said. “Though personally, I’m glad he’s alive, at least. We would’ve rescinded his title anyway. Perhaps you can deliver that message to him if you meet him again, Lilith. I believe he may feel... relieved.”

Ilea looked at him and smiled. *Yeah. I think so too.*

“With the influx of gold and, more importantly, the copious amounts of armor and weapons that Lilith recently provided our city, we’ll be able to train and equip more Shadowguards. Coupled with the nature mages in the Haven and much of our food production having been moved there, we’ll be able to defend the city against any reasonable threats without even a single Shadow present. The walls and defensive enchantments are nearly done as well,” Dagon added with a grateful nod to Claire.

“If you want to thank someone for all that gear, the former King of Rhyvor is in town,” Ilea said.

“Maro Invalar,” Dagon said.

“The necromancer I met who was bad at gambling?” Anna asked in a whisper. “He was a king?”

“Long ago,” Ilea said.

“Lilith has also made contact with a group of Cerithil Hunters, shedding some light on long-misunderstood theories about elvenkind,” Dagon continued. “With Ravenhall unified, we strive to defend against threats beyond humanity as well, Elves, Feynor, and Awakened included. But we are just as willing to consider potential allies beyond the Plains.”

“Who is supporting all this?” Trian asked. “You said you’ve been in talks with Lys, but what about all the other nations? What about the Order of Balance?”

“Lys will back us,” Sulivhaan said. “They will not outright support our independence, but they will tolerate it, and in return, we will set up agreements to make sure no other nation will interfere while they take the war to King Baron and Baralia.”

“So we stand alone? No nations will support us? No healing orders will be present?”

“That is what we’ve been preparing for.”

“Why won’t any of the healing orders support us?” Ilea asked.

“The Corinth Order in the west has no interest in shaking up the current balance of power. The Order of Truth is based in and supports Baralia. We do not wish to associate with either. The Order of Balance is an extension of Alyris’ power. If we invite them into our walls, we may as well have imperial administrators here.”

“There are not many healers within the Shadowguard yet, let alone the Hand, but I’m sure things will stabilize in time. Especially once rogue healers know that Ravenhall is a safe haven for them,” Sulivhaan explained. “We won’t have sicknesses spreading, and while it may take longer for injuries to be healed, they will be healed.”

“Taking in rogue healers would offend the other orders, especially the Corinth Order,” Trian said.

“Our declaration of independence will offend them either way,” Dagon said. “Let them fume. They will not move to attack – our name carries far too much weight. We’re not an independent city in the west or some hamlet in the Naval Forest.”

“Why don’t we found our own order?” Ilea asked. “If everyone’s going to be pissed anyway. And if the current orders are already tied up with other nations.”

Dagon and Sulivhaan looked at her. Claire looked up and then nodded slowly. Charles started laughing.

“Would that be possible?” Dagon asked, glancing at Claire.

“We have the funds,” Claire said. “We have the equipment, we have the space, and with the refugees, we’ll have plenty of volunteers as well.”

“We don’t have a Class,” Sulivhaan said.

“Not yet,” Trian said.

Ilea glanced his way. He looked thoughtful, then nodded to himself. He locked eyes with her.

“This is it,” Trian said, smiling, then he schooled his face and looked at the others. “I’ll work with Lilith and Claire to plan something, to found a healing order here in Ravenhall.”

“You can’t just throw gold and people at a problem like that and hope healers pop out on the other end,” Varren said.

“Not healers,” Trian said, grinning at Ilea.

She looked at him and nodded along. “Battle-healers,” she said. “I became a fire mage by burning my own arms for a few weeks. I’m sure we’ll figure something out.”

Varren gave her a look, then shrugged and remained quiet.

“Very well, it could work,” Dagon said. “Trian, if you’re willing to take on this duty, then I’m sure we shall welcome it. Once you have more details, we’ll talk again and put it to a vote, but I don’t see anyone pushing against our own healing order.”

“While it will offend many, it would also greatly legitimize our independence to the general populace. And it would, in the best case, provide more healers for our city. Or battle-healers, as you suggest, but I’m going to be skeptical about that one until I see a few more Liliths walking through town.”

“I’ll let you know when I have more to show,” Trian said.

Ilea looked at him. Something felt different about him. He sat straighter, his lip twitching upward toward a confident smile. His eyes sparked a dim blue. Focused. For the first time since the demons, she felt like she really saw her friend again.

\* \* \*

As the official meeting went on, there were some discussions of Morhill, the town north of Ravenhall that had been decimated and abandoned during the demon summoning. Sulivhaan had suggested it could be retaken and rebuilt to potentially form some kind of buffer city between Ravenhall and the Empire, given Morhill’s closer proximity to Lys, but no decisions were made.

Finally, Dagon stepped to the center of the room again. “As the last part of this meeting, Lilith, I ask, will you join this council and fight by our side, for Ravenhall and its people, and for what you see is right?”

Ilea smiled and nodded. She’d fought during the demon summoning. She’d fought to retake the city. And she would fight again, for and with the people she trusted and called friends.

“I will.”

“Then, as voted, Lilith, I welcome you to the Council of Ravenhall.”

Claire and Sulivhaan clapped, the others joining in a moment later. A quick affair, all in all, and Ilea liked the lack of complex contracts, rituals, and dos and don'ts. They'd simply asked her to trust them and keep them in check, as she would expect her friends to do for her as well.

Most of the others left, but Dagon and Elise wanted to ask her some questions about her findings in the north.

Before he left, Trian came up to her, glancing at the librarian. "If you have time after, I'd like to discuss the healing order business with you and Claire."

"Sounds good. Maybe in an hour or so," Ilea replied.

"Great. I'll be in her office," Trian said and smiled.

Ilea mirrored the gesture, then joined Dagon and Elise. "So, you had some questions about my journey to the north? Will this be an exchange of information like we used to do?"

"I think our relationship has gone beyond that, Ilea," Dagon said, using her real name now that everyone else had left.

"You mean now that I have all the interesting information," she said, forming an ashen chair to sit on. She noted that Elise had tensed up a little at her joke.

"And you're past level three hundred," Dagon replied, playing along. "But we're such dear old friends, aren't we? Remember when you asked me about imperial fugitives?"

"Really? I don't remember that at all," Ilea said.

Elise seemed more and more lost.

Ilea looked at her. "We're just fucking around."

"Not literally," Dagon said.

"Who knows," Ilea said and smiled at him.

The man sighed. "We should stop confusing her. To her, you're Lilith, one of the most powerful and influential members of the Shadow's Hand."

"That's who I am, Head Librarian," Ilea said, but she couldn't quite keep her tone serious enough. "I'm Ilea," she added, holding her hand out to Elise. "Healer, fighter, adventurer. My hobbies include breakfast, lunch, and dinner."

Elise nodded along, shaking Ilea's hand in the process. "I think I'll need some time to get used to everyone here. The other librarians at the Library of Souls were far less... eccentric than the people here." She breathed

deeply, then smiled. “Good to meet you, Ilea. The information you brought from the north answered a lot of questions and brought up new ones too.”

“Right. I probably forgot to share some things with Claire as well. Did you know that there used to be three suns in the sky?”

Dagon raised his eyebrows.

Elise seemed lost in thought for a moment. “There was one librarian who used to go on about that. She’d collected old tales in small villages, nothing written down but passed on through the generations by word of mouth. She found a connection between a lot of tales and stories, an event where the skies flashed and the ground shook, though it was all a little too vague to really mean something. I wouldn’t even have remembered this if there hadn’t been several mentions of a third star or third sun in many of those stories.”

“It’s an interesting fact but hardly relevant today,” Dagon said.

Ilea summoned the translated legate guardian’s diary and Kohn Reyker’s notes. “I found these too, and some mentions of an ancient war in diaries I found in an Azarinth temple. Think I sold those to a guy in Riverwatch ages ago. And I found this stuff as well,” she added, summoning the figurines and the torn map she’d taken from the temple.

“Hard to figure out a connection between everything, but the timeline with Maro getting stuck in his machine and the Soul Rippers appearing near his dungeon seems suspicious. Plus, Iana is suggesting the runes are from the demon realm but are not demonic in nature.

“You should’ve seen the halls of steel that we saw when we fought Adam – and there was a device that let us teleport back here. One of my abilities helped guide things, but yeah, whoever built all that certainly had the capability of traveling through realms. Maybe you can figure out more. I think it’s interesting, at least, and I’ll let you know if I stumble on more.

“I think the current conflict between the elves and Taleen machines is still relevant, and the legate’s diary suggests that this conflict had at least something to do with that.”

“Who translated this?” Dagon asked.

“An Elven friend of mine. A Cerithil Hunter,” Ilea said.

“So all that is true as well,” Elise murmured, looking through the notes. “This suggests there was an alliance of sorts between different species of Elos. Unthinkable today. We should study all this, Dagon, and see if we find out more.”

“It is peculiar that all of this is entirely unknown to me,” Dagon replied. “Events of such scale don’t just get lost in history. They may be rewritten, changed, but some archive somewhere should still hold that knowledge, and I’ve studied many and consulted with hundreds of scholars. That part frightens me more, to the extent that I wish I could simply dismiss these findings.”

“At least the conflict between elves and the Taleen is still very much ongoing,” Ilea said. “Verifiable too, I think, if you manage to talk to a Cerithil Hunter.”

“No, no. The problem is that I trust you, Ilea. We’ll study all this, see if we can find out more. And you let us know if you find anything as well.”

“Sure. Anything else you wanted to know?”

Dagon righted his glasses. “Quite a few things, actually.”

Ilea went on to answer a lot of questions about the north, about the monsters she’d fought, the day and night cycle, even the plants that she’d seen. And she talked about the elves, the dungeons, Hallowfort, and Rhyvor.

“It would be so valuable to visit this Hallowfort,” Dagon murmured. He sounded wistful.

“I could take you,” Ilea said.

“I’m afraid that would be far too dangerous. Even if I was forty years younger, I don’t think I would consider such a journey. Even with you there to protect me.”

“Your loss,” Ilea said and stretched. “Well, I’ll bring back what I can. Oh, I had something I wanted to ask you about as well.” She felt a little guilty about it, but it had bugged her from time to time. “Eve. She was... one of the Shadows in my team.”

“I’ve met her before, yes,” Dagon said. “I’m sorry.”

Ilea waved him off, though she appreciated it. “I think... I don’t think she shared a lot with us. Maybe it’s selfish, but even so, I’d like to know more about her. And I know it’s probably difficult to find out anything, knowing that she probably came here with a made-up name and all that.”

“We’ll look into it,” Elise said. “I’m quite proficient at finding people.”

Ilea nodded. “Alright. Just... let me know if you find anything. Oh, and if you’re good at finding people, a few other names come to mind. A man named Albert. That’s how he introduced himself when we found Cless. I fought him briefly. He used golden barriers of light to fight. That’s one guy,

but I know very little about him. And then, maybe, a man named Scipio. Maro mentioned him and said that he could still be alive after all this time. He used to be interested in realm travelers.”

“Both somewhat unique names,” Elise said. “But with only the names and those additional points, it will be difficult. With Eve, we’ll have an entire profile to work with, her having been a Shadow for some time. But I’ll do my best to find out more.”

“Thanks,” Ilea said.

“Our thanks to you,” Dagon said. “Anything you need, you come and ask. Oh, and congratulations on reaching your next evolutions. I didn’t have the opportunity to say it earlier – it didn’t feel fitting – but I know you must’ve fought like a madwoman for that achievement.”

“It was quite fun, to be honest.”

“Unlike your resistance training?”

“Yeah. You know, I think I just need stronger opponents.”

Dagon laughed. Elise nodded along.

“You’ll find them, I’m sure,” Dagon said. “Just maybe not in Ravenhall. I doubt that Verena or anyone else in that range would be interested in simple resistance training.”

“Yeah,” Ilea said, standing up. “I should go meet with Trian and Claire. Good to see you, Dagon, and Elise.”

The two stood up as well, though Dagon had been pacing throughout most of their talk. He shook her hand.

“Good fortune, wherever your next adventure takes you,” Dagon said.

“Lilith and Ilea, nice to make your acquaintance,” Elise said with a smile.

“Until next time, then,” Ilea said.

## Influence of the Rich

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Ilea left Viscera with a bit of a strange feeling. She looked up at the gray sky over the city once she was out in the streets. She heard a few people walking past, heard a few random conversations. Someone was shaking out a rug. She looked around and saw an adventuring team, ready with their packs and weapons. She wondered what their quest was going to be.

*I'm on the Council of Ravenhall.*

It felt a little scary. Even though she didn't have a lot of obvious responsibilities, she was still part of the council and could veto changes. But more than that, it felt like things were moving, changing, and she was a part of it all. Everything she'd brought from the north, her friends could now use, Chris and Iana, Claire, Sulivhaan, Dagon and Elise.

She stretched.

There was an energy, she supposed, in the city and in her friends who were here. She wondered what it would bring, everything they'd worked for, everything they were planning. There were different emotions at play, she could tell, but all in all, it felt right.

This was her home – more so than Riverwatch, more so than Hallowfort. A place to come back to, a place to catch up. A safe base. Not that she didn't care about the other places, but Ravenhall was different. Maybe it was because she'd stayed here for the longest time, maybe it was because she'd fought to retake the city, or maybe it was because she still felt very much connected with the Shadows.

In other places, people would react with confusion and fear if she talked about her monster hunts or her journey to the north. Here, the Shadows would ask her what kind of treasures she'd found, how her magic had developed, and if she could add the monsters to some encyclopedia.

It really was no surprise to her that it all felt right. *And now Trian wants to found a healing order here. And that feels right too. Fun and exciting as well, not that I want to take part in the boring bits and pieces of organization.*

She stretched her arms and then blinked up to a nearby building. None of the Shadowguards would complain about it here. She spread her wings and flew toward the city center, where the guild and governmental buildings were located. The city was alive, and after her battles in the north, Ilea knew that if anyone ever chose to summon demons here again, she would slaughter every last one of them.

\* \* \*

"You made it. I'd considered checking the Golden Drake," Trian said when she joined them in Claire's office.

Ilea took a bite from the grilled meat she'd gotten on the way. She may have checked out a few street food stands. For some reason, council meetings made her more hungry than dungeon exploration. *Maybe because the latter is so much more fun.*

She grinned.

"Try not to get any of that fat onto the armchairs," Claire said from the side.

Ilea made her own chair out of ash. Hers was bigger and better than the other chairs in the room.

"Let me eat, Claire. We're Shadows, not aristocrats."

"Once Ravenhall is independent, you'll be among the ten most influential people in the city. Considering your wealth as Lilith, you already are – maybe even the most influential."

"Good, then I'll be the role model," Ilea said, taking a bite out of the meat, making sure to savor the taste and fat as she lounged in her ashen throne.

"A city ruled by Shadows," Trian said.

Claire smiled. "I suppose you're right."

"Have you come up with a name yet?" Ilea asked. "For the healer thing?"

"The healer *organization*, and not yet. I've been thinking more on organizational stuff. The space we need, people to hire, funding, equipment, how to test recruits."

"Why not use our secret underground base? Most of the space is empty, and there were rooms as well, right?"

Claire considered the suggestion. "Iana and Chris have the lowest floor, and yes, there are rooms, but not enough to house a reasonable amount of students. But... yeah..." She summoned a plan and gestured for them to come and see. "The property extends quite far underground, and I bought up space around it in case we needed to expand, so if we hire a few skilled architects, we could potentially make it work. I just hadn't expected it to be used this quickly and with such a dedicated purpose."

"That looks massive," Trian said. "You would just offer that to be used?"

"If Ilea agrees," Claire said. "And if you can house the enchanters. I don't think they'll want to move out anytime soon. If anything, they'll want to dig themselves in deeper."

"I think it's a cool idea. I do like the secret underground base, but what's the point if it's just a bunch of empty halls?" Ilea said, then continued eating.

Trian looked at the plans and smiled, a glint of joy in his eyes. "Yeah. I think this could work."

"You can get food from the restaurants we own in the city and equipment from the Hand and Shadowguard or from the stuff I brought. Could the students join courses with the Shadowguard? William teaches a bunch of them, right? He could evaluate them."

"I talked to him already," Trian said. "Classes, maybe we can get some spots, but he doesn't have time for more evaluations. I think I'll do that myself. With a few more people I've been thinking of, but I'll run it by you two before I decide."

"As much as I'd like to be involved, Trian," Claire said, "I think it's best if you manage everything on your end."

"I can help with evaluations and stuff whenever I'm here," Ilea said. "But I don't plan on becoming a permanent school manager or anything."

“I didn’t expect you to,” Trian said. “So you two would have me take on the full responsibility?”

“Sounds like you’d enjoy that,” Ilea said. “I do want to butt in with suggestions and stuff, though, because you’re using the super-secret hidden base. And you’re trying to train battle healers, so I want to make sure they turn out cool.”

“I’m happy to leave this project in your hands,” Claire said. “But I’m here if you need support with anything.”

“So, about the name. Let’s not call it an ‘order’ – and nothing pretentious like ‘truth’ or ‘balance’ either.”

“I did want to call it an organization instead of an order so that we can distance ourselves from the current ones,” Trian said. “Also to attract students.”

“Yeah. If we’re talking battle-healers like myself, it won’t exactly be similar,” Ilea said. “We’ll need combat instructors too.”

“It’s already on the list,” Trian said with a smile. “I’m just generally thinking about what could help someone below level fifty get a healer Class.”

“Or an evolution, right? Or can people with Classes change them?” Ilea asked. She’d not given that much thought, but she supposed if someone became a warrior of some kind and then realized they really, really didn’t want to have that Class, would they be stuck with it?

“Evolutions would work as well, but I think we should focus on recruits at a very low level. Changing one’s Class is possible, but it’s more difficult the higher-leveled and more, let’s say, settled you are with your Class. And even at a low level, it’s not easy. It’s generally understood that very strong intent is required to give up one’s Class and get another one. There have been instances of more mundane workers switching to fighting Classes after they’ve experienced a devastating monster attack or the like.”

“So you kind of need to find a new purpose?”

“That’s the idea. But it needs to be far enough away so that your current Classes can in no way fulfill the idea. If I wanted to become a healer myself, for example, I would probably have to focus fully on training as one, preparing, learning about anatomy, working with other healers, and learning from them,” Trian explained. “But even then, someone at level two hundred switching out their Class for a new level one Class is unheard of. If anything, I’d hopefully be offered a Class evolution with more healing

capabilities once I evolve the next time around. That's how larger shifts are done usually, but yes, for very low-level people, it's a possibility, and I think those are the kind of people we'll be focusing on."

"Refugees from the war," Ilea murmured.

"Refugees, former slaves from Baralia, people looking to make a change now that they've seen the war, and people who want to help in a more direct manner. There will be plenty who wish to become more involved. They want things to change, and we'll offer them the opportunity and training."

"And then what? We don't have an elixir or anything. And the Azarinth one I ate apparently had a high mortality rate."

"You said it in the meeting," Trian said. "You got your fire mage Class by burning your arms. We'll offer combat training, first aid, medicine, magic theory with a focus on healing, maybe alchemy, and anything else that could be useful. And in time, I'm sure we'll figure out something that works. The healing orders each have a long tradition and have squashed any potential competition, directly or through other means, but the guards and militaries of different nations and cities have proven that you can train healers without them."

Ilea nodded along. "We should add resistance training. I can help with that whenever I'm around, or once we have a few healers, they can help each other. My many resistances have popped up in tons of my evolution options, mostly the ashen stuff. And they're super helpful in real fights too. Hard to train them up at this point because most adventurers in the city can barely hurt me, even without my defenses up. But with low-level recruits, that wouldn't be a problem."

Trian looked at her. "It will be tough on them. But with the choice for them to leave at any point, we can keep working with those that endure and push through."

"It's not forever either. Once they reach the second stage of Pain Tolerance, they can just shut off their pain. And then, once they unlock healing magic, I wouldn't even need to be there to help out. The arcane healing my Class has should also help early on, with the mental aspect of that kind of training."

"Yes. And with all that, we'd be training battle-healers tough enough to work even with Shadow teams. I'm sure Sulivhaan would love that."

"Trian's Healer Choir," Ilea laughed.

He furrowed his brows. “Why would they be singing?”

“Sparky’s Sparkles?”

“You can be co-founder. I’ll need you there early on anyway, plus we’re using so much of your wealth and connections. So let’s go with Lilith’s Shades – to have some kind of connection to the Shadows.”

Ilea crossed her arms. “Shades? That sucks.”

“What about the Ravenhall Healing Organization?” Claire suggested.

“No,” Trian and Ilea both said at the same time.

“It’s simple and identifies what the organization is, no?” Claire asked.

“It’s not fun,” Ilea said.

“It lacks any kind of punch. We’re not just a healing organization. We’re Lilith’s healing organization,” Trian grinned.

“You’re really leaning into the Lilith thing,” Ilea said.

“Are you against it?”

“No,” Ilea smiled. “I think I’d like the idea, but if I’m co-founder, then we have to add some kind of training with ash. The Ashen Healers.”

“The Dark Paladins?” Trian asked.

Ilea literally cringed.

“No? Guardians of... the South?”

“Closer,” Ilea said. They were both lost in thought for a moment. “My Class has the name Sentinel in it. Would be more distinct than Guardian.”

“Sentinels... I like it,” Trian said. “Sentinel Corps?”

“Medic Sentinel Corps,” Ilea said. “Then it’s clear they’re healers but also have a combat focus.”

“It’s a little long,” Trian said.

“That’s just for, like, official business. Everyone else would just call them Medics or Sentinels or something.”

“That’s true. Either of those names would stick after a while,” Trian said. “I’ll use that. Medic Sentinel Corps.”

“I still don’t know what’s wrong with Ravenhall Healing Organization,” Claire murmured under her breath.

“Guess that leaves me to start on the actual work,” Trian said, ignoring Claire’s complaint.

“You need me there?” Ilea asked. “I’m happy to help out.”

“I appreciate it. But I think I’ll want you there once we actually have things set up and a first batch of volunteers ready. I was thinking of including Orthan and Aurelia in the process. They’ve been eager to start

some kind of work again, but after everything that happened, they had to lay low.”

“You can make the decisions on the staff since you’ll be the one working with them most of the time,” Ilea said. “Oh, but you should get Lyza involved. She manages the arenas where I offered my resistance training. She’s a tough one – and experienced with all kinds of people. I feel like she could be interested in something like this.”

“I’ll talk to her. And maybe we can find a few more instructors, combat and otherwise,” Trian nodded. “I’ll have to talk to Dagon for literature on medicine and healing. Hmm. Now I’m excited to start.”

“I won’t keep you.”

“Me neither,” Claire said, summoning a key. “For the new headquarters of the Medic Sentinel Corps. Good luck.” It was clear she still wasn’t happy with the name.

“Thank you,” Trian said, grabbing the key. “Will you be in the city, Ilea?”

“I’ll come back to check in whenever I can, but I planned to visit Riverwatch sometime soon. Haven’t seen Dale in a while. The city is still standing, right?” She hoped neither the war nor more elves had reached it.

“As far as we know, it should still be there, yes, though we have little information on their internal situation,” Claire said.

Ilea nodded. “With the war and all, I thought maybe I could offer some help there – if they need it. And maybe I’ll take Maro as well, introduce the necromancer to my necromancer friends.”

“The necromancer who lost dozens of gold in the gambling houses?” Claire asked with a raised eyebrow.

“That very one,” Ilea supplied.

“The one that hired a hundred escorts and arranged a festival of life?”

Ilea scratched her head. “I don’t know about that.”

Claire sighed. “All the alcohol in one of the northern districts was bought up, and hundreds didn’t show up to work today or came intoxicated. The guards who tried to intervene joined as well. We had to supply people from the Shadowguard to help out with the normal guard today. That hasn’t happened in months. We got several complaints in regards to some of the festivities and rituals performed.”

Ilea nodded in return. “I’ll talk to him.”

“Sulivhaan already did, and he informed me that Maro is mostly harmless. The problem is that with his wealth and power, he has already unwittingly formed a cult. At least, Sulivhaan suspects it. Necromancy and death magic aren’t inherently a crime in Ravenhall, but we’d at least like to keep it somewhat of a niche. Otherwise, people start to look for corpses and skeletons to raise.”

*Wealth? How did he get wealth? I thought he left all that with me and Terok?*

“I see,” Ilea said and left it at that. Maro’s sheer presence seemed to have had an impact. She hadn’t expected anything different. But to think he had already organized a festival and birthed a cult so soon after their arrival in Ravenhall was impressive.

“As for helping Riverwatch,” Claire said, summoning a large ledger and turning the pages, “there have been some requests for the Hand, but information has been scarce from the western cities. Ah, here we go.”

She took out a letter. “Increased monster activity in the western forests. It’s a monster hunt request – more details will be given in Riverwatch. The range listed is two fifty to four hundred. Seems like the city and guild can’t deal with it themselves. Which isn’t a great sign. That’s the only one I have here. It’s from a few weeks ago, but it’s not that easy to get letters to Ravenhall with the war going on.”

“Monsters, I can hunt,” Ilea said. “I’ll ask Dale about what else is going on.”

Claire gave her a long look, then nodded. “He’s a guard captain, right?”  
“He is.”

“Maybe you can... test the waters, so to speak. For potential future cooperation. With Ravenhall. But I’ve also been looking for opportunities to invest some of our gold into external places. It’s proven difficult with the distance. Maybe with better connections, like you seem to have in Riverwatch, it could become a possibility. If they’re in need of gold and other potential resources.”

Ilea smiled. “As I said, I’ll see if they need help.”

Claire smiled back. “The independence of Ravenhall isn’t official yet, by the way, and we’d like to keep it that way for the time being.”

“Oh, I would’ve just told them about how great Lilith is, don’t you worry.” Ilea winked. “Can I have the notice?”

Claire handed it to her.

“Now, any clue where that gambling hall was?”

“Can you lead me to the new headquarters first? You’ve been there before, right?” Trian asked.

“The super-secret hidden headquarters of our new healing organization, the Medic Sentinel Corps?” Ilea asked.

“That one,” Trian said. “The super-secret hidden headquarters of our new healing organization, the Medic Sentinel Corps.”

“Right, yes, I can lead you there.”

“Please leave my office,” Claire said, pointing at the door.

Ilea laughed and blinked outside, landing in the square in front of the government building before she stretched. She didn’t have to wait long for Trian to join her.

They walked through the city streets in silence for a while, Ilea soon pointing at an ordinary-looking house front. When Trian opened the door with the key he’d gotten, the Shadowguards inside looked up and greeted Ilea.

“This guy is going to be one of the new owners,” she said and pointed at Trian. “Come on, I’ll show you around.”

He took a moment to greet the guards and then followed her down the stairwell. “It’s quite spacious.”

“It is.”

“But Claire’s right, we’ll have to add more offices.” He inspected one of the side rooms on the first floor down. The room was still empty.

Ilea leaned against the door frame. “You sure about this?”

Trian glanced at her. “About the headquarters?”

“About everything. The Medic Sentinels. I don’t want you to feel obligated to take on a job like this just because everyone else is so engaged with this independence business.”

He nodded. “I appreciate it,” he said, then looked at the ground. “You know...” He paused, taking a deep breath before he continued. “What I said about people changing their Classes. I’ve been thinking a lot about what to do. About what would happen once Kyrian returned, once you returned. Once the war ended. Should I reclaim my title? Should I return to Virilya, rebuild what was taken from us? Should I go out there on missions again, work with you or Kyrian, get stronger? None of that felt right. Not really.”

Trian smiled. “But in that meeting, when you suggested we build our own healing order. It felt like everything just made sense. I want to take part

in all of this. I want to build something, something that lasts. And I don't want to participate in the politics of Virilya, not after all that's happened. I don't want to go out there and fight monsters either – there are people better suited for that. But this?" he said, gesturing around himself at the empty room. "This I can do."

Ilea walked up to him and grabbed him in a hug. "Good to have you back, Trian."

He hugged her back. "You too. Just one man missing."

"Oh, right. You should go and introduce yourself to Iana and Chris. They're working on that problem too."

"I'll do that. But I won't keep you, Ilea. Thanks for this opportunity. I'll work hard to make it become something."

"Don't overwork yourself, or I'll barely have any friends left who have time for a bout."

"For you, I'll make time. Not that I'm a very exciting sparring partner for you anymore."

"It's fun to stomp you into the ground. Especially knowing that we were once so even," Ilea said, making a fist.

"You should go and find that necromancer. And I... I should order some furniture."

"Good luck with that."

"And to you. Remember to check back in. I'll need your healing and ash."

"I'll be back," Ilea said with a smile, then blinked out.

## The Necromancer

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“Now to check on that necromancer... before his cult becomes the dominant religion in the region,” Ilea murmured to herself before activating her Sentinel Huntress skill, focusing in on the necromancer.

Even with the information from Claire, it took her a while to find his scent. Mostly because there was just so much to register in the city. The trail led her down into the sewers, through the underground, and then up to a closed gate. Behind it, she saw two armed men playing cards at a table, sitting on wobbly old chairs.

*I hope the smell in there is better than here,* she thought, the flow of sewage prominent in her ears, the smell in her nose even more so. She stepped up and knocked on the gate.

“Fuck off!” one of them shouted.

Ilea knocked once more, this time using a little more strength and hitting the door near its top. The hinges bent and ripped out of the stone, the gate landing on the floor with a heavy crash. It slid toward the table.

The two men jumped up, one grabbing his daggers and the other preparing what looked like a death magic spell.

**[Mage – lvl 103]**

**[Warrior – lvl 58]**

Ilea smiled and stepped inside, her ash armor and demeanor giving off a terrifying yet casual vibe. “I don’t like being told to fuck off.”

The men looked at each other. “What do you want?” the warrior asked. Not the man who had shouted before.

“I’m looking for my friend. Gray hair, green eyes, beard. Incredibly charming,” she explained as she walked closer, onto the door.

“Look, lady, we don’t want trouble,” the mage said.

“I’m just here for him. I wasn’t being sarcastic – he’s actually a friend.”

“Do you mean the necromancer who came earlier?” the warrior asked. “The description fits.”

“That would be him, yes.” Ilea smiled. “What is this, an underground gambling place?”

The warrior grinned. “A little more than that.”

\* \* \*

Ilea was led into the complex onto a balcony overlooking five floors lit in various colors, both torches and magical light present. On the ground floor, a red hue was prominent, the smells of smoke, sex, and blood prevalent. Puke and alcohol, too.

“Lovely,” she said.

The guard next to her grunted, “Lovely that we have to fix the door. Again.” He shook his head and walked off. “Joe! Get your ass out here, the door is busted again!”

Ilea heard a distant cursing.

*Maybe if ‘Fuck off’ wasn’t the first thing they said to people trying to get in, it would make these circumstances a little less numerous.*

She spotted Maro instantly, the man standing near a roulette table with a rather large crowd. His armor stood out amongst the scantily clothed bystanders.

She jumped over the railing and let herself fall down, blinking right before she landed to soften the fall. Few even noticed her, most of them in a daze or focused on the dancers moving around the various platforms and stages. Ilea stole more than a glance too, yet she still made her way over to the gambling necromancer.

“Black, black, black, black,” she heard him – and the crowd around him – murmur. The little marble finally came to a stop.

People parted for her, and a moment later, she was standing next to Maro. “Shame,” she said, “Should have bet on red.”

The man laughed, welcoming her with a tight hug. “My friend! It is no shame – winning and losing are part of the game! And black is the color of death; there was no choice.”

She smiled. “Been enjoying yourself? I hear you organized an orgy and lost a ton of gold.”

He moved his hand around her back. “Ah, that small party?” the man laughed. “I might need to borrow some gold from you, if you have anything left.”

Ilea rolled her eyes, “Not for gambling. I can get you food and something to drink, though, if you like.”

“What about some escorts? We could enjoy them together?”

Ilea thought about it. “If I hire one, then it’ll be without you.”

He flinched back theatrically. “Am I so hideous? It pains me to hear that. This city is wonderful.”

“It surely is. Do you feel like getting some fresh air? I want to visit a friend, and you could maybe help my talking dagger. Or do you want to stay here?”

Someone grabbed at her ass, then appeared confused at the ashen armor in their way.

She casually grabbed the man with a few of her ashen limbs and threw him a few meters away into an unoccupied space. The impact was dull, as was his pained moan right after.

“Now? Sure. I don’t have any more gold to play with. And a talking dagger sounds like something I’d like to see,” Maro said, his wings spreading in her sphere. “Not wearing your new bone armor?”

“The enchantress we’ll visit has it right now. Speaking of which, do you have any Taleen machines with you?”

“Let me check. Yeah, actually, Guardians. Both sword and ranged variants. Thought I’d try some necromancy spells on them at some point, but I haven’t been successful so far. They weren’t really living in the first place, I suppose.”

“Perfect,” Ilea said, spreading her wings before they flew up and away, drunken hands grasping at the both of them as they ascended.

“Were those undead?” she asked jokingly as she looked down.

Maro landed on the uppermost railing and smiled. “Close enough, really.”

\* \* \*

“You’re already back? I’m not quite done with your armor. The material is... difficult to work,” Iana said, wide-eyed and obviously distressed. She glanced at the necromancer going through the things on the nearby workbench.

“Maro, don’t freak her out,” Ilea said before looking back at Iana. “He’s the necromancer I mentioned. He’s harmless.”

“I’m far from harmless,” Maro said in a disinterested tone.

“He’s harmless,” Ilea reassured Iana, but she could tell that neither of the enchanters really believed her.

A loud jangle resounded, Maro having summoned a Guardian onto the floor. “Which one is the talking dagger?”

“I am,” Aki replied.

Maro stretched his hand out and grabbed the dagger, holding it high above the Guardian, poised to stab.

“Wait! That’s not how it works!” Iana exclaimed and walked to his side, her eyes glancing into his for a moment. “You... you have to...”

He lowered the dagger and handed it to her.

Iana was still looking at his face.

Ilea stepped between them and took the dagger, giving it to Iana. “No charming the girl,” she said, glancing at Maro.

Maro rolled his eyes. “Alright. Not this one.” He looked over at Christopher, who looked away immediately. “What about him?”

“No,” Ilea deadpanned. “The Guardian, how does it work?”

Ilea looked at Iana, who turned the Guardian around, studying it from each side.

“Will it work?” Aki asked.

“We’ll see,” Iana muttered. “Here,” she added after a while, touching the part of the Guardian Ilea would define as its neck. “It’s where the runes flow together, I can see it.”

Maro stepped closer. “Rune sight,” he murmured, a tinge of wonder in his voice. He smiled. “I’m envious.”

Iana looked up and smiled, her radiant blue eyes sparkling. “I understand it’s rare.”

The former king turned toward Ilea. “I’m the one who is overly charming?”

Ilea shrugged. “She’s genuinely charming. You, on the other hand, have some kind of dark magic going on, Death King.”

He narrowed his eyes at her.

Ilea smiled.

Iana glanced between Ilea and Maro, but she focused on the task at hand. “Here...” she whispered. “Can you?” She looked up at Ilea.

“Sure,” Ilea said, crouching down and holding the dagger. Ilea looked at Iana, and when she saw her nod, she slammed the dagger down.

“Oof,” Aki exclaimed.

Magic suddenly spread outward from the dagger and through the Taleen machine.

Ilea looked around. She looked at Iana’s glowing blue eyes, Chris’ focused stare as he moved closer, and Maro’s badly hidden interest.

“Did it work?” Ilea asked.

“The enchantments are co—”

“It’s dark in here,” Aki said.

“Didn’t work,” Maro sighed.

“Wait... give it a moment,” Iana said, a smile slowly spreading on her lips.

Ilea watched through her sphere as the new mana she’d seen flowed through the Guardian, slowly but surely spreading out.

When the mana had permeated the whole machine, its green eyes flashed to life.

“Aki?” Ilea asked. She felt the attack coming before it happened, stepping over toward Iana before the blades lashed out, glancing off her back and leg, one sinking into a nearby table and one striking at Maro.

“Should we destroy it?” Maro asked.

“Wait! Don’t move!” Iana said.

Ilea just stood over Iana, seeing the girl looking at her with fear and excitement in her eyes, watching the blades slash into Ilea’s ash. “Aki, are you in there?”

A sudden, deep scream filled the air. “What... what’s happening...? What is this...?” Laughter followed. It was clearly the dagger speaking, his voice a little lower than usual. “I... have... legs!” The machine sprung up suddenly and slammed into the nearby wall with a fast and uncoordinated movement. “Oof... again.”

Iana laughed. “It worked!”

“Seems like it,” Ilea said with a wide smile. She turned to the machine, blinking closer before she caught and restrained the rapidly moving Guardian. “Aki, slow down before you destroy half the laboratory.”

“It’s... I can move!” Aki said.

“You can,” Ilea said, seeing a few blade arms scraping past her armor. “But please calm down. You just got a lot of new limbs.”

*My dagger learned how to move!*

## Steel and Ash

---

“Should we go outside?” Maro asked. “Stuff here will get wrecked.”

Ilea grew her ashen limbs and held down each leg and sword individually. *No hands. At least he'll be a very efficient cake-cutter.*

“Aki? Have you calmed down? Are you there?”

“I feel... restricted,” Aki replied. “Did I lose it all again... I cannot see anymore.”

“That’s because I’m holding you down and your insect machine face is against the wall. Try to turn your head first,” Ilea said, laughing. “Sorry for holding you down, but you’ll wreck the place if I don’t. Seems like it actually worked. You have a Guardian body!”

“I do! I have a Guardian body!” Aki shouted.

“You do!”

“I’m so happy!” Aki said, struggling against the ash.

“Stop struggling!” Ilea shouted back.

“I want to move!”

“I know! But this baby dagger has to learn how to walk. Be patient,” she said, identifying him.

**[Guardian of Akelion – lvl 200]**

“Oh,” Aki said.

Ilea rolled her eyes. “That’s your leftmost arm that you’re moving.” Maro laughed from the side.

Ilea stepped aside, her ashen limbs doing all the work. “Just keep figuring things out. We can move up to one of the empty stone halls if it gets too crazy here. Iana, maybe clean up your research with that ring I gave you?”

Iana opened her eyes wide. “Yes. Right. Sure!” She got to work immediately, clearing everything off the tables near the Guardian and Ilea.

“What’s... what’s his level?” she asked while rushing past.

“Two hundred,” Maro replied. “I think he’s categorized as a monster. Hey... Aki, right? Think of a status. Do you have one?”

“No, no I don’t. I can still use my meditation-like state, it seems, but I might not be able to level up.”

Ilea nodded. “Aki, focus on learning how to move. We can figure out the rest later.”

“Right. So many new sensations. Is that really your ash? Holy shit that’s strong,” the Guardian replied, his head finally turning to look at them.

“Hey there, you see me?”

“The eyes look more like those of a Taleen Praetorian,” Maro commented.

Ilea knew what he meant. There was intelligence there. Intent.

“It’s a possibility that the dwarves made more machines like him,” Iana said.

“I don’t think the Praetorians were nearly as intelligent as Aki,” Ilea said.

“Why a dagger, though?” Maro asked, stepping closer to the Guardian to inspect him. “Or did they intend for him to be used like this? Maybe a prototype. Or someone tried to copy the dwarves to do exactly what we did here. Where did you find him again, Ilea?”

“In a Taleen dungeon, next to a dead elf. A Cerithil Hunter, I think... though Aki sounded like an obnoxious imbecile when I found him, not quite as reasonable as the hunters we’ve met. He’s somewhat influenced by the person close to him.”

“Not anymore,” Iana said in a proud tone.

“It’s going to take a while until he’ll be able to move around as well as the Guardians,” Maro commented.

"That's your uppermost left arm," Ilea said, feeling the pressure from Aki's movement.

"And this?" Aki asked.

"Middle on the right."

"What? How does that..." he murmured, then continued testing.

"He'll be able to learn, unlike other Guardians," Iana said. "And he's level two hundred."

"Another Shadow," Ilea said and smiled.

The Guardian's green eyes looked at her.

"He's going to turn a lot of heads. And any adventurers who've dealt with Taleen machines will probably attack on sight," Maro said.

"Shit," the dagger exclaimed.

"I'm sure we'll find something," Ilea said. "Hmm. Iana. Can you get Trian down here?"

The girl nodded and rushed off.

"Aki, for now, it's probably best if you stay here in these halls and learn how to move around and all that. Maybe Trian can keep an eye on you. He knows you already, after all."

"I want to run!" Aki said.

"First, you gotta learn how to walk." Ilea smiled. "But you'll run soon enough."

Aki sobbed. "I can't believe you all did this! Iana, Chris, Ilea, Maro. I don't know how to thank you all. I've been a dagger for as long as I can remember. It's too much."

"I just happened to have a few Guardians on me," Maro murmured.

Ilea carefully let go of Aki, but she helped keep him stabilized when she thought he would fall down.

At that moment, Trian joined them, walking closer before he looked at the general scene. "What the...? What's going on here?"

The Guardian stumbled around on the floor, blades flailing around as he cheered and cursed. Like a weaponized fish on land.

"I think we may have just gotten you another assistant," Ilea said.

Trian narrowed his eyes. "Is that... Aki?"

The machine laughed, the sound deeper than usual and slightly distorted. "Yes! At your service. Or soon. Once I figure out how to walk."

Trian gave Ilea a look.

She smiled back. "He can move!"

Aki slipped and fell down with a heavy impact, his head hitting the side of a stone table. “Fuck.”

Trian nodded slowly.

They moved Aki into one of the empty halls above, everyone else joining to see and help out. Ilea held him up by his core until he managed to figure out all the limbs. They did some testing with healing and death magic.

Aki had an understanding of how damaged his machine body was but didn’t feel pain. Healing had no effect on him, but he could repair internal parts of himself with conscious effort. It was very slow, but it was better than what the normal Guardians could do since his ability to absorb ambient magic was much more powerful through the machine’s body.

Sometime later, Aki was already able to stand on his own. Moving in any direction was still difficult because of the number of limbs and the power he had.

Ilea was just happy that they’d found a body for her friend. To finally be able to move and see with two eyes, after hundreds or even thousands of years as a piece of metal.

“Left swords,” Aki said, the three weapons moving one after the other. “Right swords.” He repeated the exercise time and time again.

“Do you think Balduur or Iana could give him actual hands?” Ilea asked. “Those things... well, he won’t be able to do much.”

“He can slice things,” Maro suggested.

“It’s not like he’ll have to do a lot. He doesn’t need to eat. If he wants to read or write something, he can ask someone for help. Or be very careful.”

“What if he wants to fuck?”

The dagger exhaled an exaggerated laugh, “Very funny, Mr. King. I have legs and sword arms; this is better than anything I ever expected. I don’t think the joys of the flesh will ever be a concern of mine.”

“Never say never,” Maro said. “I just saw someone stab a talking dagger into a machine, and the thing somehow came alive.”

“It’s really not that strange,” Iana said. “You just lack knowledge of the details.”

Maro shrugged. “Strange magic, I say.”

“Think you can fight already?” Ilea asked. She created herself in ashen form and moved the thing closer to Aki. “Try to hit that.”

Maro laughed. "Intriguing. Didn't know you could make ash clones of yourself. Or is it purely creation and manipulation?"

"It is. I don't think it will be very strong or fast," Ilea replied.

"I can attack it?" Aki asked, moving a bladed arm closer to the ashen figure.

"It's just ash," Ilea said.

"If it's just going to be more testing from now on, I'll go and finish up your armor," Iana said. "We'll talk again later, Aki. If you don't plan to run off now that you can move."

"I... I could do that," Aki said, his voice curious. "But no, of course not. Not yet."

"Trian had some ideas as well," Ilea said. "I can tell."

Her friend had left after a while, returning to his prep work for their little healing organization.

Ilea glanced at Maro. "Speaking of running off – I'll leave for Riverwatch soon. Wanted to check in on some friends there and maybe help out a little if I can."

Maro turned to her. "You want me to join?"

She shrugged. "Not sure if it's for the best if you form a cult here. I think some of the leadership was a little concerned about your power."

"Wait, Riverwatch is the place with those necromancer friends you mentioned before, right?"

"Yeah. Walter and his people. Weavy is there too."

Maro raised his eyebrows. "The Mind Weaver! A talking dagger and a demon. I nearly forgot. Sure, I'll join, but I won't promise to help you with whatever you're doing. You're stronger than me anyway."

Ilea smiled. "Yeah. I think I'll manage."

She looked at him for a long moment, then nodded to herself, the two of them watching Aki try and fight the slow-moving shadow-being that Ilea controlled.

She breathed in deeply, imagining Aki when he became more proficient with his Guardian body. *Or an even stronger version*, she thought. *No. Don't get ahead of yourself.*

Still, she couldn't help but grin at the possibilities.

TWENTY

## Moving Out

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Ilea woke up from her nap, turning in her summoned bed to look at the mostly empty hall of stone.

The ashen clone was still there but stood unmoving.

*The form persists through my sleep as well. That's so cool,* she thought.

Aki was slowly circling the thing, occasionally slashing at it with somewhat awkward movements. But it was miles from the flailing motions of the previous evening.

Maro, standing a couple of meters away, was commenting on the strikes. "You're not using all your legs as efficiently as you could." He turned toward Ilea. "Oh look, you woke up."

She rubbed her eyes and pushed both healing magic and meditation through herself. Aspect of Ash as well as Azarinth Awakening were still active, the two free skills constantly running. Her Armor of Ash sat flat on her back.

"You can move pretty well already," she said to Aki.

"I'm almost as fast as your floating ash, yes," the dagger-turned-Guardian said. He laughed. "An improvement. But this body can do so much more... I can feel it."

Ilea smiled at him, dissolving her ashen clone. "I think you'll soon reach a normal Guardian's capabilities. It will be interesting to see how far you can push that thing."

"I wonder if he's going to be stuck at level two hundred," Maro said.

“But monsters can level up, and some Taleen machines were a little higher than others, right? Demons can level too, and they only have one Class. What do you think?” Ilea commented.

Maro walked up to Aki and touched one of the sword arms. “Hard to say. This, at least to me, is unprecedented. Not an Awakened exactly, and not a machine. Something in between.”

“It’s not like I’ll be out there hunting and killing monsters anytime soon,” Aki said.

“I’m just happy that you can move around by yourself now,” Ilea said, smiling.

“Me too,” Aki said, looking up as he sighed. “It’s been so long.”

Maro tapped the machine. “Just don’t get yourself destroyed in the first week, then.”

“I’ll be careful,” Aki said in a whisper.

\* \* \*

“It’s done,” Iana said, standing in front of the workbench, which was now covered with bone armor, the olvor hammer sitting behind it all.

Ilea had had an idea the night before and asked Iana about it. The enchantress had obliged.

“It looks... fierce,” Aki commented, the Guardian standing next to Ilea. He was somewhat in control of his body now, no longer flailing his sword arms around in the basement.

The enchantress smiled at the machine, looking genuinely happy to see the successful implementation.

“Can you enchant him too?” Ilea asked, nodding at Aki before she went and identified her newly enhanced gear.

**[Quiet – Rare Quality] Enchantments [Bound Return 5]**

**[Eternal Guardian Armor Helmet – Ancient Timeless Quality]  
Enchantments [Durability 5 / Mana Flow 3]**

**[Eternal Guardian Armor Torso – Ancient Timeless Quality]  
Enchantments [Durability 5 / Mana Flow 3]**

**[Eternal Guardian Armor Arms – Ancient Timeless Quality]  
Enchantments [Durability 5 / Mana Flow 3]**

**[Eternal Guardian Armor Legs – Ancient Timeless Quality]  
Enchantments [Durability 5 / Mana Flow 3]**

**[Eternal Guardian Armor Boots – Ancient Timeless Quality]  
Enchantments [Durability 5 / Mana Flow 3]**

*Self-regenerating, mana flow enchanted and hardened bone armor with a badass look. That will take Basilisk or Dragon armor to top, Ilea thought with a big grin on her face.*

“I honestly don’t know where to start,” Iana replied. “He was already far more complex than anything else I’ve worked on, besides the gates and the key you brought. And now, he’s even more complicated. I might try to enchant him in the future. But not now, not here. I will need space and some way to protect myself in case of explosions.”

Ilea took each piece of armor and moved them into her necklace, summoning the full set right after on top of her pants and shirt, covering most of them. She checked the hammer and felt the magic connecting to herself. “How does it work?”

“You feel the connection, right? Leave it on the floor and focus on it.”

Ilea did just that, feeling the pull before the hammer slammed into her hand. “Cool. That’s exactly what I wanted.”

“It may not be as effective at longer ranges, and it’ll be costly to use then.”

“No worries. It’s mostly just to show off,” Ilea said and winked at the girl.

Iana nodded. She looked tired.

Equipped anew and mostly ready to leave, Ilea and Maro stepped out into Ravenhall. She stretched in her new armor and summoned her hammer, feeling its weight. Testing something, she found she could barely lift it without her auras active.

*Good thing they don’t cost mana to use anymore.*

“To Riverwatch, then?” Maro asked.

“Yeah, soon. Just gotta stock up on food. I hope Keyla and her team had some time.”

\* \* \*

“I’m a little early,” Ilea said.

Keyla had a smug grin and crossed her arms. “I know you better than you know yourself. Of course, I have prepared as much as I could. The third order of cakes already came in too – it’s reserved for you.”

“Remarkable. May I propose to you?” Maro spoke, going on one knee next to Ilea, his gaze focused on Keyla.

“You’re married,” Ilea commented, “Also, Keyla? Don’t.”

“I must decline. I’m seeing someone after all,” the cook commented, winking at Ilea.

“Heart... broken...” Maro whimpered, clutching at his chest. “Only food may fill it.”

The cook obliged, summoning a meal from her new storage ring and handing it to the man. “I’ve got a couple hundred meals ready, but I guess we’ll have to transfer them individually,” she said, ignoring Maro’s slaughter of her meal.

The next few minutes were spent exchanging meals between their two storage items, plates appearing and disappearing on the table in the private dining room on the top floor.

*Three hundred sixty meals from Keyla and thirty cakes from Popi.*

“Marvelous. That should last me a while,” Ilea said and grinned. She was very aware of Maro’s murderous stare. “You can get some too, if you can pay.”

The man’s stare changed into a thousand-yard-like expression, his eyes looking past the cook, past the kitchen, and perhaps past Elos itself.

“Don’t worry about him, I’ll share,” Ilea said to the cook. “Thanks for the hard work, Keyla. Give my thanks to Popi too. I’m sure he’ll have some fans up north soon enough.”

They left and were soon out of the city, out in the snowy vales of the southern mountains.

Ilea breathed in the cool air and smiled. *Ready to be out there again.*

She briefly looked over the progress she'd made on her resistances during her time in Ravenhall. The progress wasn't as impressive as it would have been when fighting deadly beasts, but thanks to William, Viper, and Phillip, she had still made some decent gains. She'd gained a single level in Curse, Ice, and Wind Resistance, two in Blood Magic and Light Magic Resistance, and a whole three levels in Earth Magic and Corrosion Resistance.

*Lot of mages with earth magic in a city being rebuilt, plus Phillip really did like those acid arrows...*

A lot had happened in the past few weeks since she'd returned. Kyrian was still missing, but maybe they would have a lead soon, and thanks to Cless, they knew at least that he was alive, fighting and surviving, somewhere out there.

Her funny little joke of calling herself Lilith had grown into something a little bigger than she'd ever expected, and now some of her friends and acquaintances had become prominent figures in the city she'd once traveled to to join the Shadow's Hand.

She'd even joined some kind of city council.

She'd been scared of coming to the south again, scared of getting too involved. But now? For some reason, she felt grounded, calm. Maybe being in the north and surviving its desolate landscape, having fought the many monsters she'd met, had provided her with some perspective.

Getting to three hundred certainly helped too. She felt more confident in her abilities, her magic, her power. And after her visit to Ravenhall, she also felt confident in her friends and allies – in their ability to grow, to walk their paths, and to build something more out of the city they'd come to call their home.

Keyla and the Golden Drake. Claire and her management of so much of the city. Sulivhaan and Dagon with their plans and connections. Trian and his new role as head of a new healing organization. William and the Shadowguard. Phillip and Viper, ready to go out there again. And Aki, moving around as an actual Taleen Guardian.

It felt inspiring. To see them all with that much passion, that much growth. It made Ilea want to do the same. Right now, she would go and visit Riverwatch and aid them where she could. And then? Who knew where her next adventure would take her?

But she knew one thing: she was ready.

“You look emotional,” Maro commented as he passed by her. “It’s cold. Let’s go to warmer lands.”

Ilea smiled. “Yeah. These mountains are pretty high up,” she said, spreading her wings. “Let’s see if you can keep up.”

The necromancer stretched. “Go on then, *Lilith*.” He made sure to say the name with a strong, sarcastic bite.

Ilea grinned and flew off, heading northward toward Karth, the mountain she’d seen in the distance so long ago when she’d first managed to blink out of her Azarinth temple.

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## Angel of Death

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It was hopeless, really. The monsters. Hidden near the riverbank.

It was all Linus could do not to scream, to stay composed and focus. He had faced monsters before, of course. Both men and beasts deserving of the name. Both with the guard and with his brother.

His glaive swung wide, twirling in the air and coming down on the neck of a Nazark. He trusted his skill, trusted the blade. The ground was wet, the air cold. His boots moved smoothly on the gravel of the road, blood spraying out from his enemy's wound.

The glaive continued through the air, his skill keeping the bladed pole moving. It wove behind his back and finally into his other hand. No monster was in range.

“Retreat!” he heard his commander shout, but the sound was lost in a sea of screams and snarls.

He was part of the team that was supposed to flank the beasts. Nazarks, easily provoked, easily led into a trap. Today, it was the other way around. The scouts had failed, it seemed, or the creatures had learned.

### **[Nazark – lvl 62]**

*Weak, he thought. A single blow of his weapon would be enough to kill it. Still, he felt his breath get stuck in his lungs, felt the shiver flowing*

unrelentingly down his spine as he looked at the blood dripping from the monster's claws.

This was what it meant to fight outside the walls. Those that were meant to protect the people living happily within the distant city.

*Riverwatch*. The city he had come to call his home.

He looked at the lanky beast, taller even than him and thinner, albeit not by much. Hatred glowed in its eyes, coupled with apprehension. It had seen its kind cut down, its attention focused on the blade held out by the human warrior.

Linus waited, recovering his stamina and mana as he surveyed his surroundings, listening for anything that would try to sneak up on him. The formations were broken, and many were wounded or dead. On each side.

What the beasts lacked in teamwork and planning, they made up for with savagery and fearlessness. He knew the guard was losing. *A numbers game*. Individual skill might be the saving grace. Either for him or the beasts.

"Why couldn't you just stay in the forest?" he asked. And he meant it, his voice laden with anger and fear.

Yet his hand was steady, the heavy wood familiar, a pillar to lean on. To focus.

The beast moved. Its spindly legs propelled it forward, strong muscles tensing and releasing as they brought its claws down.

Lightning cracked around Linus, his body tensing up before he shot forward. His glaive was aimed at the creature's heart. The next moment, there was a dull crash, and the blade punched through. *Too much*. He felt it, knew it in his core.

The beast slid closer, the gaping wound on its chest spelling its death. Yet not fast enough. Claws moved in and slashed at him, their momentum making it impossible to avoid an attack.

His eyes opened wide right before they crashed together, a *ding* filling his mind just as the long, vicious claws buried themselves in his left arm and right shoulder.

The force reverberated through him, and the two tumbled down in a ball of long legs and arms, all the air punched out of his lungs. Still, he gripped his weapon, the wood holding against the weight.

Linus moved the corpse away from him and stumbled to his feet, blood dripping from his arm and shoulder. Neither wound was life-threatening,

but they would be an issue if not treated soon.

The pain was familiar, not worse than what he had felt before, but not much better either. It would impact his skill. Sliding the blade out of the corpse, the man distanced himself from the body as he looked around.

Corpses littered the riverbank, but the sounds of battle had moved toward the treeline to his right. Coughing and moans of pain echoed around him, and the iron stench of blood lay heavy in the air. *Death*. The thought flashed through his mind. *Run*. He heard himself think. A pounding in his body, his own heart beating faster yet again.

He activated Meditation, its second tier allowing him to move slowly toward the battle, calming him down, unraveling the knot of fear in his mind.

He sped up again once he was focused, lightning flowing through him to quicken his movements, to enhance his reaction speed. The Nazarks had been quick, killing five of them before most even knew what was happening.

Any lower-ranked adventurer team or even the guards from Stormbreach would have fallen into chaos and been quickly overwhelmed. Yet they were the Hunters of Riverwatch, trained and prepared to take care of monster infestations. Nazarks hadn't been planned for today, but it didn't matter.

Fire flashed in the underbrush. The light of dawn was slowly pressing through the dark.

The trees wouldn't favor his weapon; an open space was required to fully use its range. Linus moved his grip farther up the wooden pole, his lungs heaving for air as he steeled himself. Lightning flashed once more as he broke through the underbrush.

His heavy steps pushed against the earthy ground, his blade slashing into the neck of a beast, killing it instantly. A slide allowed him to dodge a clawed hand, his weapon cutting through a leg before he rolled in his armor and shot up again. He gritted his teeth against the pain in his shoulder. His right arm was wet with blood.

He saw an ally, a mage. The woman looked injured, stumbling away from two more beasts as a small ball of fire burnt into one of them, released by her hand. Blood was dripping from her chest, her left arm hanging to her side, the white of bone visible.

Linus moved toward her, the power of lightning flowing through his veins. He jumped to her side and shouted, “Healer!” – more in hope than expectation of finding the only healer in their troop.

Three more monsters answered his call, rushing out from the thicket as he readied his blade.

Everything stopped instantly.

Writhing lines of moving darkness exploded through the Nazarks’ heads and chests. A figure clad in black, wisps moving silently around their armor, landed softly in their midst. Black wings of ash dissolved behind their form.

Linus breathed out, his weapon ready as he prepared, hands sweaty and eyes focused on the blue piercing glare of the monster. The taste of blood was in his mouth, his body moving to protect the mage.

### **[Battle-Healer – ??]**

He read the tag and watched as the person moved past with graceful and quick movements. Past his blade and his body. He turned, only to find a steady hand on his shoulder. He activated a short-term boost to his mind, but all he saw was the wound on his arm closing rapidly. A feeling of warmth flowed through him, his eyes going wide as he watched the tissue on the mage’s arm reform.

*Monster...*

He had seen healers before, had trained with them and fought to protect them. This wasn’t a healer. This was a wraith of death. He dared not breathe, dared not move.

“Relax and move to the road,” the voice said, human. Young. With a confidence and calmness that made the hairs on his arms stand up.

He forced his eyes to hers but found only the trees staring back at him.

“Shadow,” the mage said with a breath. Her hand grasped at her arm before her gaze focused on Linus.

“Are you alright?” he asked, looking around to find the stranger. All he found were corpses. The distant sounds of battle could still be heard, and he saw spells and flashes of light.

The mage stumbled away from the tree, looking around frantically. “I... am. Come, we have to go to the road.”

He agreed and followed, their breathing the only sound beside their legs brushing against the bushes and plants.

They broke out of the trees, and Linus immediately saw others stepping out, bewildered, looking around as if expecting to find the monster right behind them.

“We’re not the only ones,” the woman said, a smile on her face as she wiped at the blood she had coughed up just minutes ago.

Linus grasped at his shoulder. It was a weird feeling to be healed. This had felt different still, more forceful than what he’d experienced before. He could feel the lingering warmth where the wounds had been – and in his mind.

He steadied his shaking hands, focusing on the forest, looking over the bodies. “Look for survivors,” he said, “Regroup, form up!” He was no commander, but neither were those coming out of the forest.

They listened, mages and rangers lining up behind, their backs toward the river, weapons and spells at the ready.

He saw more people move out of the forest as they formed their line.

Noises came from the tree line, followed by a group of Nazarks rushing out.

Linus readied his glaive, ready to fight. Yet he saw the beasts’ gazes weren’t focused on him.

A man in red robes lined with silver plating rushed out behind them. Silver antlers reached up from the helmet that covered his face. His hand was extended before a beam of black seared through the fleeing monsters, their bodies crumbling as if the decay of death came upon them in mere moments.

Linus held his ground, his bladed pole ready to strike. *That’s no Shadow*, he thought, the man too far away to identify. His armored robe looked powerful and ancient. As he stared at him, the mage suddenly appeared a meter away. Linus’s teeth clenched, lightning flaring up as he forced himself not to strike, his instinct nearly costing him his life.

“Bow before me, human,” the man said, his hands casually at his sides.

### **[Necromancer – lvl ??]**

Linus kept his hands on the weapons, his spells extended and his senses heightened.

*I can give them time. Until the healer comes back.*

He jumped back, focused on the necromancer before him. “Healer!” he shouted again. His only hope to survive this was the mysterious stranger that had intervened before.

Something emerged from the trees, flying high and illuminated by the sunlight pushing through the mist. Black wings, ethereal and powerful. The armored healer, clad in black, looked his way.

*Ash?*

She appeared closer and looked around.

Linus forced himself to focus on the necromancer, confused as to why the man hadn’t moved.

“You fucking dunce. Stop scaring the soldiers,” the healer said, shaking her head. She slapped the necromancer’s head and vanished once more.

*Scaring... the soldiers?* The words repeated in his mind, his eyes darting around to find the woman, but she was gone.

“Taking all the fun out of it,” the necromancer muttered, rubbing the spot where she’d hit him. “Alright, glaive master, join the others. Would be best for your already atrocious casualty numbers,” he added, then flew up and away.

“What the fuck is happening?” Linus said, looking at the mage he’d fought with before.

“Stay vigilant. We don’t know who they are,” she said.

“That’s her, right?” asked one of the others who had stumbled out of the bushes. “The one Dale talked about. Gian, you’ve seen her before, no?”

“Yeah, but she wasn’t like that,” Gian said. “You think she really became that powerful in just a few years?”

*Captain Dale? So those stories weren’t made up?*

Until now, the respected guard captain’s fanciful stories had simply felt strange. Linus had assumed the man wanted to encourage recruits to take up a healer Class.

*But the wings and armor... maybe he wasn’t actually making them up.*

\* \* \*

Ilea rushed through the forest, far faster than the monsters she was hunting. It was a slaughter. Dozens of them still ran, some trying to find the humans they were fighting and others fleeing from the newcomers.

It didn't matter. They were slow, sluggish even. Their hide proved utterly useless against her ashen limbs, the bladed ends piercing through their bodies like bullets through skin.

She ignored the notifications, the low-level monsters irrelevant to her progress. Ten more she killed before the forest returned to silence. Birds and other animals were holding their breath, hiding in whatever holes they could find.

"I think that's all of them," Maro said, appearing a couple of meters away, dabbing a cloth at the blood on his armor.

Ash formed and moved over his armor, Ilea wordlessly helping him out. "Don't get used to it."

"Already have. Want to join my Kingsguard? We could use a woman of your power."

"Maybe you want to join my Queensguard instead, Maro," Ilea joked, flying up to look over the forest. She strained her ears as she rushed over the surroundings, and when her sphere and senses didn't pick up any more of the beasts, she made her way back.

A thin gravel road led alongside the riverbank to Riverwatch – a couple of kilometers away, if her estimate was correct. The Hunters were lucky that some of them had screamed so loudly. Otherwise, they would never have known anyone was there.

She landed in the field where the initial battle must have happened. Dozens of corpses littered the grass, most of them beasts. She closed her eyes and breathed in, focusing on the blood, guts, shit, and piss.

"You alright there?" Maro asked with a teasing voice as he landed next to her. "Should I raise them? Would give them quite a spook."

Ilea opened her eyes and glanced at him. "Do that and I'll spook them with your ripped-off head on a stick."

"That would work too," he said, his helmet vanishing to reveal his grin. "I was talking about the Nazarks, of course."

"Necromancers," Ilea murmured, leaving him to look for someone in charge.

## Hunters

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“Who’s in charge?” Ilea asked one of the adventurers, her ashen limbs moving out to wake the others she had healed. Most had been in a critical condition. “Stop playing dead, you two. I can hear your heartbeats,” she said, hearing the very same accelerate.

“Your prey is distressed, Lady Lilith, I can feel it,” Maro said, moving closer to one of the survivors.

“Oh my fucking god, Maro. They’re already traumatized – do you have no regard for the human mind?” She slashed at him with an ashen limb, but he vanished briefly to dodge.

He smiled and walked toward the apprehensive group.

Now that she saw them together, Ilea realized they were part of an organization. Military, perhaps, or a guard.

“Who are you?” the glaive-wielding man asked, his gaze neither hostile nor friendly. Green eyes, black hair, tall, and somewhat thin.

“He’s got my eyes. A bastard, maybe?” Maro asked. “We’ve come to find my long-forgotten son and—”

Ilea interrupted his speech, “I’m a Shadow. We were on our way to Riverwatch when we heard you. What are you exactly, adventurers?” She heard the word ‘Shadow’ whispered by some of them.

“I’m Linus... It looks like Captain Miller didn’t make it. No officers left, then. We’re part of the Hunters, guards from Riverwatch tasked with monster subjugation.” Linus sighed. “This battle was not expected.” He

turned to his compatriots. “Get ready to leave. Bodies on the carts, get moving!”

*Seems like he's the leader, then.*

“How's the city?” Ilea asked Linus while the Hunters got to work.

“The city is standing,” the man supplied.

*That doesn't exactly tell me much. Guess I'll have to check in with Dale.*

“I'll help with the cleanup,” Ilea said absentmindedly.

She walked over to help with the dead. It felt wrong to move them into her storage items, given their comrades were still around. She grabbed one of the corpses and moved the dead woman over to the arriving carts. A mage, she assumed, due to the lack of sheathes or straps for any weapons.

Some of the hunters looked at her, but nobody said a word.

She carefully placed the corpse in the wagon and turned around. All the other bodies had already been moved. When she checked through her messages, she found none of her skills had leveled.

*Just a bunch of unlucky Nazarks that ran into my path then. And a bunch of lucky humans.*

“Already done?” Maro asked as he walked over. “Heard the city is barely an hour from here on foot. Want to go?”

Ilea glanced at the dead mage once more before she nodded. *How many would have died if we hadn't been here?* She clenched her fist.

Spreading her ashen wings, she gave the group of Hunters a nod and ascended. Maro followed in silence, the two flying low, right next to the ice-cold-looking river.

She knew this road.

Ilea stopped and landed a couple of hundred meters away from the walls of Riverwatch. The city sprawled before her. It was larger than Ravenhall, but she knew Claire planned to build down and into the mountainside with time. And with all the changes coming, she wondered how Ravenhall would compare to other cities.

*Since when do I care about the size and prosperity of different cities?*

As they approached on foot, movement near the gate indicated they had already been spotted.

“Riverwatch,” Maro said. “Doesn't look like they've prioritized defenses nearly as much as Ravenhall.”

“They don't have an insane mercenary order to defend and fund them either,” Ilea said. “Can we switch to a more normal getup? I don't want to

stand out too much.”

Ilea put her bone armor away. Luckily, there was no blood on her clothes, thanks to the ashen armor she had used above her bone one.

Maro rolled his eyes, walking toward the gate. His armor was suddenly replaced by elegant black pants, a red shirt, and a black coat going to his knees. A silver pin depicting a rose appeared in his hand before he pinned it to his chest.

“Not that you won’t stand out just as much,” Ilea said but walked on. “Also, your eyes don’t really fit with the red.”

“Red and green? Fits perfectly, in my opinion,” he replied. “You’re not a queen, so you wouldn’t understand.”

Ilea ignored his comments. “I don’t know what their laws are in regards to necromancers.”

“I think I’ll be fine.”

Four more guards had joined the ones near the gate by now, with still others on top of the wall. One of them stepped up, all ready to fight, hands on their weapons.

“State your name and business! We saw you land.”

“Shadow. Here on Shadow business. This is Maro. We helped out a group of Hunters on the way. They ran into some Nazarks,” Ilea explained casually, pointing first at Maro and then back down the road.

“Can I see a badge? I don’t like him being a necromancer – can you vouch for him?” the guard asked, a hard stare focused on the mage.

She summoned and threw her badge at the lead guard, noticing a couple of his companions opening their eyes wide, others talking quickly to the ones next to them.

*Storage items. Ravenhall guards probably get to see a whole lot more of them, I suppose.*

Going from facing down Kingsguards and delivering royal treasures to surprising people by owning a storage item felt a little strange.

The guard checked her Shadow badge and nodded, handing it back to her. “Yeah. You’re alright. The necromancer?”

“He’s not going to raise any corpses,” Ilea said simply.

Maro fixed his coat and stepped toward the man with a smile on his face. “Maro Invalar.” He bowed. “It is a pleasure to visit your beautiful city, dear noble warriors and mages.”

*He’s so fucking bad. And they love it.*

Ilea wouldn't have believed it had it not been for her sphere that informed her about the distress levels dropping rapidly.

"You're fine. Want to come with me or explore the city?" she asked the man.

"Exploring sounds nicer? Just come find me if you need help. I've had enough fighting for today, though, to be honest," Maro replied in a low tone.

"Sure. Meet up at sundown in the Adventurers' Guild, the one closest to here. To visit my friends."

"Ah, yes. Done deal. I'll be there," Maro said with a grin.

Ilea shook her head and walked past the guards. She noted that literally none of them felt distressed anymore. "What's your usual policy with necromancers?" she asked one of them.

The man looked at her and then at Maro. "Let's just say he's allowed in because of your word."

On entering Riverwatch, Ilea noted the smells and noises inside weren't quite as overwhelming as back in Ravenhall. *Fewer people.*

A dog barked at her when she passed. The streets were muddy, with ice in some places. There was snow on some of the rooftops, but most had melted away by now.

"Oy... lady, some copper?" a man asked, thin and with clothing that wouldn't last another winter.

Ilea summoned and flipped a couple of silver coins his way. "Get a bath too."

*At least I'm putting that silver bucket to use.*

### **[Warrior – lvl 28]**

She wondered how many years ago he had gotten those levels. Ilea didn't stop, ignoring the shouts of thanks behind her.

*I don't remember there being so many beggars.*

Rounding a corner, she saw three more, ignored by most who walked by. For each, she summoned a couple of silver coins, gradually making her way to the guard station Dale had been stationed at.

Ilea recalled the location of his office, and this time, she blinked in front of it directly without talking to any of the guards around the station.

*Good timing,* she thought, smiling as the door opened before her.

## **[Warrior – lvl 142]**

Dale jumped back as magic surged around him, his sword already in his hand. He raised his eyebrows and sheathed the weapon again when he realized who it was.

She waved and smiled.

“You? You weren’t here a second ago,” he said. “You really have no regard for this old man’s heart.” Dale shook his head and smiled.

“Sorry about that. Had about enough random discussions with suspicious guards for one day,” Ilea said.

He nodded. “A battle-healer with two question marks would always raise suspicions. It’s good to see you’re alive.”

“And you. Been a while, Dale. How are things? Do you have a moment to catch up? Or should we meet later?”

He glanced past her, considered, then gestured back to his office. “I can talk for a moment, sure. Not every day you get to enjoy the company of a Shadow.”

Ilea smiled and went inside. She walked to the window on the far wall as Dale closed the door. Outside in a spacious yard, she could see some of the guards training.

“Any urgent business you’re on?” he asked, touching a rune that seemed to boil water in a pot on a nearby stove. He got a mug from his desk and another one from a shelf. “Tea?”

“Thanks,” Ilea said. “No urgent business. But I did come here with a Hand mission.” She summoned the notice and handed it to him.

“You’re here with your team?”

“Just me. And a friend, but I don’t know if he’ll be joining in. He’s not a Shadow.”

“Just you,” Dale murmured, reading the notice before he handed it back. “I can hardly tell if anything has changed about you. But taking on a mission like that alone... you must’ve been busy.”

“You could say that,” Ilea said. She formed a chair of ash and sat down, watching the guards training.

Dale poured the tea once the water was boiling. “Here you go,” he said.

“Thanks,” she said, taking a sip. “Met some of the Hunters out there. One of them was called Linus.”

“You did?”

“They ran into some Nazarks. We helped them out. I think they should be back in half an hour or so,” Ilea informed him.

“Nazarks? So close to the city?” Dale said thoughtfully. “An ambush, then. Otherwise I doubt they would have needed help at all. Casualties?”

Ilea nodded. “It didn’t look great. Don’t know the specific numbers.”

He sighed. “More bad news.”

“More?”

“Ah, I don’t want to bore you to death with it all. I’m sure you’ve had your fill of problems.”

Ilea drank from the tea. It was herbal and somewhat citrusy. “This is nice tea,” she said.

“Used the good one,” he smiled. “So, tell me, you’ve been away. How’s life been treating you?”

Ilea blew away the steam rising from the mug. “How long do you have?”

He leaned against his desk and checked an enchanted device on the table. “Forty-seven minutes.”

“Right. So, I’m sure you’ve heard about the north...”

\* \* \*

She was on her fourth cup of tea when she told Dale about the Praetorians. At some point, he’d offered cookies.

“Elves and Taleen,” Dale said. “We’re really living quite different lives.”

“It’s really not that crazy. I enjoy it too. I came back south around a week ago and checked things in Ravenhall. Quite a lot going on there as well. And I thought I’d come here after. You said there was a lot of bad news?”

“It’s been tough. After the western cities fell, then the demons, and now the war. Baralia hasn’t made a direct move against Riverwatch, but we can feel it. A few officers have turned up dead, and more refugees are coming in. We’ve caught several spies as well, and our leadership isn’t exactly united on anything. It’s like everything is frozen – the siege of Virilya isn’t just keeping the capital of Lys on hold.

“Then there’s the monsters, far more present in the western forests, likely because the independent cities have fallen and there’s less activity on the roads.” He breathed in deeply and smiled. “But we’re keeping busy, working our best to keep things under control. Refugees also mean new recruits willing to take up a guard post.”

“It does sound like you’re busy,” Ilea said. “You said the leadership isn’t united?”

“Yeah. The man who issued that mission you came here for, Alistair Gallian, is one of the contenders for governor, but the votes have been at a stalemate for a while now. I don’t want to get too involved with all that, but it’s clear to everyone that external influence is at play, and the war will decide how things will continue.”

“You mentioned Alistair specifically?”

“I trust him the most. He’s been consistent in his opinions over the years, unlike many others. I even heard him offering gold to hire Shadows has caused some backlash. There’s been talk about Riverwatch not being able to stand on its own. He’s been opposed to that opinion, but you can see how hiring Shadows to solve a monster problem is going to put our own military in a bad light.”

“Yeah, that does sound like a tricky spot to be in.”

“But now you’re here to deal with that,” he said and laughed.

Ilea gave him a questioning glance.

“It’s funny, remembering you as that lost healer girl back then. And now you’re supposed to deal with a monster problem even our Hunters can’t seem to get under control. Alone.”

“I didn’t come here just for that, you know.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“Thought I’d come and see how things are in the city. And with you. But I’m happy to help out. In any way that a level three hundred Shadow could be of use.”

“Three hundred, you say,” he murmured.

“You’re a friend too, so there’s no payment needed.”

“What’s the catch? Who are you working for?”

“So little trust? After all this time?” Ilea smiled.

“I like you, and I trust you, Ilea. But it’s been over a year since you last showed up. Things have been shaky in the area, and now you show up out of nowhere and offer your help.”

Ilea nodded. "Right. I have friends in Ravenhall. Some of them may be interested in forming ties with Riverwatch. Some may be interested in investing. I can maybe put those parties in touch with you, or with Alistair, if you trust him and if you're interested."

"As for me and my help, that's just me. I'm not a politician, nor a manager. But I can fight monsters – or people, not that I'm overly keen on the latter. I offered to help out when I was below level fifty, you remember that. Now I'm past three hundred, and I offer you my help again. I hope that at least tracks."

"It does, yeah. I'll have to introduce you to Alistair anyway, for that mission you're here for. Maybe we can discuss other possibilities as well," Dale said.

"I'm still Ilea," she said. "Just with fancy armor and a stronger punch."

"And connections, and ties." Dale sighed. "I've been more stressed lately. Sorry if I'm being too cynical. An old friend visits with adventure stories from the far north, and here I am, worrying about her allegiances. It's not like me."

"I like that about our relationship, you know? That no matter what, you're Dale, and I'm Ilea. I agree that things were simpler back then, but I still came here because of you. The other stuff is secondary."

He finished his tea. "Yeah. Hey, are you in a rush to get to that mission?"

"Not particularly."

He nodded. "I was about to go down and join the new recruits. It's been a month, and we're evaluating their progress. Want to join in? Could always use the eye of a Shadow."

"Sure that's not against guard protocol?"

"Oh, it very much is. But you're a friend, and I'm sure nobody will complain about a level three hundred Shadow giving some pointers and demonstrations here and there. If that sounds like something you'd enjoy, of course."

"You know I like showing off, at least to you and the Riverwatch guards who saw me in my first real battle against other people," Ilea grinned.

"Never seen anyone at your level fight. Good reminder for the officers too, not to get too comfortable."

"Lead the way then, captain. Oh, and while we're out there," she said, changing into her bone armor set, "call me Lilith."

Dale stared at her armor for a moment, then nodded and moved out. A guard did a double take at her and Dale when they passed, then he nodded at them.

Around forty people were waiting in the yard, most of whom looked like new recruits. They stood in formation.

Dale joined the group of waiting officers. “The Shadow Lilith will be joining us for the evaluation.”

There were a few glances, but nobody openly complained about it. Ilea could tell that two of the officers were trying very hard not to look at her.

“Captain, everything is ready,” one of them said, glancing at Ilea for a second.

“Good. Start, then,” Dale said and turned toward the recruits.

Ilea watched as the guards in training started forming into pairs, each using their preferred weapon or magic to fight one another.

Dale gestured for her to follow and then started walking around, commenting on some of the recruits.

“Guards or Hunters?” Ilea asked after a while.

“Guards at first, only taking small jobs outside the walls with a focus on gaining levels. After they reach level fifty, they can choose to join the Hunters.”

“Basically adventurers in the city’s employ?” Ilea asked, noting the glances from some of the recruits. Most tried to stay focused on their opponents.

“Not exactly. The pay is worse, but you get benefits in the city. Jobs are usually somewhat close by, and we move in much bigger groups. It’s hard to get twenty adventurers together even for newly discovered dungeons. Too little organization usually, too much ego.”

“More safety, then. Sounds like a good system. How many healers do you guys have?”

He laughed at that. “Not nearly enough. I try to encourage people to have it as a second Class at least, but it’s hard to argue. Even if they’ve seen you before. Maybe your presence here will inspire some.”

“It’s fucking stupid is what it is. You can heal yourself and fight at the same time.” Ilea shook her head.

“Stigmas. They think that giving up your second Class for a healer Class will seriously reduce your combat ability. I had the same opinion before seeing you. Then there’s the fear of the healing orders. There aren’t

many incidents with rogue healers that we hear about, but the rumors are there. Many also lack the talent for it – or the knowledge. We can't provide many teachers either. Handing them a sword or a spear is much easier and cheaper.”

Ilea had her own opinions, of course. *I hope Trian's work will bear fruit soon.*

She kept walking, ignoring a blast of ice that crashed over her. The man who had released the spell looked mortified, but Dale just motioned for them to continue.

“And the high-level ones like you who have made it are all out there, with adventurer or Shadow teams or a cushy military position, aren't exactly willing to teach newcomers either. And why would you? Just means more competition.” Dale smiled. “We get by, though. Still, if I could make it happen, I'd like to have a healer in every group of ten.”

“How many do you have now?”

“One in fifty? A hundred? Sometimes it feels like even less.”

“Then maybe I can inspire a few of them,” Ilea said as she watched the recruits.

## Evaluation

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“This is Lilith,” Dale said. The new recruits had formed ranks, standing at attention. “She’s with the Shadow’s Hand, and today, you will be facing her.”

The looks in their eyes changed. Ilea could make out those who were excited and those who were scared. There were few with more subdued reactions, though confusion was present as well.

Dale glanced at Ilea. She stepped forward, looking at the recruits. She thought them just another group of resistance-testing adventurers and decided to put on a show.

“You will not hold back. You will not be afraid. You will fight with the intent to kill me.” Ilea summoned a gold coin into her hand. “Whoever manages to draw blood gets an entire gold coin.”

The recruits looked at each other with excited eyes. Some actually looked confident.

“You’ll break them,” Dale whispered before looking at the list he held. “Frederick Trail, you’re up first.”

“How else would I get them to go all out?” she said and winked. Her armor formed around her, cladding her bone set in a dark, nearly black layer of ash.

The recruit who had been named stepped up, wide-eyed and glancing around and back at his fellows.

“Trail...” Ilea started, getting the man’s attention. She saw him gulp.  
“Do you know a man named Joseph?”  
“No, ma’am,” he replied.

### [Warrior – lvl 38]

She just nodded, a couple of ashen limbs forming on her back. “You may start.”

The warrior looked unsure but still unsheathed his sword. A well-made blade but nothing that could hurt Ilea without a seriously powerful and skilled warrior wielding it.

He approached carefully, glancing at the swaying ashen limbs before he focused. Spells were released, his body growing more nimble, his muscles more dense and powerful. His heart rate increased before he dashed forward, his blade slamming down on her shoulder.

It stopped dead, surprising not just the man himself but many of the watching recruits as well.

*Maybe it’s good to show them what’s possible,* Ilea thought. “You would probably be dead by now if I was a wild beast.”

The man jumped back and tried again. He hit with more vigor, his movements allowing follow-ups and dodges. Despite his level, he showed more experience and composure than she’d expected.

“Enough,” Dale said after a while.

The man was sweating, his hands shaking lightly as he held on to the blade. His eyes were still focused on Ilea, ready to strike or react.

“Well done,” the captain added. “Now, you will defend against her. Lilith, I hope you can gauge the limits of my men and women. I’d like to avoid bad injuries.”

Ilea cracked her knuckles, walking toward the man. Happy to find he was switching to a more defensive stance, she sped up, trying to body-check him. He rolled to the side and took a couple steps back to make distance, sword held out toward her.

“Injuries build character,” she said, speeding up once again. This time, she stopped and changed direction with the help of her ashen limbs smashing into the ground. A light kick sent the man flying, his sword taking the brunt of the force.

Blood dripped from the recruit's mouth as he stood up slowly, his sword still held up and ready to defend once more.

"Well done. How's your health?" she asked.

He was about to speak when she blinked behind him and grabbed him in a choke.

"Just some bruises," Ilea said. "Don't let an opponent distract you. Expect teleportation at all times." She let go and pushed him forward. "Some basics I learned from a man with the same last name." She thought back to their training. In the latter days, Trian and Claire had taken over, but Joseph had been there at the start.

The recruit stumbled but quickly turned and held his sword out again.

Ilea formed an ashen blade and advanced, striking slowly and with very telegraphed moves. She sped up when he dodged without issues until, finally, her blade was about to hit his. The ash dispersed instantaneously.

Frederick used the opportunity to stab at her neck, but the blade was stopped by the ashen armor and slid to the side with a scraping noise. His hand moved back, but not quickly enough.

Ilea grabbed at the weapon, her hand closing around the blade before she yanked it toward herself. She smiled as she watched him let go and jump back.

"Lost your weapon," she said, letting the blade fall to the floor. "What's your next step?"

The man glanced at the captain and retreated, his eyes focused on Ilea.

"Good. Don't turn your back to the enemy. Sometimes, though, you have to." She moved toward him quickly, trying to be just a bit faster than his back steps.

Finally, he had to turn to keep his distance, running as fast as he could amid chuckles and laughs from the watching group of recruits and guards.

*Their time will come as well,* Ilea thought, increasing her speed as she slammed her heels onto the floor with hard and powerful steps. She was behind the running man in just two seconds and tripped him, but she clapped when he landed in a roll and continued onward.

"What a guy," she said, going back to Dale and his assistant. "Definitely ready."

"Agreed. Barely any hesitation and quick decision-making skills," Dale said. "He's pretty fresh, I didn't expect such good results." He cupped his hands near his mouth and shouted, "Frederick! Come back!"

The man was already fifty meters farther away and quickly turned and rushed toward them.

“Stop with the laughter,” Dale said, addressing the others. “Feel free to be a little rougher with them,” he added – loudly enough to make sure everyone heard him.

“Sure. I’ll heal the ones who give it their all,” Ilea replied. She tapped Frederick on his shoulder, quickly healing his bruises. “Well done.” She summoned a piece of gold and handed it to him.

“But I didn’t draw blood,” he said.

“You did bleed, though,” Ilea said. “Let’s see how the others hold up.”

“Next up,” Dale said, “Gideon Skorn.”

\* \* \*

Half an hour passed with Ilea throwing recruits around. Some walked away with broken bones or bad bruises to be taken care of by their own healers at a later time. Cocky or stupid behavior was what led to those results.

A sizable crowd of guards and officers had formed, first just to watch, but Ilea soon agreed to take on higher-level opponents as well. The ones brave enough to try.

She noticed a group of people approaching who looked a little different than the previous officers and guards.

“Defense now,” she said, focusing back on the poor water mage whose attacks had simply flowed off her armor thanks to her second-tier resistance.

His speed and resilience left much to be desired as well. Still, Ilea appreciated the effort, and she finished the bout with a throw. The water mage landed hard, rolling over twice before he came to a stop. He tried to get up but slumped down again, coughing up blood.

“Some more Vitality, my friend,” Ilea commented as she appeared next to him, delivering some healing with her foot as she touched his side. “You’ll get a teleportation spell soon, I hope. Otherwise, try to form a barrier with water. That should be helpful too.”

Her time both at the Hand and with all those adventurers she’d trained her resistances with had offered more insights than she’d expected. At least for a fresh group of recruits.

Reappearing close to Dale, the group she'd noticed closed the distance and demanded not just her attention but the others' too.

A man with short black hair and blue eyes led the group of five. He was dressed fairly normally other than the intricate embroidery on his vest. A blonde-haired, armored woman walked to his left.

*I know her. Can't place her, where did we meet?*

To their right walked an older man with gray hair and a beard of the same color, or lack thereof. Despite the frail look, he kept up effortlessly.

*The shield mage, wasn't it?* she thought, remembering the tournament from a couple of years ago.

Two more well-dressed men walked a little behind the first three, their clothing and weapons indicating their own high standing or, at the very least, a certain amount of wealth.

They stopped a couple of meters away from Dale and Ilea, the black-haired man nodding to the captain.

"Captain Dale, I was informed that a Shadow had arrived and decided to come and welcome our guest personally." He looked at Ilea. "My name is Alistair Gallian. It is a pleasure to welcome you to Riverwatch."

His voice was somewhat quiet, but his words were spoken deliberately and with confidence. Ilea heard him without a problem, but she could tell some of the people around her were having difficulties.

*Is he hiding a stutter?* she wondered. *He's focusing way too hard on his words.*

"Good to meet you too. I didn't expect you to come to this training square."

The blonde woman with Alistair opened her eyes wide but didn't say anything, looking at Dale before shifting her focus back to Ilea.

Alistair stepped a little closer. "I did not expect a Shadow to be examining our future guards and Hunters. What do you think?"

"Good base for most of them – I was surprised by how well many of them fought. But I didn't reach this level through conventional training, so I might not be the best person to ask," Ilea replied.

She identified him.

**[Mage – lvl 203]**

“Few Shadows have. I am happy to hear you think them adequate,” Alistair said, then bowed lightly. “Would you mind interrupting this evaluation to join me for lunch?”

“Lunch is always welcome,” Ilea said.

“I’m aware that Shadows usually work in teams,” one of the people with Alistair asked. “Is yours waiting in an inn nearby, or perhaps outside the city?”

Ilea shook her head lightly. “I am the team.”

“A single battle-healer,” Alistair murmured. He gave Dale a glance and then nodded. “Very well.”

## Aazarinht Sentinel

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Ilea had expected Alistair to suggest a fancy restaurant, but after the short introduction, they went to the canteen of the guard station, a large two-story building of stone and wood that was more reminiscent of a barn than a restaurant.

“Are you not satisfied with the establishment?” Alistair asked after they sat down in a private room on the first floor of the large building.

*Have I been dining at the Golden Drake too often?*

“No, it’s just that I’d expected something different,” Ilea said.

Alistair smiled.

Dale had joined them as well, at Alistair’s request. The blonde woman who seemed vaguely familiar was there too, as were the two well-dressed men and the barrier mage she’d seen in the Riverwatch tournament before. It felt like Alistair was the most comfortable of the bunch.

“The atmosphere feels quite tense,” Ilea pointed out. “What’s going on? You,” she said, addressing the blonde woman. “You seem kind of familiar – have we met before?”

The others glanced at the woman, who seemed to freeze up.

“I’m Valery Stormbound. I’m... not sure if we’ve met before.”

**[Warrior – lvl 179]**

Ilea looked at her for a long moment. “Riiight, I think I remember. You were in Salia a few years ago. I found you in that library hideout.”

Valery opened her eyes wide. “You... what? No, no, it can’t be. You’re too far above her.”

Ilea switched out her armor for more casual clothes, revealing her face to the group. With Dale and Valery both knowing her and her real name, she didn’t think there was a reason to keep the mysterious Lilith getup going.

Plus, the food was arriving, and she couldn’t eat with her helmet on. That was, of course, just an additional reason and not the main one. At all.

The dish served to them was potato stew with vegetables and unidentifiable meat. She hadn’t expected anything else from the guard station. “A staple,” she said, digging in.

Alistair seemed very interested in the reactions of everyone present and the fact that Ilea knew Valery, but he didn’t yet speak up.

Dale sighed and started eating as well.

“I know you too,” Ilea said, pointing at the old barrier mage.

“You do?” the man asked. He smiled and relaxed a little. “Esteban Cain, at your service, Lady Lilith. I’m a professor at Riverwatch College. Where, pray tell, have we met before?”

“We haven’t. But I saw you perform at the tournament a few years back, right before the elves attacked,” Ilea said with a smile. “Quite a show. Jyraiu’s wings inspired me to get my own,” she added, quickly spreading her ashen wings after checking if there was enough space.

“You seem to have quite a history with the western cities,” Alistair said.

It felt like much of the tension had faded, replaced by curiosity, though Valery still seemed to shift from confusion to suspicion.

“Nothing too crazy,” Ilea said. “But yeah. Known Dale for a while too. And I’ve just returned from a long journey recently. Thought I’d stop by and see if I can help out.”

“That is fortunate for Dale, and perhaps for the city. Have you come on official Hand business?”

Ilea summoned the notice. “I have.”

“I see.”

“What the fuck did you do on that journey?” Valery blurted out.

“This and that,” Ilea said, eating more. “Went north. Fought a bunch of things. Came back.”

Esteban chuckled.

Alistair smiled. “A Shadow through and through. Should I brief you on this mission?”

“Sure,” Ilea said.

“Very well. The closest of the abandoned cities in the west, Stormbreach. Are you familiar with it?”

Ilea nodded. “Abandoned because the population was slaughtered by elves?” she asked rhetorically. “I haven’t been there myself, but yeah, go on.”

“Not all were killed. Many are here in Riverwatch, many more yet fled farther east. Recently, the monsters in the forests between us and Stormbreach have changed their behavior. More of them move closer to our walls and patrols. Either they are less fearful, or they are driven away by something else.”

“We’ve sent scouts into the area. Most didn’t return. Those few who did spoke of demons and other monsters patrolling the forests nearby,” Alistair explained.

“Demons? Patrolling? You’re suggesting someone is controlling them?” Ilea asked.

*Some Mind Weavers made it to Stormbreach?*

“Perhaps. We don’t know for sure. No demons have attacked Riverwatch since the months following the summoning in Ravenhall, but I trust the reports. And I don’t believe in ignoring potential problems. I’m sure you’re familiar with fighting their kind.”

Ilea gave him a look, then continued eating. “I’ll check it out.”

Alistair seemed relieved. “I would appreciate it. We can provide a scout who knows the area.”

Ilea nodded. She saw Valery glance at Alistair, while Dale seemed a little tense again, but Alistair seemed calm – happy, even.

“Then I shall bid you good fortune on your mission. Make sure to meet me again once you have learned more or dealt with the problem at hand.”

Ilea finished her meal. “I will.”

She could tell there was more going on, but based on what Dale had shared with her, she assumed this was mostly just Alistair checking to see if he could trust her.

She said her farewells and met up with Dale again once the others had left.

“That was so fucking uncomfortable,” he murmured.

“It was fine,” Ilea said.

“Because you’re you. Never seen them so tense. You freaked them out. And you intrigued Alistair. I’m sure we’ll have a chat, and I’m sure he’ll ask for your help once you’re back.”

“I’m happy to have a chat with him if you say you trust him. He seemed a little cagey.”

“They expected a team of level two hundred Shadows. That’s why he came with that small entourage. They didn’t expect a single Shadow at three hundred. I think it threw them off. I don’t think anybody really knows what that means. Might as well have been Empress Alyris herself who stood here and evaluated our recruits.”

“You’re exaggerating. Wait, do you know what Alyris’ level is?”

“I do not,” Dale said. “But yes, I trust him. Valery has been formidable too. She’s helped integrate many of the survivors from Salia into Riverwatch. Esteban has been a name in Riverwatch since long before I was born, and he’s chosen to support Alistair as well.”

“Him being old doesn’t exactly mean much.”

“No. But his actions do, and he’s got a long list of those going back over half a century. But I’m not here to convince you of anything, Ilea. I think they’re good people, and I think you are as well, and I think both they and you can make up your own minds.”

“But I’m glad you’ve come and chosen to help with that mission. Having fewer issues with monsters in the western forests will free up a lot of our fighters. There’s plenty of work to be done in the city too, and we’re stretched thin as it is.”

“I’ll go check it out, see what it’s about,” Ilea replied. “And as I said, I’m happy to have a chat afterward.”

## Compromises

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Dale put together a team of people who knew where Stormbreach was. Ilea would've only needed one of them, but the team needed more so that the guide could safely make their way back again with a group. She donned her armor and stretched, smiling at the troop.

“So, let’s figure out what this monster business is about.”

“No wagon?” one of them asked.

“No wagon,” Ilea repeated, her ashen limbs moving out to grab each of the guards. There were about half a dozen in total. With her current strength and skill level, they were little more than carry-on baggage as she flew.

The flight didn’t take very long. Ilea had to keep her speed down a little because of the lower-level team she had with her, but they still covered the distance far quicker than any of the locals ever had before. Most of them had never flown. One of the hunters joked that his only ‘flight’ had been a short fall from the Riverwatch walls.

They guided her using distinct landmarks, most of which were luckily visible from the air, and soon pointed out a small spot of gray and brown in the distance.

The former independent city of Stormbreach.

Ilea flew low over the forests. The only trees remaining with any color were pines and variations thereof. She landed in front of a river that cut through a nearby clearing at the urging of her ash-borne navigation system.

The Hunters stumbled to their feet as they were released from her ashen grasp, two of them using trees to balance themselves and assist with keeping their lunches down.

"Beyond the river is the area associated with Stormbreach. Where demons were sighted," said the leader of the squad, crouching next to Ilea. She was a soft-spoken woman with a kind face but eyes that had seen their share of trouble. "It's been a couple of weeks since our last scout came through here. Are you sure we shouldn't stay with you?"

Ilea looked back at one of the Hunters dry heaving over by a tree stump and held back a smile.

"I'll be fine," she said. "A couple weeks is a long time. I'll fly you back a little to make sure you have a higher chance of survival."

"Please, no more flying," the almost-vomiting man complained between heavy breaths.

"She's right. I'm the highest here at level one ten. If demons show up, we're in trouble," the lead huntress said, nodding at Ilea.

"You could also make camp where I set you down if you want to wait for me," Ilea suggested.

"Keeping on the move is important. Many beasts are territorial. If we leave quickly enough, they might not challenge us at all. I think we can make it back by sundown," the huntress explained casually, checking her gear. "Get ready, team, we're flying again!" she called out. There was a chorus of groans, but they all began moving into position to be lifted once more.

Ilea took the group a little farther back than they'd agreed on. With the river to guide her, finding her way back again, this time at her full speed, wasn't hard. There had been scents and tracks of monsters nearby, but nothing had approached so far.

Ilea looked over the river and toward the forest that held Stormbreach. Another one of the western, mostly independent cities. Southwest of Riverwatch but nowhere near as far west as Salia or Dawntree.

*Decimated by the elves, for whatever reason. Damn near completely wiped out.* She thought about the elves and their possible motives but couldn't really think of anything.

*Big number of Taleen getting close and they needed to flee eastward into human territory? An oracle's whim? A bet among the young warriors?*

She jumped over the river, which was at least fifteen meters and raging with an icy current. It felt nice to be out in the forest again.

Landing in the dirt, Ilea summoned her black olvor hammer and clad herself in ashen armor. *The hunter is here.* She grinned, letting the hammer rest on her shoulder. She could feel its substantial weight, but it was no longer a concern.

*I wonder what a level three hundred Strength-focused warrior could wield. Add in a bunch of multipliers and it'd be pretty ridiculous.*

The forest wasn't too thick, the trees mostly barren in the late winter cold. The so-called human Plains were a little lower than the western lands, their temperatures warmer.

*Good thing it wasn't winter when I first arrived here from Earth.* It would likely have been a quick death. Either outside or in the fridge of an Azarinh temple ruin.

Voces were audible in the distance. Ilea focused on the sounds, moving quickly through the thin layer of frost and snow that had remained from the previous night, and crouched as soon as the voices were distinguishable from the howling winds and rushing river.

"Shut up, human. You always want to run, always thinking of betraying our great master." A sluggish voice formed the words, each syllable pronounced in between wet, squelching noises.

"I'm just suggesting it. None of us is here by choice," someone else said. *The human, presumably.*

Ilea moved closer, using only her blink to stay hidden and make as little noise as possible. She stopped when her sphere was within range of the slowly walking group.

Her eyebrows quirked up in surprise when she saw them. *What's this? A forlorn DnD group?*

There was a creature that looked a little like a big goblin, or maybe a more burly Nazark. A human adventurer was among the group, as was a demon spawn.

*Is a Mind Weaver around then, or is someone else controlling it?*

The fourth and last member of the bizarre group was a lizardman, half a meter taller than all the others and with a big scaly tail brushing over the earth behind him.

"You've ssseen what happensss to the essscapeesss," he said. "Be glad we're on patrol duty and not... entertainment."

His forked tongue darted out and looked around. “Leave this placce. There iss nothing here for you. We told you before.”

*He's talking to me, isn't he?*

Ilea remained quiet, confused at the situation.

“Is he still here?” the human asked.

“Why can't we just eat him?” the Nazark-like creature asked with the accompanying wet sounds she'd heard earlier.

“We talked about this before,” the human said, shaking his head. “You just don't get it.”

The Nazark lowered his head and made a weird purring noise. “Intelligence is low, but I try to remember.”

“Don't be mean to him,” the lizardman said. “Let'sss just ignore him.”

*Him. So, it isn't me? Well, they wouldn't really know my gender, would they? Perhaps they encountered a human before me?*

Noises came from a nearby ledge overlooking the group, followed by someone stepping out from a bush and looking around with frantic movements.

“Do you bring news? News from Stormbreach?” asked a bedraggled man.

Ilea had to move her head a little to get a better look, her sphere lacking the required range.

He looked middle-aged, though the hair he still had was thin and in chaos. A human. He wore a thick white and red robe.

“There is no news, it's the same as it ever was,” the human adventurer said as he kept walking.

“No news from the Lady?” the robed man asked, stumbling over the ledge and nearly falling before he caught himself.

“You sssshould leave thisss foresssst,” the lizardman said. “Know that not all of usss are sso underssstanding.” His voice became deeper and more threatening with each word.

The older man nodded, obviously frightened by the lizard person. “I will stay in this forest. One way or the other.” His voice was soft, the departing group either ignoring it or not able to hear.

Ilea smiled to herself and kept her eyes focused on the man. *This seems to be a more interesting mission than just killing a bunch of monsters.*

*But I hope I get to fight a bunch of monsters too.*

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## Man of Conviction

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Ilea watched the man for a while. She considered him an easier target to ask questions instead of confronting the group. So she stalked him as he made his way to the river.

The squad was long gone, lazily strolling through the forest.

“Come come come, yes, yes, swim into the trap, little fish. Finally!” The man laughed out loud, crouching down to grab a fish that had swum into his roughly constructed trap. He held it up and laughed again as his stomach rumbled.

### **[Healer – lvl 104]**

*Seems like he's missing some of his marbles. Out here for too long, or what's going on?*

Ilea checked her surroundings once more. He really was alone.

The snow and frozen dirt crunched when she stepped out from behind the tree she'd been using as cover. “Your hunting skills are better than your awareness,” she said.

He was startled by the voice and nearly fell, turning around awkwardly while the fish flopped to the ground. It landed in a brown puddle, splashing dirty water on the man's robes and adding to his disheveled look.

“No! My fish!” he shouted and crouched down to get his fish. “Best wash that one again,” he murmured, glancing at her. His eyes seemed a little wild, but he focused here and there.

*Twitchy, that one,* Ilea thought. “I come in peace.”

He narrowed his eyes. “What brings you here, young healer? Or are you with the occupants?” He stepped back into the water, holding the fish in the current with a strong grip.

“Stormbreach is occupied?”

“Oh yes,” he said, lifting the fish again and shaking it to get rid of the water. He shivered a little, then glared at her with rare focus in his eyes. “A monster is at the helm of our ancient and sacred town. Corrupting all who step within. I tell you, this is no place for someone such as you.”

He looked at the fish and sighed. “Have you eaten?”

Ilea removed her ashen armor, her bone helmet vanishing shortly after. “How are you going to gut and cook that?”

He chuckled and waved her off, droplets of water splashing to the ground. “Ah, don’t you worry about me, dear. I’ve made fires with worse. Eating them raw is no issue either. We are healers, you and me. I’m sure you know.”

“Know what?” Ilea asked and smiled. “They taste much nicer when you cook them.”

He pointed at her. “That is true. Well, you seem more versed in surviving the wilderness. I can offer the fish and you the fire? I’m sure you’ve had a long day too.”

*A long day?* Ilea wasn’t sure. She’d arrived near Riverwatch, killed a bunch of Nazarks, and met up with Dale and Alistair. Now she was here, in the cold forest around Stormbreach, talking to a lone healer who may or may not be going mad – if he hadn’t already.

“A pretty slow day so far, to be honest.”

He laughed and walked away from the river. “There’s... a small cave nearby. The patrols don’t know about it yet,” he said. “I suggest you move east, away from here.”

*A cave, you say? Interesting. Maybe he’s trying to hunt more than just fish.*

“Why do you stay, if it’s so dangerous? I have a higher level than you, after all,” Ilea said, following the man as they moved through the forest.

"I am an Elder of the Sanctuary Healing Order. And I won't leave Stormbreach behind. I will stay here until it is freed again or I meet my end," he said with conviction.

They reached the cave. It was a small opening near a ledge, and the man squeezed himself inside. Ilea blinked in after him and looked around in her sphere. It was a surprisingly spacious area with a small tunnel leading farther down.

*Is he going to turn into a monster now?*

He smiled in the darkness and grabbed a bunch of wood from a nearby pile. "I haven't eaten in days. I hope the smoke doesn't attract too many nuisances."

*No mutant transformation, then? Sad.* Ilea waited, but he just started building a small fireplace. In the confined cave. *What about the smoke killing us instead? Well, I guess we're both healers.*

"You want Stormbreach to be freed? From what exactly? I haven't heard of the Sanctuary Healing Order either. Are you based here?" Ilea asked, helping him pile the wood.

He reeled back as she drew close but relaxed when he noticed what she was doing. "Thank you. Freed from the monster that came and claimed the city. Few remained after the... terrible crimes... committed by the elven invaders. Most fled, leaving us with little power to resist. The Sanctuary Healing Order has been a pillar for Stormbreach for centuries, and we will not leave now. It is a trial. A trial, to be overcome with faith."

She listened and nodded. "Seems like you have an abundance of that."

He smiled. "It keeps me going, young healer. Do you have something to create fire?"

She summoned her fire sphere and set the wood aflame.

"Oh. A storage item. High-level *and* wealthy." The man stretched out his hands to warm them. "You're not just a random adventurer. What brings you here?"

"I'm Lilith. Part of the Medic Sentinels and a Shadow," she replied, sitting down near a wall. "Do you need help with the fish?"

He shook his head. "I'm fine. Medic Sentinels, you say? That is new to me, but Shadows I have heard about." He produced a sharp stone and slit the fish open, removing most of the guts. "You were hired, then?"

"I was. Riverwatch has reported more monsters coming from the western forest."

He chuckled to himself. “And here I thought our Lady had called for someone. Well, who knows? Either way, now you are here.”

“I am,” Ilea said. “You mentioned a Lady?”

“The Lady of Benevolence, protector of Stormbreach and our sacred patron,” he explained, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. “The demons, humans, and others are under the control of a wicked beast. Too powerful for any that have come before, but perhaps not you. Have you fought demons before?”

“I have. And it would take a mind mage to make them as docile as the one I’ve seen today.”

“You seem experienced with them,” he said, then seemed lost in thought for a moment. “Perhaps I can... be of service. Lead you to the city, tell you of passages unknown to the monsters.”

The man moved some of the sticks to the side before placing the fish on top of three interlocking branches. It looked semi-stable. “Will we have to wait for your team?”

Ilea shook her head. “No, I’m alone.”

“I see.” He didn’t seem disappointed, nodding once more. “My name is Collin Rey, one of the Sanctuary Healing Order’s Elders. Perhaps the last that remains.”

“Good to have found you, then.”

She’d thought about just going in and killing whatever monster had taken over the city. A Mind Weaver, she assumed. But killing it without knowing more could set loose all the demon spawn that remained, and she really didn’t want to cause another chaotic spread of the demon infestation.

The fire flickered, flames licking over the fish before Collin moved the branches a little, stopping it from getting burnt.

“What are these underground passages anyway?” Ilea asked.

“They’ve been both sewers and tombs alike. The rulers of our city have not always been sure what to do with them all. They were built over a century ago. Smuggling was the original intent, I believe. More recently, we’ve used them as ways to get people out without them getting seen by the elves and demons. Many of them successfully, I might add.

“They’re not safe, though, and their maintenance has been sporadic at best. By now, there will be demons there too. Infected members of our order, as well as some we tried to get out. If we come across them, I simply ask you to bring them to rest as quickly as you can.”

“I’ll do my best.” She glanced at the fish and the fire. “You should eat. If possible, we can leave after.”

“We can,” he nodded, leaning his head back before he murmured a prayer. “Would you like to have some of the fish?”

“I’ve already eaten, but I appreciate it, Collin.” It seemed like he needed it more. And she had copious amounts of food in her necklace.

He nodded and carefully removed the fish from the fire, using a stick to hold it close as he blew on it. “The fire,” he said, glancing at the flames slowly consuming the sticks.

Ilea wordlessly formed a blanket of ash that slowly descended over the flames, smothering them and returning the cave to darkness.

“Ash creation,” the Elder murmured. Then he wolfed down the fish, his stomach rumbling all the while. When he was done, he stood up. “Do you have torches on you?”

“I can see in the dark,” she replied. “Where do we enter?”

He nodded and pointed to the tunnel leading farther down into the cavern. “There. Without light, you will have to guide me, and I’ll let you know where to go. At least until we find a torch on the way.”

“Good. Then I’ll lead, and you tell me which paths to take,” Ilea said, walking to the small opening in the wall. Her helmet appeared once more with her ashen armor on top.

The man nodded and followed, the only sound that of their ashen and leather boots tapping on the stone.

“You seem more warrior than healer, Medic Sentinel,” Collin commented after a while.

No branching pathways had shown themselves yet, but an open cave was coming up, a collapsed bridge of stone trying to reach the other side. Much of the bridge now lay on the floor a couple of meters down. The remaining chunk on the other side, hanging on the ledge of a high wall, was just in range of Ilea’s sphere.

“I can do both,” she said. “The bridge has collapsed.”

He nodded. “We have to get to the other side. A battle-healer. It seems a strange concept, though perhaps simply something new. Are all of your... Medic Sentinels like that?”

“That’s the goal. They’ll be able to support adventurers better.”

“I see. And more people might want to join your order too. Perhaps not those that should be healers in the first place, however.”

Ilea smiled. "We're not going to be a healing order, I think. More an organization of fighters who happen to be healers as well."

She wasn't sure how Trian planned to have people assigned to jobs or teams, but she'd think of it more as another mercenary group, maybe with more rules as to which jobs they could take.

"A healing mercenary organization. And it sounds, perhaps, like you're new to all this. Do you have any powerful backing?"

"Why do you want to know?" Ilea asked.

"You are here to help Stormbreach. I'm simply trying to return the favor."

Ilea smiled in the darkness. "I don't think you have to worry about us."

"That's good then. But it will be interesting to see how the big orders react to your presence," Collin said. "Some of their higher-ranking members do not like new competition."

"Careful, I'll hold on to you." Ilea grabbed him and jumped, her wings forming in flight before she flapped them once and brought them to the other side. "The big orders. Balance, Truth, and Corinth, right? Why would they care about mercenary healers?"

The man dusted his robe down. "They are each the most influential in their respective territories. Any smaller orders, they essentially allow to exist."

"They allow to exist?" Ilea repeated. "Wouldn't more healers be beneficial to everyone?"

"An idealistic thought. But yes. It would be beneficial. And yet healers are sought after in cities, militaries, guards, adventuring teams, and by any influential noble themselves. You see the potential for influence."

"I do," Ilea said. "Are they pulling the strings?" She wondered about an organization like the Golden Lily. Could it be connected?

"Perhaps in the west. The Corinth Order holds a lot of power there. In Baralia, I understand that the Order of Truth is ancient, older than the line of the king. But it is always a struggle, isn't it? And I would not know the details. I care for Stormbreach, and that is all."

"Do you pull the strings in Stormbreach?"

He laughed. "You are so very direct. I'd like to think we have a guiding hand in matters of importance. But our Lady cares for the people of this city and its fate. We remain where nobility has long since fled with whatever wealth they could gather."

Ilea nodded. She only had his word for all that, but she understood that these kinds of considerations were complex. Collin was right. It would be interesting to see how people reacted to a healing organization in Ravenhall. Did they have enough power to stave off outside influence and pressure? Dagon and the others apparently thought so, or they would have objected to the idea.

They found a room with forking pathways. There was a torch on one of the walls, and Ilea lit it and handed it to him. “Can you tell me some more about the big orders?”

He thanked her and chose one of the paths. “The Order of Truth is based in Baralia. Their influence stretches as far as Asila and some of the northernmost towns of Lys. It’s advised not to travel through their lands as an unassociated healer. Even for those of recognized orders, it can be dangerous.”

Ilea heard the demon before she saw it in her sphere. She held up her hand to stop the man and then sped up, appearing next to the creature, her ashen limbs forming and slicing through its body in seconds.

*Clean enough,* she thought as the demon fell, blood leaking onto the stone ground, the viscous liquid slowly spreading.

### **‘ding’ You have defeated [Brawler – lvl 58]**

“It’s safe,” she called down the tunnel, waiting and watching as the torchlight approached.

Collin walked up and looked down at the demon corpse. He bowed, then closed the eyes of the creature. “May you find rest.”

Ilea waited for him, more diverging tunnels opening up before them.

“The right one this time,” Collin said. He waited for her to walk toward it, glancing back at the corpse one last time.

He started speaking again after a while. “So, the Order of Truth, I know little about their inner workings. They provide healing in the cities of Baralia but remain shrouded in mystery, despite their range and influence.

“The Order of Balance is based in Lys, with some influence in Nipha. I understand that the Empress has removed a lot of their privileges and power throughout the last decade, but those are mere rumors. As a healer not part of an order, you are thought to be safest when traveling through Lys. They

are paid to heal, and it seems more and more that that is the extent of their goals. Time will tell, especially with the ongoing war.”

They’d reached man-made tunnels by now, but it appeared Collin had led them to a dead end. He looked around the empty stone room and walked to one of the walls.

Now that she focused on it, Ilea saw several hidden runes on it through her sphere. But she would have no idea which one to activate.

Collin touched a specific one, mana flowing into it before a door-like shape glowed nearby, opening up without triggering anything else.

“The Corinth Order was strongest in DawnTree, slowly infesting the cities of the west. In this horrible fate that befell us, I cannot say that their partial destruction wasn’t welcome,” he said with a little venom, motioning for her to walk through the open pathway.

Their conversation continued as he guided her through numerous tunnels, the occasional demon standing in their way taken care of by Ilea.

Ilea found herself feeling more and more cynical about the current state of healing orders in the Plains. Healing magic was incredibly sought after, both by common men and women and even more so by adventurers, hunters, and guards. It seemed like healing magic had become a way to exert power at worst, and at best, it was sold as a commodity.

The current status quo didn’t surprise her. The entrenched orders had plenty of incentives to prevent new healers from gaining any sort of ground. In turn, they monopolized a set of abilities that should’ve really been a core component of any adventuring or Shadow team.

Ilea thought of Trian and smiled. She understood a bit more now why he’d been so passionate to take on this task. She was more excited about it now too, knowing what they could bring to Ravenhall – and potentially the whole of the Plains.

## Sanctuary

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Ilea and Collin spent nearly half an hour navigating the tunnels below the forest and, soon, Stormbreach itself.

The man had kept her up to date on where exactly they were, finally mentioning that they were now below the centermost governmental buildings of the city. Quite far below, that was.

Water flowed through parts of the tunnel system, some of it sewage, and other streams simply ran off from creeks that trickled down through the cracks of the old foundations. Mushrooms and some vegetation grew in parts, despite the lack of light.

“You just have to go up now. I think, with that teleportation of yours, it will not be difficult for you to scout the city. I wish you good fortune,” the man said, looking down a dark pathway.

A loud sob suddenly echoed through the halls, distant but piercing. Ethereal and ancient.

“What’s that?” Ilea asked, turning toward where the voice had come from.

The healer looked nervous, unsure of what to say as he opened and closed his mouth. Finally, he seemed to find resolve. “Our... Lady. She is grieving the lost.”

“That didn’t sound human,” Ilea said, hearing more sobs. “An Awakened? Or something else?”

"I... This is the most sacred... Outsiders are not allowed to meet her," Collin said, likely aware that he wasn't answering her question.

"Why? Because they would find out some monster or otherworldly being is your patron saint?"

Collin shook his head and glared at her, but there was fear in his eyes. "You would not understand. Our Lady is kind and caring, more human than most of us."

"You misunderstand. If she's crying over the lost souls of her town, I'm certainly sympathetic. And with how you're trying to hide things, I'm only more intrigued." She smiled. "I think I'll go meet her."

"Impossible. Outsiders are not to meet the Lady of Benevolence, not ever," Collin said and stood in her way.

"Might just be the monster that took your town that will meet her, then. Or a team of Shadows sent to scout and secure the area. Do you think either will understand?" Ilea asked as she walked toward him.

He seemed to consider, then moved out of her path. "She is... easily startled... her grief is overwhelming. It might be dangerous for you."

He followed her in hurried steps.

"Secret order with a monster in their basement, unable to control it. What's new?" she asked as she strolled down the dark pathway, her sphere picking up magical reverberations that came with the sobs.

"She is not a demon. Our city was taken. Can you blame her for getting overwhelmed?" the Elder asked.

"I don't care about blame, Collin," Ilea said as they reached a ripped-open iron door leading into a dark hall.

They hadn't been this way before. Lines of blood marred the ancient stone floor. The smell was heavy with iron and rotting flesh.

"Please... please... please..." a young woman begged, her body covered in cuts and bleeding all over. Her face was in anguish, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Ilea was about to intervene when she saw the woman's teeth – sharp and long, like needles. Her eyes shone a dark red, reflecting the flickering light of Collin's torch. She wore a dirty robe and had long white hair that lay matted and disheveled against her pale skin.

A demon was standing over her, its claws digging into the monstrous woman.

An ethereal sob left the woman, the sound carrying magic and physical force. It knocked the demon off its prey. The monster woman's wounds began to heal, but not fully. Her magic was so slow and weak that it only staggered the demon for a moment before it recovered and began to tear into her once more.

"My Lady... in her grief, she does not protect herself... she needs blood," Collin said. He moved to step past Ilea, but she stopped him. "Please... at this rate... she will die."

The demon noticed them and turned, screeching and opening its monstrous maw at the newcomers.

### **[Demon – lvl 38]**

Ilea looked at the woman, her dress torn to shreds.

### **[Spirit of Blood – lvl 283]**

The beast screeched once more and rushed at Ilea.

She lashed out with an ashen limb – only to pierce the spirit as she appeared in front of the demon. The creature shrieked, and its claws slashed into the spirit woman's back as blood dripped from the deep wound Ilea's ash had produced.

"Leave it be..." the ethereal voice moaned. There was more power in it than before.

A burst of magical pressure made Collin and the demon stumble back.

"Why? It's a demon spawn, a ravenous beast only driven by hunger and instinct," Ilea said, watching the facial muscles on the spirit twitch in pain and anger.

Somewhere in the red serpentine eyes, understanding flickered. "She was my child... a child of Stormbreach."

The Lady moved closer to Ilea, the ash digging deeper into her body as the demon continued to slash at her back.

"Not anymore." Ilea grabbed the demon with four of her ashen limbs, moving it away from the spirit and restraining it. "See for yourself."

She pushed some healing mana into the blood spirit's wound as she removed her ashen limb from her stomach. The wounds were slowly

closing, but her condition wasn't getting much better, the bleeding continuing.

Collin rushed in again, only to be stopped by Ilea again. "She needs blood. You cannot heal... What is that? Arcane... magic? It does not matter, only blood can—"

He was interrupted by a loud sob from the spirit. "My child."

The Lady hovered a few centimeters above the floor, blood dripping as she extended her clawed hand to the restrained demon's face. It bit into her fingers, but she didn't react.

"What did they do to you?" she whispered, then turned and looked at Ilea, her eyes going wide as she noticed Collin.

"I... Collin, you are alive!" she said with a wide smile, tears coming to her eyes as she floated toward them, falling to the floor before she reached them. She appeared exhausted.

He thrust out his arm. "Take my blood."

Her eyes opened wide once more, her teeth elongating as saliva started rolling down her chin. A spike of blood formed in her hand, and she thrust it at the man.

Ilea stepped between them, then stored the bone armor covering her left arm and removed her ashen shroud. "Don't kill the man. He just came to help."

Genuine terror and disgust flashed in the spirit's eyes as she moved back, tears streaming down her face. "I can't... please... Collin, I..."

Ash cut into Ilea's shoulder and ripped through her flesh and muscle. *Harder than I thought*, she noted, but she finally cut through it before grabbing the separated limb and stepping up to the spirit.

A new arm formed near instantly before it was covered again by bone armor and then ash. "Here. Prime cut of Ilea, a monster's favorite." She slammed the arm into the spirit's open mouth.

"Instant limb regeneration... arcane healing," Collin said in hushed tones, his jaw slack.

The spirit was ripping into Ilea's arm, now unprotected by resilience bonuses after the separation of the limb from her body and magic. She bit and slurped, ravenous just like the demon spawn that was still screeching, pushed against a wall.

The red eyes slowly seemed to lose their frantic intensity, and her ravenous eating turned into a more collected and calm dinner. She didn't eat

the meat, instead going for the veins and sucking out every last drop of blood.

Ilea watched as the spirit's wounds gradually closed, the bleeding stopping as her serpentine eyes focused. When she finally lowered the arm, the spirit looked at Collin and then Ilea before she dropped her gaze and blushed.

"Another one?" Ilea asked with a raised eyebrow.

The spirit nodded meekly, holding the blood-drained arm with care. Ilea smiled and repeated the violent arm removal process before she held a second serving up to the woman.

This time, there was no cascade of saliva. The claws retracted into human fingers, and her fang-like teeth receded slightly too. The Lady fumbled with the drained arm and nearly dropped it, taking the new limb and giving back the old one. "Th... thank you." She didn't make eye contact.

*What am I supposed to do with this?* Ilea looked at her withered, cold, and dead arm, not a drop of blood remaining inside. She shook it idly but then noticed the tears flowing down the spirit's face, her teeth already an inch deep in the second arm.

Ilea watched, no longer stopping Collin from going to the Lady's side. The spirit seemed calm enough and likely not a threat anymore.

The Lady wiped at her eyes, still drinking the blood from the gifted limb.

Ilea summoned a cloak and handed it to Collin. "Here you go."

"Thank you," Collin said, carefully covering up his lady.

The spirit lowered the arm and tugged on the black cloak. "Healer. You have offered me your blood."

*Oh shit, did I accidentally bind myself to some ancient evil?* Ilea was prepared to resist when she saw the woman bow.

The Lady held out the arm. "Potent and powerful, a being of immense strength has chosen to step before me. Welcome to Stormbreach," she said and raised her head, her white hair having regained some vibrancy. Her eyes had changed too, now a pale gold instead of red.

"Nice to meet you. The Lady of Benevolence, I assume?" The spirit bowed.

"She is a Shadow with the Medic Sentinels, here to take care of the monster that took our city," Collin supplied.

“No mere Shadow,” the Lady said, floating a little closer to Ilea. “A being of ash and the arcane. You are quite unique. How have you unlocked this path of yours?”

“I stumbled upon an old temple.” She saw the spirit’s eyes widen. “Ate some grass.”

The Lady nodded gravely. “It is fortunate, then, that you are alive. I hope you are not spreading that dreaded grass.”

“I don’t plan to,” Ilea said. “I know how dangerous it is.”

“Are you an Elder of these Medic Sentinels?”

“One of the Founders, I suppose. But we’re just starting out, so it’s kind of a secret. Like your order being led by a Spirit of Blood.”

The Lady smiled. “A new power rising in the south. Well, so be it. You have come to this town as an emissary of your order?”

“Not really. I was hired as a Shadow to take care of a monster problem in the forests near Stormbreach. I met Collin in the woods, and he explained the situation here.”

“And you will help free our people?”

“I’m here to fight some demons already, so sure.”

The Lady nodded. She turned to look at the still struggling demon. “Is there no hope for them?”

“I don’t know. People who get killed by a demon stand up again as one of them. I doubt there’s much left of who this originally was, other than the bones and flesh,” Ilea said.

“The muscles tense up, and bones reform to allow for claws and teeth. The brain gets smaller, and many of the organs simply regress and die, unused by what they become,” Collin added. “I’m afraid the people they once were are truly gone.”

A lance of blood formed above the spirit. But it hovered there for a long moment and then dissolved. “I cannot do it,” she said and looked away.

Three spears of ash slammed into the demon a moment later. Head, chest, and heart. It died instantly.

“I’m sorry,” Ilea said.

Collin gave her a nod.

“I will take care of the demons. I’ll collect each one after I kill them so you can send them off in the way you deem best,” Ilea said, looking at the two as the demon corpse vanished into her necklace. “Is it possible for you to distract whatever monster is controlling them while I hunt the demons?”

I'd like to go for the Mind Weaver last so that the rest of the demons don't go on a rampage."

"I should be able to do it for a short time. I have sensed their presence in the city," the spirit nodded.

"Once I'm done, I'll come and kill that one too. You get your city back, I finish the mission."

"I sense that there is more. You want something else in return," the spirit said.

Ilea smiled. "Yeah. I hadn't expected to meet someone like you out here. Maybe a friend of mine can get in touch with you and your order? We could use information and potentially some pointers for our own healing organization. If that sounds agreeable?"

She wasn't sure how helpful this spirit could be to Trian, but she liked her, and they'd had a healing order here for a while. A long while, she assumed. And they must have accumulated quite a bit of knowledge by now.

"You have come here and returned me to sanity, offered your blood to me. I would offer what you ask already. And I would give you my life to save this town, Sentinel. Know that you and your organization will forever have our support."

Ilea smiled and gave her a nod. "Now, have you fought it? The monster that took over the city? You're close to three hundred yourself – I'd assume you could take down a single Mind Weaver."

"It is no mere Mind Weaver. It is a demon beyond what I have seen before. I tried to fight it. Yet the result was definitive. A ferocious beast near immune to my attacks. It wore ill-fitting pieces of armor and talked of being a king," the Lady explained, shaking her head. "Near all of the survivors who remained in Stormbreach fell to the creature or its spawn. I was forced... to flee, nearly succumbing to my wounds."

"Any idea about its level?"

"It is below level five hundred. That is all I know."

Ilea rolled her shoulders. *Below five hundred. But sentient.*

"I'll see what I can do."

"May you be successful on your mission."

"I'll scout through the city first and come get you once I need the distraction."

Collin nodded. "Should I come with you?"

“No, you two wait here. I’ll be faster alone.”

Ilea blinked up. She checked her sphere as she moved through the underground, occasionally killing a demon and storing it in her necklace.

*Already killed eight of them today. Feels like I’m back in Ravenhall. Speaking of... Could it be him?* she wondered.

Blinking up once more, she found herself at ground level. It was late afternoon, and the suns would set soon. Looking around, Ilea saw the city streets were cobbled, while the houses were made of stone and wood, three stories high here in the city center. Plants and ivy grew over many of them. Trees decorated the broad streets.

*They planned to have trees here, unlike Ravenhall and Riverwatch.* She liked it.

Ilea snuck around, blinking through several abandoned houses before she appeared in one that overlooked a vast square. Demons as well as groups of humans and other species were all just standing around. A market? She wasn’t sure.

Looking a little farther, she saw bridges spanning some parts of the underground. *They went vertical here.* She wondered why there weren’t more cities that went deep instead of wide. Ravenhall did both now, but most towns she’d visited simply sprawled above ground. *Probably because we like the suns.*

She blinked down – right in front of a patrol walking toward the square. A demon, a human, and a lizardman.

The demon immediately attacked, screeching when sharp ashen limbs punched through its head and heart.

As its body vanished into her necklace, she watched the human and lizardman step back, weapons at the ready but wholly unprepared to deal with her.

She waited for a moment. “Not attacking?”

“You’re not attacking either,” the lizardman said. He looked tense.

The human was holding his rusty sword with shaking arms.

“True.” Ilea relaxed, most of her limbs disintegrating. “I heard there’s a new king in Stormbreach.”

“Indeed,” the lizardman said. “What would you want with the king?”

**[Warrior – lvl 110]**

**[Warrior – lvl 32]**

“Kill him?” she said, waiting for their reactions.

The lizardman smiled, sharp teeth showing. “Finally. And here I thought we’d be trapped here forever.”

“D... did the Lady send you?” the human asked.

“He keepss going on about the Lady of Ssstormbreach. I told him we need the Ssshadow’s Hand instead. Are you with them?” the lizardman asked.

Ilea smiled. “I am. So where’s the king?”

“King Demon ressides in the Ssanctuary temple. The biggest building in town.”

“King Demon?” Ilea asked. “Really?”

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## Double Tap

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“Yess. King Demon. Really. And he iss a demon, but I ssupposse he’s not the worssst of them. We are sstill alive, after all,” the lizardman said with a grin.

“Some of us are,” the human said dejectedly. “He’s killing a few every day. More when he’s annoyed or angry.”

“I see,” Ilea said. “I want to kill the normal demons first to make sure there’s no outbreak here. Do you know if there’s a Mind Weaver controlling them?”

“Aye, two of them. They don’t ssend them out too far or for too long. I heard that after a couple hourss in the foresssts, they turn wild,” the lizardman said. “Come, we shouldn’t talk in the open.”

He grabbed the human warrior and glanced around, leading them into an abandoned building before he closed the door behind them.

“Two Mind Weavers and the king,” Ilea repeated.

“Yep,” the lizardman said, sitting down on a chair and awkwardly moving his tail to the side. He sat near a window, looking out. “A demon in every group. If sssomeone triess to flee, the monsster attackss.”

“You’re strong enough to deal with one, aren’t you?” Ilea said.

“Perhapsss. But the weaverss notice and go out to investigate. Have you ever felt mind magic grip your very thoughtss?”

Ilea breathed in and ignored the question. She wondered how the Mind Weavers had reacted to her slaughter of the demons on the way up.

*I think the Lady can handle a couple of mind mages.*

“What about the market? And your patrols?” she asked.

“A farce, all of it,” the lizardman said. “He thinks himself a King and forces usss to take part in thiss play.”

“The Lady will cause a distraction. Maybe you can talk to everyone and help out while I kill the demons in and around the city.”

“The Lady will help?” the human asked, hope flashing in his eyes.

The lizardman sighed. “I will help, if only to be rid of thiss charade. I’ve been in thiss city for too long already.”

“Good, then I’ll inform her and we’ll get started,” Ilea said, getting got up.

“When? Tonight, or perhapss tomorrow? How much time do you need to prepare?”

“Five minutes? Just don’t antagonize the demons and focus on the Lady. I’d like to avoid a slaughter. Good luck.” She gave them a thumbs up and vanished, blinking a couple of times downward before finding the room again.

“Back already?” the Lady asked.

“Yep. Some of the people in the city will help with the distraction. Just spook them and, if you can, lure out the king. Can you handle the combined attacks of a couple of Mind Weavers? There are two, supposedly. And I think the demons I killed on the way up may have informed them that something is going on.”

The spirit nodded and smiled. “I can hold them off for a while. Five to ten minutes, perhaps, if they focus solely on me.”

“Should be plenty. Ready to go in a couple minutes? I don’t think we should delay any further.”

“Very well.” The Lady breathed in, magic emanating from her form. She looked up, her teeth and nails turning sharp. “Let us cleanse this city.”

“Start your distraction in around three minutes. I’ll work my way toward the city from the forest outside.”

Ilea vanished, then sped back the way Collin had shown her, black wings and ashen limbs at the ready, tucked in behind her as she rushed through the dark tunnels. Her sphere and memory led the way.

It took her barely a minute to cover the distance, reappearing in the woods to the touch of a cold breeze brushing over her.

“Now,” she said to herself, spreading her wings, “let’s go on a hunt.”

The trees were spread out and lacked leaves, so the low suns gave Ilea enough light to spot movements at a great distance.

Ilea flew low through the winter forest, finding her first target barely ten seconds later. She landed with a heavy impact, the group fanning out in confusion as she grabbed the demon from their squad.

“Go to the city, help clear out the demons. Don’t move until the mind mages are dead and I’ve engaged the king.”

The demon’s head exploded in her grasp, blood and brain matter landing on her ash before she vanished once more.

She sped through the outskirts of Stormbreach with speed and focus, killing every demon that she came across. After the fifth group, she closed in on the city. Walls and houses were visible in the distance, watchtowers above.

A slight headache suddenly formed in her mind, and a big grin spread across her face. *That was a mistake.* She quickly located the Mind Weaver, hovering a couple of dozen meters to her right and above the trees.

“Foolish hu—”

The creature’s chest was pierced by ten ashen limbs, its back exploding outward. Ilea punched her flat hand into its throat and crushed its spine, hearing the kill notification a moment later.

### **‘ding’ You have defeated [Mind Weaver – lvl 209]**

“These are not your lands,” she said as she stored the body in her necklace, despite it not being a turned citizen of Stormbreach.

Around three minutes had passed already, Ilea moving in circles around the city, closer and closer as she hunted for any hidden demon or the squads they were a part of.

When she reached the walls, she simply blinked through, relying on her sphere alone as she rushed past the abandoned buildings. The sprawling ivy, encroaching trees, and old, cracked stone walls made it seem like the city wasn’t lived in at all.

*Two years since the elven attacks.*

Ilea wondered if Stormbreach had looked the same before then or if nature really had reclaimed so much in such a short time frame.

She suddenly whipped to the right, finding a demon with a single human. The demon had no time to react as he was snatched by Ilea the

flying monster, stabbed through the heart, and carried away like prey.

*Another one.* She stored the corpse and blinked, appearing close to the main square. *Signs of battle.* She noted the destroyed stands and pools of blood leading away from the area. People filled the square, milling about like livestock. *The surviving citizens. More than I thought.*

Now that she was closer, she saw many of their feet were bloodied, their clothes ragged, and their bodies unwashed. It appeared they had been forced to be part of King Demon's 'play' without reprieve.

A familiar pressure exuded from the Mind Weaver floating above the remaining people of Stormbreach. Demon spawn stood amongst them, ready to lash out at any given moment.

*As soon as I kill that Mind Weaver.*

*Well.* She paused only for a moment and walked out of the house she had been hiding in. *Let's see if my acting is any good.*

The Mind Weaver immediately turned her way, the black abyss of its eyes staring into her soul as he spoke into her mind.

*"Healer... have you come to pledge fealty?"*

He hadn't attacked yet, she noticed.

*"Yes, I have."*

She spread her arms and walked closer, trying to make out all the demons in the group of people. There were dozens of them and ten times the number of humans and other species.

*Focus on me, you damn idiot.*

Ilea looked at the Mind Weaver as a loud noise sounded from a distant part of the city.

*I don't have much time.* She sighed and sacrificed a thousand health. *The messy way, then.* A blink brought her into the center of the people.

Her healing activated and brought her health back, the ash from her wings and half her arms exploding outward in an obscuring cloud as her chest started heating up.

The rest of her ashen arms shot out, more and more ash forming and spreading at the same time. She pierced only the heads, repeatedly blinking through the crowd with sixteen ashen limbs as she decimated the demons with fast, focused strikes.

Screams and shouts filled the air around her as she focused fully on her sphere. Ilea hit with precise, quick strikes, carefully balanced so as not to

injure or kill any of the bystanders. Lances of ash formed and shot at the Mind Weaver as a distraction and challenge.

His magic slammed into her mind, not quite comparable to a single Blue Reaper. *Maybe those should be called demons instead*, she thought, seeing many of the warriors and mages among people starting to fight the demons too.

Word had spread, the lizardman having done an excellent job. *Now, before he starts killing them*, Ilea thought and blinked up, seeing the Mind Weaver teleport back and away from her.

Her wings spread and her speed increased, following the demon through the city before, finally, one of her limbs slashed his back. He tumbled down and crashed into a house, his magic expanding around him before a heavy fist slammed into his skull, cracking it against the wall behind him. Rock and bone were splintered, and the room returned to silence.

### ***'ding' You have defeated [Mind Weaver – lvl 179]***

Ilea turned and blinked, flying back to the square where the remaining demons were engaged with the survivors.

It wasn't the same massacre as in Ravenhall or Morhill, the demons too low in level and lacking an advantage in numbers. And yet, they were still dangerous.

She landed amongst them, her ash cutting through the beasts with ease. She used some of her limbs to heal those badly injured. Weaving through the monsters and people, her fists and limbs delivered heavy blows.

Ilea spun her head to the side as something flew past her. A white-haired woman clad in a black cloak, followed by a massive demonic pursuer. The monstrous beast jumped from rooftop to rooftop, shouting at the top of his lungs.

Ilea's smile went wide. *It's him.*

Ilea killed four more demons and checked the people around her. Spotting the lizardman from before, he gave her a nod.

"Move the injured to the center," she said. "We'll take care of them afterward."

She blinked and once again spread her wings.

The spirit was fast. But so was the demon. He caught up to the Lady, the two tumbling through the air before they crash-landed on the cobbled road,

stone cracking under the force.

The Lady of Benevolence had shed her fair and wondrous disguise, her teeth and claws slashing at the armored demon. He ignored the strikes, lashing out at her and digging deep with his own claws before throwing her aside.

Ilea landed before them and smiled. She saw the Lady cough and growl as the demon turned to look at the newcomer. It was the same demon she had faced before. In Ravenhall.

*Faced and lost to.*

She smiled, her heartbeat picking up. "I'm your opponent."

"The king has no opponents, huntress!" he slurred, brandishing his claws. "You... you were there, in the cold city!"

He charged – then vanished...

...and reappeared right in front of her, his claw slamming down on her.

Ilea raised her arm and caught the claw, her legs bent and pushed into the ground. The cobblestones moved and cracked slightly. Her ashen armor held, and she smiled, feeling the heat in her chest that had been building since she'd reached the square.

*Time for a rematch.*

Heat and fire surged forth, turning stone to ash and setting the very air on fire as the stored-up heat was released in a sphere around her. The heat wave sent the demon staggering back. He groaned, his skin burnt, and one of his eyes burned shut.

"Yeah, I think this will be fun," Ilea murmured, joy in her voice as she charged.

"I—"

She crashed into him, sending the two of them tumbling through the street, impacting the cobbled road before they hit the side of a building, tearing through a stone wall and crashing down again.

They stumbled up, Ilea dodging past the demon's fast strikes, deflecting one of his arms and punching his stomach to drive all her intrusion spells into him. Magic flared into her enemy as the demon pulled himself up from the ground and spat blood onto her ashen armor.

She jumped back to avoid another strike, grinning as she stepped backward, avoiding the enraged demon's attacks, his strikes powerful and fast. But she had faced plenty of dangerous beings by now. Beings more powerful than this one.

Ilea found an opening on the sixteenth strike and stepped close, slamming her fist into his jaw, a second punch slamming into his chest, throwing the demon back.

Her hand rushed out and grabbed his massive clawed foot, spinning him before she threw him toward a house. Ilea followed the flying demon and crashed into him right when they reached the house, the two of them breaking through three walls before they came out on the street beyond.

A clawed hand shot up and grabbed at her head, another roar sending spittle and blood onto her ash. The claws slowly pierced her ashen armor – right until Ilea slammed her fist down on his skull, hitting him a second and a third time.

Destruction flashed through his brain, and the collective force of her fists and empowered body, as well as the demon's heavy skull, turned the cobblestones below them to dust. Finally, she stopped and charged Absolute Destruction.

The demon started moving again after a few seconds, clawing at her with both arms but barely finding purchase against the powerful ashen defense. Finally, he managed to get through the ash on her face, only to get his claw caught in the bone below.

Ilea felt his claws dig into her left eye, blinding her partially, and blood started to pour down her face. She could feel the power gather in her right fist, the Azarint runes glowing brighter.

“I’ll see you in hell, demon.”

She sacrificed a thousand points of health, blue runes flashing before her fist slammed into and through his skull, then into the ground with a dull *thump*, stone cracking. Bone exploded outward, and whatever was inside was smashed to a pulp.

Ilea staggered up. She ripped his clawed hand out of her helmet and jumped back, her armor of ash and eye reforming. *No notification.* She smiled, ashen limbs forming behind her and spears above. *Nearly as tough as I am.*

She watched his headless body twitch, tissue slowly reforming.

*Let’s not tempt fate.*

Ashen spears, followed by sixteen limbs, slammed into the creature’s body, destructive healing mana pumping inside as she sliced, diced, and cut through every bit of the demon.

Finally, a noise rang in her mind. Meditation was already flowing through her as she looked down at the minced remains hanging on to the demon's bones, only the skull destroyed.

**'ding' You have defeated [Frenzy King – lvl 340] – For defeating an enemy twenty or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted**

**'ding' Azarinh Fighting reaches 3rd lvl 13**

**'ding' True Ash Creation reaches 3rd lvl 9  
'ding' Heart of Cinder reaches 3rd lvl 2**

She breathed out and smiled, her mana regenerating quickly.

*Not as clean as the rest. Tough one. But I guess he's not been fighting a lot of opponents at his level. Should've gone farther north.*

Ilea collected the body, then ascended and flew back. The fight had taken them a sizable distance away from the square.

She landed amidst the people and checked the situation. The demons had been taken care of, and the injured were being healed by none other than the Spirit of Blood.

The name was apt, too, as the woman was literally making the injured drink her blood to heal. She glanced at Ilea and sighed, a smile on her lips. "You made it."

"I did," Ilea replied, looking around. "How many have died?"

"Three," came the reply. There was hurt in her voice.

"I'm sorry," Ilea said, and she meant it. She knew that with more people and preparation, they might've had zero casualties. But the two Mind Weavers had complicated things. Once she'd started killing demons, the situation had changed.

"It is done," the Lady said quietly.

Ilea nodded and made some distance to the crowd.

While most of the others were celebrating, crying, and hugging each other, the lizardman she'd talked to first came up to her.

"You killed him, then?" he asked. "Didn't think a sssingle Shadow could take him out."

"You haven't seen me fight," Ilea said.

"I know. But he regenerateess..."

Ilea smiled. “I regenerate harder.”

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## A Slice of Life

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“You will have all the support we can give, but first, we must rebuild, look for survivors, and clear out the rest of the demons,” Collin said as he walked through the square with Ilea.

“Do you really want to stay in the city? There aren’t a lot of you left.” She estimated the survivors to be barely a hundred.

Collin smiled, turning to look at the Lady as she talked to each of them. “Some will leave. But this is our city. Here we will stand, here we will remain.”

Ilea nodded. She could get behind the sentiment.

“I can send word to Riverwatch. Maybe you have some refugees there that would like to return,” she said, following his gaze.

“I would very much appreciate that. The tunnels here are vast, well known by us, and filled with enchantments. We will move down as we rebuild. Winter will come to an end soon, a blessing amongst all the loss.”

Collin smiled, then bowed to her. “Should we remain in power here, you will always find refuge within these walls. Aid and whatever else you might need, Lilith, Medic Sentinel and Savior of Stormbreach.”

“Let’s just keep it at Lilith,” she said, walking toward the cheerful people, finally freed of their monster king.

*Back to their spirit queen.*

“We only have another hour or two of daylight. We should find shelter for the night,” Collin said as they reached the spirit.

“And so we will,” the Lady nodded. “Will you remain with us tonight?” She addressed Ilea with a warm smile.

“I should report to Riverwatch, and I have a date with a friend.”

“I understand. The fallen, did you bring them with you?” the Lady asked, concern in her eyes.

“I did. Where should I leave them?”

“The temple.” The spirit spoke with a quiet voice and led the way. “We will burn them. And cleanse this city of the demonic corruption.”

Ilea quirked an eyebrow as she watched the slender spirit move the massive steel doors. *Spirits. Well, she is an Awakened of sorts.*

Light poured in through the ruined ceiling, rubble littering the beautiful carpet in the vast hall. Various statues decorated the wall. Some of them were destroyed, others merely chipped.

“Here,” the Lady said.

They stood in front of an altar, and Ilea quickly summoned all the demons she had killed in and around Stormbreach, placing them on top of the flat stone surface. Many of the survivors had followed the group into the temple, whether out of interest or merely to stay safe with the most powerful beings in town.

“I can collect some wood,” Ilea said.

The Lady smiled and shook her head with closed eyes. “That will not be necessary, Sentinel.”

She turned and floated upward, stopping when she was above the corpses.

“Citizens of Stormbreach. Your suffering ends today. You will not be forgotten. May you find rest.”

With that, a pulse of mana flashed through the temple. Ilea wasn’t sure what had happened until she saw the bodies light up in her sphere. A moment later, flames flickered to life. Flames that burned the very blood of the dead.

Soon, the whole altar was aflame, the Lady of Stormbreach floating above it all. Tears of blood fell from her face, hissing as they landed in the flames.

Ilea watched the ceremony, breathing deep and occasionally glancing at some of the awed onlookers. *Savior of Stormbreach.* She looked at her fist.

The air was cool when she stepped back outside, a breeze flowing through the main square, still marred by blood and gore.

The city looked deserted, lost. And yet the warmth of the flames could be felt all the way outside. The smoke rose in the evening sunlight, a contrast to the mostly clear sky.

“Dramatic, that ssspirit,” the lizardman said as he joined her, stretching before he checked his belt and weapons.

“She means well,” Ilea said and smiled.

“Tearss of blood? To each their own,” he commented as he stepped past her. “Will you remain here, Shadow, Ssavior of Ssstormbreach?”

Ilea shook her head.

He moved his head back slightly. “I ssee. Monssters to hunt. Citiesss to sssave.”

She didn’t comment on it. “You’re staying?”

“Not much of a builder, me. More townsss remain to be looted in the wesst. It will be interessting to sssee what remains,” he said with a smirk.

“I see. Let’s hope there isn’t a maniac demon king there too.”

He chuckled. “I cannot ssay that thiss won’t make for a good tale. It had to end, one day or the next. Either that or he would have taken all the landsss. I would have been a captain, at least,” he mused.

“Or demon food,” Ilea said as Collin walked out of the temple to join them.

“Aye, or demon food.”

Collin stepped up to her and bowed. “Thank you again.” He glanced at the lizardman but didn’t address him. “Can we expect your return in the near future?”

“Probably not in the near future,” Ilea replied. “But you never know what may come up. I’ll make sure a representative of the Sentinels will be in touch.”

“Of course.” He bowed once more. “We will not delay you any further, then.”

“Give the Lady my regards,” Ilea said before walking down the stairs leading to the temple, her wings spreading.

\* \* \*

Ilea covered the way back in considerably less time than it took her to get to Stormbreach. The weight of carrying the team hadn’t slowed her down as

much as the additional navigation and the sheer wind resistance of their bodies.

The suns had nearly set when she landed near Riverwatch, covering the last bit of distance on foot. The sky was colored a dark red, nearly purple. Big storm clouds were visible in the north.

Birds still chirped in the forest around the big sprawling city, unbothered by the cold or the people. Spring was on its way.

Ilea reached the gates and was let in without much trouble. She heard some of the guards whispering about Lilith.

*Report to Alistair? Or should I wait and see if Maro shows up?* He wasn't around yet, and she had an inkling that he wouldn't show up to their meeting place as discussed.

She rolled her shoulders. *I'm the Savior of Stormbreach already. Let's talk to Alistair tomorrow and take tonight off.*

She decided to wait for a while and have dinner. If Maro didn't show up, she would go look for him.

After around twenty minutes had passed, Ilea was just about to go and look for Maro. The sunlight was mostly gone, the guards' lanterns and torches the only light remaining nearby. She stored the empty wooden box of food in her necklace and jumped down from the roof. No guard had actually bothered her up there, despite the clear rule violation.

“We made it,” a voice came from near the gate. Ilea looked around to see the heavy metal gate opening wide enough to allow the Hunters and guards from earlier inside.

*Oh, nice. I can have them report what happened.*

“You’re alive,” she said to the group of survivors, mud and blood covering their gear.

“Fuuck, I have to get this clean by tomorrow,” one of them whined.

“We are,” the lead Hunter said. “And you’re back too. Did you find out anything about the demons and Stormbreach?”

The rest walked closer, interested in what she had to say.

Ilea stepped over to one of them and healed the wound on his arm while also forming an ashen mist that she casually moved over their gear to clean them off. She winked at the man who had complained after seeing his relieved expression.

“I did. And took care of the problem. A high-level demon in the company of two Mind Weavers had taken the city. Called himself King

Demon and forced the survivors who remained within the walls to play along. Not the worst that could've happened, I think, otherwise they would have all been dead," Ilea explained.

"A demon calling itself king," the huntress murmured. "Are you sure it's done already? We just got back."

"I'm sure. But let me know if the monsters in the forest keep behaving strangely. I can join a few hunts if necessary."

The woman nodded. "Yeah. We'll let you know if anything else comes up, Shadow."

"Could you report this to Alistair? And maybe spread the word to any refugees from Stormbreach? The Sanctuary Healing Order is still around, and they're trying to rebuild."

"Of course. I will get word to him immediately. Come on, guys."

"What about beers?!" one of the men said.

"Right after."

Ilea watched them leave. *Crazy to think I went there, did the job, and arrived back before them.* She summoned her wings and hugged them close for a moment. *So convenient. So fast. So cool. Now... where do I find a runaway necromancer?*

She wondered for a moment if she should go and find him or if she should visit the Vultures by herself.

*Would be faster without him, but he seemed interested. And they will lose their minds about his power.*

She sniffed the air and checked the mana around her. There was no trace of Maro around, but it was way past their agreed-upon time.

"Any gambling halls around here?" she asked one of the nearby guards, who explained where to find it.

She flew to the spot, casual clothes appearing on her right before she landed quietly amidst the crowd outside. Some eyes glanced her way, but she moved past them quickly.

Again, she checked with Sentinel Huntress. A faint trace of Maro remained, leading away from the area. Ilea followed, rushing through the dirt and cobbled roads as fast as her sense of smell allowed.

The trace got stronger, more of an actual lead now. Maro had been here recently. Sometimes it vanished entirely but then picked up again a couple of dozen meters away. *Teleportation.*

Finally, the trace led her to a bar, warm light glowing behind the murky glass windows. Ivy was growing along the façade of the two-story building.

The door creaked when she opened it, a jingle coming from above as she stepped inside. *Small but cozy.* Warm light came from oil lanterns placed in various spots. The wooden walls were lined with paintings depicting violent battles as well as various adventurers in armor and mages in their elaborate robes.

“Evening,” the man behind the bar said with an accent Ilea couldn’t place.

She nodded his way and found Maro in her sphere. “What beers do you have?”

“Various. Wheat, ale, something darker?” the barkeeper asked, looking at her with an easy smile.

“I prefer ale,” Ilea said.

The man nodded and grabbed a glass. “Riders is pretty good. Brewery is nearby, too.”

She gave him a nod and watched as he poured the ale.

*On tap. Looks nearly like a pub from Earth.* She looked around once more. Few patrons were occupying the two floors. *No oil lamps, and the smell is definitely more... present. Cool vibe, though.*

She placed two copper coins on the counter. “Thanks.”

Ilea walked up the stairs to the sound of raucous laughter coming from a corner of the room. A group of four men and women, all looking rather tough, were listening to none other than the former King of Rhyvor. Even the upper-floor barkeeper had joined them, it seemed. A slow night.

“Turns out they were wrong. Not only is fighting in underwear a bad idea, it’s even worse when three Shredders appear out of nowhere,” Maro said, lifting his glass to take a deep drink.

“Aren’t those the wind magic worms? They surround you and then attack,” one of the adventurers said, summoning a small flame in his hand. “I’d have a hard time against one.”

“No,” a woman frowned. “They attack with their bones, hundreds of little teeth.”

“Either of you ever even seen one?” the barkeeper asked.

Neither replied.

“Ah, fuck,” Maro said and shot up, spreading his arms. “There she is, Lilith herself. Demon slayer and Shadow of the North. And I... am late.”

He smiled brightly.

Ilea changed into her bone armor and spread her ashen wings. “You are, necromancer king,” she said. “Which means... the rest of the drinks are on you.”

The group looked at her with differing expressions. Two of them had tensed up a little, but no swords had been drawn or spells cast.

*An experienced bunch.* She smiled and stored her armor again.

“I was just going to ask if you could cover the bill. She’s rich, you see,” Maro said, gesturing her way.

“That’s her? I wouldn’t have believed it without seeing that armor and those wings,” a big man said. “Battle-healer too... Yeah, can imagine that being nasty.” He gave her a meaningful nod.

Ilea nodded back and joined them, ignoring Maro’s attempt to get her to pay.

“Rough day, Shadow?” one of them asked.

“Not too bad,” Ilea said.

“Heard you’d taken on the job in the western forest. Any news?” another one asked.

“Bunch of demons had taken over Stormbreach.”

“Had?”

“Yeah, took care of it.”

“Oh, yeah, I can see that,” Maro said. “We can work on the performance, but you’re better than I’d thought. You’ll need more impressive clothing for casual situations. To flaunt your wealth.”

“I have no interest in flaunting anything,” Ilea said.

“You were just flaunting your power and magic,” he pointed out.

Ilea raised her eyebrows. “True. I do like my magic a lot.” She summoned a bit of ash, which floated around her arm before coalescing into a sphere around the top of her drink. “But do go on with your story.”

He gave her an amused look. It was clear he very much enjoyed the enraptured looks of interest the other adventurers were giving them – or, perhaps more importantly, him.

Ilea smiled to herself and sipped from her ale, listening to the rest of Maro’s story.

*I can see the appeal. They looked at me the same way when I talked to the Hunters at the gates about Stormbreach.*

But she found that something about it felt wrong. Attention was one thing, but these were local adventurers. Any of her recent stories would impress them. So was it wrong to tell them about them? Or to enjoy some attention?

She thought about it for a while, seeing Maro ensnare them with his charm.

It was interesting to see. And she realized that she didn't want that. She didn't want to experience things to impress others. She wanted to explore and fight for the sheer sake of it, or to help out in one way or another.

The quick reveal about her being Lilith was fun, but she could tell that there was already a barrier between Maro and the adventurers. They adored him, looked up to him, saw his power, if only through Identify, but they weren't equals.

*No wonder he nearly formed a cult by accident. Guess there were more reasons than just Elana's plans and some fleeting feeling of responsibility that made you play the part of king for as long as you did.*

She caught his eye and smiled, Maro smiling back at her.

*Ilea looked at her ale and drank. Yeah. I think I'll try to stay just Ilea as much as I can. Lilith is there to intimidate and fight, not to gather a following of sycophants.*

“Fucking hell. I wish I'd been there,” one of the women said.

“It was... a while ago,” Maro said.

Ilea sipped her ale. *We need all these brewers in the north.*

“That's it for me, though,” the necromancer said as he finished his drink, standing up.

“Already?” another one of the women said. “I know some places you might like.”

“Some other time. But duty calls,” he added, teleporting behind Ilea.

The group blinked at the quick movement.

Ilea finished her ale too and stood up. “Enjoy your evening,” she said as Maro waved at the group. She blinked out and up before spreading her wings.

“You could have stayed, you know,” Ilea said as Maro flew up next to her.

He didn't say anything for a moment. “Not the same when you're around. I can feel you judging me.”

“Oh? Intimidated by little ol' Lilith?”

He just looked at her.

“It’s fine, Maro. You can do whatever you want.”

“I know.”

“Do you still feel like meeting the necromancers?”

He nodded. “Yeah. They do sound very interesting. Sorry that I didn’t come and help. Heard you were evaluating recruits too. You’re already becoming some kind of urban legend in these parts.”

“I could handle it fine, no worries,” Ilea said. “And yeah, I guess it’s not a bad thing to have Lilith be known in Riverwatch as well.”

“Your friends are planning to spread their influence here?”

Ilea smiled. “If it can help out, why not?”

“Sure. Just be aware that the more you involve yourself, the more work there will be,” Maro said, stretching. “It’s so freeing to be gone from Rhyvor once and for all.”

“I’m not signing up to be queen, Maro,” Ilea said and winked at him. “Come on, then. Let’s surprise Walter with two level three hundred intruders.”

THIRTY

## The Vultures

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Ilea led Maro into the forest, the trees hiding their flight through the increasingly rocky terrain. She landed near the hidden entrance to the Calys mine.

“Should be around here.”

“They’re in hiding, aren’t they? Sure you just want to bring in a stranger?” Maro asked.

“Are you nervous?” Ilea smiled. “What are you going to do? Report them for being necromancers?”

He sent a beam of death magic at her, slamming into her face. The black beam turned purple as she laughed.

“Stop it, you’re going to give away our position,” she said, her skin regenerating as quickly as it decayed.

“Your healing is insane,” Maro sighed and stopped his attack, shaking his head.

**‘ding’ Death Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 1**

**Death Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 1**

*Common in the deepest and most depraved parts of the world, the magic of death itself seeks nothing but to destroy, to rot and kill. It is difficult to survive, but to someone like you, what is death but another challenge?*

**2nd stage: Necromancers, blood mages, and death mages hate you. Your blood, bones, and body are mostly unusable in their rituals.**

“Well, that’s stupid,” Ilea grumbled.

“What?” Maro asked, looking around.

Ilea walked to the hidden entrance and blinked into the cave, followed by the necromancer. “I just got the second tier to Death Magic Resistance.”

“From that spell?” Maro asked. “Of course you did.” He rolled his eyes. “And there go all my plans for an undead Lilith.”

“I could have just removed my head and left you with the rest of the body,” Ilea joked.

“Doesn’t work, sadly. Good thing too, otherwise there would be some pretty fucking gruesome practitioners. The being needs to be properly dead to be resurrected as an undead,” he explained.

“Good to know.”

“Your blood is useless too now. That’s a shame. Congratulations, though. You’re now even harder to kill.”

“I was hoping for *you cannot die*,” she said as she walked toward the Vultures’ secret entrance in the cavern.

“Maybe at the third tier,” Maro replied in a dry tone. “That entrance is enchanted.”

“I can see that.” Ilea said, blinking inside. Nothing seemed to happen, so Maro followed.

“Just to hide it?” he commented, looking back. “They will be found if the city guard ever looks for them.”

Ilea shrugged. “No reason to. They mostly just live here. Plenty of corpses to get from all the battlefields and the cities in the west, I’m sure.”

He nodded and followed her down the stairs.

“*You have returned.*”

The voice spoke directly into her mind, the demon waiting for them in the rough stone corridor leading further into the hideout.

“They were taken over?” Maro asked as his magic surged. “A shame.”

“That’s Weavy!” Ilea shouted, stepping between them. “He’s part of their group.”

She went over to hug the demon, then let go.

“I’m glad you’re still around. Have you assimilated into human life?”

Weavy smiled as best he could.

“How have you been? You detected us so quickly?”

Weavy spread his arms, showing the sharp claws on his hands. “I was merely on my way to hunt tomorrow’s breakfast. Everyone must contribute. They do not allow fish summoning inside anymore. Not after... the incident.”

“Fish summoning?” Maro asked. “That sounds interesting. Weavy, was it? I’m Maro. Nice to meet you.” He walked up to the demon and grabbed his hand, shaking it with enthusiasm and a big smile. “You weren’t kidding. This is amazing,” he said, looking back at Ilea.

Black lightning cracked as Walter appeared, his eyes completely black and his voice booming with an ethereal power. “Who trespasses in this crypt?”

Ilea raised a hand, causing her ash to recede and her bone armor to be replaced with casual clothes. “Crypt? Really?” she asked, laughing.

Maro turned his attention to Walter and let go of the demon, patting him on the back.

“A Dark Sorcerer above two hundred... fascinating. Nice to meet you.” He walked up to him and went for an actual hug. “I’m Maro, necromancer and former king of Rhyvor. Dark sorcerer... can you believe it?” he asked as he glanced back at Ilea.

“Ilea, you’ve grown... again.” Walter seemed tired. “Who’s this guy?”

\* \* \*

After some brief explanations, they soon walked toward the common room.

It still looked much less roughly constructed than the hallways leading up to it. Warm light came from the flickering flames in the hearth as well as the various lanterns hanging on the stone walls.

Ilea joined Walter at the bar as he prepared some drinks. “How have things been?” she asked. “Everyone still alive?”

“Yes. Some close calls in the west. Lately, a group of Baralia-led adventurers west of Riverwatch have caused problems. But the boy is still here. While I don’t think Weavy is a very... traditional teacher, Eyn seems to like him. His progress has been good.” Walter gave her a long look. “You’ve been on quite a journey.”

“I haven’t even told you where I was,” Ilea said.

“I can tell. And not just because of your levels.”

“Yeah. Plenty to tell you about.”

“I would love to hear it all. Hmm, might have some food left for you as well.” Walter smiled. “Sorry, you arrived so suddenly. It’s been a while. And it’s good to see that you’re still alive. Welcome back.”

“Thanks, Walter,” Ilea said, leaning back a little. “It’s nice to have a few places to come back to. And it’s good to see that you’re doing alright.” She looked around the room for a moment. “I didn’t just come to visit Riverwatch either. Though, now that I’ve gotten to level three hundred, I could come and help out, if there’s anything you could use a Shadow for.”

Walter smiled, setting down a platter full of cold cuts and cheeses. He went to cut some bread. “I appreciate it, Ilea. But things have been more or less calm here lately. We don’t try to get too involved with Riverwatch, and building our home down here in these caverns had a point, you know?”

“Right. Well, it’s good to be back anyway.”

“Eat, and then you can tell us of your adventures, Lady Shadow,” Walter said and gave her a nod.

She took a few of the cold cuts and started eating. *To think I came here at, what, level eighty or something? And we fought a Mind Weaver together.*

Indra, Harthome, Celene, and Neeto, as well as the initiates and Eyn, soon joined them, excited to have guests in their so-called crypt. Ilea ate and told them of her adventures in the north, Maro adding bits and pieces here and there.

It felt nice, she found, and she saw the difference between this environment and the bar before. The Vultures weren’t awed by her magic or her stories. They listened because they knew her – and because they cared.

\* \* \*

Nearly two hours passed, Walter bringing out more drinks and food before he started plucking away at his lute, sometimes adding a tune to one small adventure or another that Ilea or Maro retold.

Lucia nearly had to gag Celene when Ilea mentioned meeting and befriending elves. It was no surprise to her that Celene was interested in the Awakened, but she seemed to prefer dangerous beings first and foremost. The Feynor were also an object of their questioning.

As were Ilea's evolutions, though it wasn't her power or how her magic evolved that was of interest but the fact that she'd stayed entirely human. A grave mistake, according to Celene, and a source of massive disappointment. The woman had been sure there would be an option to evolve into something "hotter" at some point. She made sure everyone knew that it was a big dream of hers.

Ilea found the thought amusing, wondering what kind of creature Celene would end up as if she actually went out there and fought a bunch of monsters.

Walter's face was resting on his hands. "Quite a lot to take in," he said ultimately, watching Ilea eat the remains of their winter supply.

"You mean the food? I know, I do eat a lot," Ilea said after swallowing.

He sighed. "That too. But more so your tale. And what you shared about the elves, Taleen, and Awakened. The world out there is bigger than I'd ever thought."

"It is," Ilea said. *With plenty more places I'll want to explore.*

"I would like to know more about this Goliath fellow," Harthome said. The smith had listened attentively when the Awakened had come up. "I would like to see his craft."

Ilea didn't know if Goliath had made it, but she could imagine it being something in his league. Her hammer appeared in her hand before she moved it over the table. "It's very heavy," she said.

The smith took one look at it and started laughing. "Please..." he said, hurriedly getting up and extending his hands, the table rattling as his knee hit it in his haste. "That is... olvor, isn't it?"

Ilea blinked over to him before she placed the hammer on the stone floor with a dull sound.

"I want to hear more about the elves!" Celene shouted, escaping Lucia's grasp.

Lucia cursed and sighed. "No keeping that one in check."

Indra had been silent throughout most of the story, occasionally glancing at Maro.

"You can talk to him, he doesn't bite," Ilea said as she sat back down.

"Are you sure? I don't... want to be a bother," he whispered.

Maro overheard her and smiled. "Ask your questions, necromancer."

*Acting like you're that much more knowledgeable. Just because you're at a higher level,* Ilea thought, enjoying the sight of Harthome and a few of

the initiates trying and failing to lift her hammer.

“Too weak,” Grandpa Bones said, glaring at Ilea with his glowing eyes.

“You’re an Awakened too, aren’t you?” she asked. Initially, she hadn’t really questioned the skeletal being, but now, after all this time, she’d not met a single one like him anywhere else.

He laughed. “Oh, my existence will remain a mystery, young healer.”

Ilea smiled. “Sure, Grandpa.”

She leaned back and drank more of the best ale she’d ever tasted. Ilea sighed, watching Eyn try and use his mind magic on Maro, the smith still struggling with the hammer, and Walter playing a slow tune on his lute.

She’d come here to catch up and maybe help out the Vultures, but it just felt nice to be there. She supposed it wasn’t a surprise that she’d enjoyed their company so much when she’d met them initially. They were all oddballs in their own way, yet even now that she’d reached the three hundreds, while normal adventurers stared at her in awed confusion, they welcomed her as a friend.

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## The Word of a Shadow

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“You get fast results. I got the reports and questioned if any of it was real. But seeing you here puts my doubts at ease,” Alistair said.

Ilea had left for Riverwatch that morning and made her way to the city hall. She’d had to ask, and slightly intimidate, some local guards to find the place. Alistair’s office was simple and austere, though the doors possessed powerful defensive enchantments. The man knew how to focus his budget.

He looked at her over his desk, resting his elbows against the dark wooden table. “A demon king in Stormbreach, then?”

Ilea nodded. “An escaped demon from Ravenhall and a few Mind Weavers had taken over the city,” she said before giving him a brief rundown of the events.

Alistair listened intently. “Only a Shadow would recount such terrifying events so casually. I’m glad that you resolved this issue for Stormbreach. We’ll see if the monsters in the western forests return to their usual behavior.”

He opened a desk drawer, retrieved a small pouch, and set it down. “Here’s your payment for the job, even though I understand that it was more complex than what you signed up for.”

“I enjoyed myself. And it let me settle an old score,” Ilea said with a grin, taking the gold without checking it. She got the feeling he wanted to say more.

Alistair stood up and stepped over to the window behind his desk. “I’ve talked to Dale and Valery.” He turned to look at her. “They put a lot of trust in you. And I understand that you may be willing to help out further.”

“I’m listening.”

“About two months ago, a woman was found dead. There were bite marks on her neck, and her skull was fractured. She was part of a group of refugees from Baralia, and the rest of them are nowhere to be found. Now, there have been more disappearances in the past years due to the war, the elven attacks, and the demons. I wouldn’t think about hiring a Shadow to investigate an incident like this, but it’s become clear that there are parties involved in this affair that make it difficult for me to move.”

“You’re talking about officials in Riverwatch?”

“Officials, guards, nobles. I don’t have any evidence, and because of how deep this goes, I can’t hire or pay you officially.”

“So you want me to find out who killed that woman and who’s responsible for the disappearances? And to find the evidence that goes with it.”

“Yes, essentially. There is a lead that we have been made aware of, but several people that I trust suggest that it might be too obvious. I’ll share the details with you as it’s still the best place to start. A wealthy gentleman named Kevan. He arrived in Riverwatch around thirty years ago, has acquired a sizeable mansion, and has stayed inside most of the time. There have been rumors going around about him for a long time, some of them suggesting an affinity for blood magic and an interest in, let’s say, a more unusual appliance.”

“You’re being very vague.”

Alistair nodded. “That’s why I’m asking you to investigate. We found traces of blood from the victim leading to his mansion, and several of the locals in the area who have met him are wary of the man. It will be difficult to even get to talk to him, but as I understand it, he is more willing to converse with those who are... interesting. I assume you should fall into that category.”

Ilea narrowed her eyes. “Blood, bite marks, staying inside... does he only come out at night too?”

Alistair gave her a meaningful look. “Yes, that’s one peculiarity that we’ve noticed. If he is the one responsible, then this should be simple. But I have a feeling there’s more going on, and perhaps he may be willing to

share some insight as to why someone might want to pin this murder on him. He's been around for a while, and while there have been rumors, there haven't been outright accusations, which leads me to believe that he may just be your average eccentric, and people love to pin any misfortune on those they see as different. But of course, my intuition could be wrong, and the obvious lead is just that. Once we have concrete evidence, I'll be able to pay you for your services."

*A murderer and potentially a vampire? Sounds like fun. Interesting that he's asking me for help as well. Is it really just my high level?*

"You should know that my talents are more suited to killing monsters than investigating murders and looking for evidence," Ilea warned.

Alistair smiled weakly, his eyes focused. "The problem we've had here is more related to association. As long as you don't openly share what we have discussed here, I don't think subtlety is a major concern. What I need is *exactly* someone like you. If you are willing."

She breathed in deep and smiled.

\* \* \*

Ilea got the information she needed and made her way to the Noble District. She had been there before to visit Alice during the Riverwatch tournament.

*It's really been quite a while. I was so sad when I saw that my bed was destroyed in the attacks. And now I have a bed with me at all times.*

She stopped in front of an abandoned-looking estate, the two stories covered in unkempt vines, red roses growing wild in the garden. The suns were low on the horizon by now, coloring the ramshackle structure in a golden hue.

*And I even have ashen pillows now too.*

She touched the steel-grated gates and moved them slightly, enjoying the ominous creaking that came from them. She moved them back and forth for a few seconds and then proceeded into the gardens.

"Hello?" Ilea called out as she walked through the tangled rose bushes, summoning her ashen armor to protect her legs against the thorns.

She reached the building's large wooden door, noting the carvings that had once adorned it had mostly faded. There was a rusted steel door

knocker that she gently struck, hoping that the whole thing wouldn't crumble. She waited for a little while, then used it again – harder this time.

She couldn't see any movement inside the house through her sphere, and on the third knock, one of the hinges gave. Ilea stood there while the heavy door creaked inward, the weight snapping the second hinge before the whole thing crashed loudly down into the entry hall.

"Well..." Ilea looked at the floor and realized there wasn't any dust. She glanced behind her and stepped into the hall. "Hello? I might have broken your door."

She only got a moment to take in the paintings and flowers decorating the space, her gaze stopping on a broad mural depicting a battle, before a figure appeared in the hallway before her.

He was a man with graying black hair, thin and nearly two meters tall. He wore a long black leather coat that was worn with age. He took a sharp breath and sighed, glaring at her with fierce red eyes.

Ilea watched him step closer. He glanced at her, then at the door on the floor, then back at her. Raising his arm, a silver flintlock-like pistol appeared in his hands, aimed at her chest.

"You broke my door."

Ilea leaned in a little closer, trying to inspect the gun. She'd not seen anything like it so far in Elos. "Is that a gun?"

"Why are you here?"

### **[Mage – lvl 219]**

Ilea tried to look ominous, even without her bone or ashen armor. She took a few steps to the side and looked up at the mural. "A woman was murdered. And you're the prime suspect."

The man sighed and lowered his pistol. "This is the third time since I moved here. If you don't have any evidence, you need to leave and pay for the door."

"They found two bite marks on her neck and blood leading to your mansion." She pointed at her own canines and smiled. "Kinda fits the description, eh?"

The man looked thoughtful for a moment, then the gun vanished from his hand. "You don't seem overly concerned or particularly invested. Who are you working for?"

“I’m a Shadow, currently working independently. I was made aware of this murder and that you may be involved.”

She turned around, grabbed the massive door, then casually raised it and leaned it against the entrance. She didn’t get the feeling that she had found and confronted a murderer. If anything, he seemed exasperated. She got the feeling that Alistair was right. There was more going on here. It would be fun to find out what it was.

“You don’t strike me as someone who would be that obvious with their murdering. Any clue who may be responsible?”

He raised his eyebrows. “You break down my door, enter my home uninvited, accuse me of murder, and now you’re asking me to solve your case?”

“Yes. Pretty much that. Can I see that gun again, though? That looked cool as fuck.”

His nostrils flared in annoyance. “No, you cannot. And your request is ridiculous.”

“Maybe, but you’re currently the main suspect, so either you’re lying to me or someone wants to pin this on you. You tell me if you know anything, and I’ll help sort this out. How does that sound?”

“Can’t just be left alone, can I? Very well, independent Shadow, I’ll humor you as it seems I don’t have another choice. But seeing how someone chose to involve me in all of this, I’ll join your investigation. Agreed?”

*I get to have a buddy cop detective adventure? Nice.*

Ilea clapped her hands together. “Perfect. So who’s got you on their shit list?”

He sighed but nodded and led her to an office where he started going through some documents and letters, working in silence before he settled on one piece of paper.

Ilea couldn’t help but notice the black-out curtains and the faint smell of blood. “Did you find something?”

“Maybe,” he said.

Ilea narrowed her eyes. “You’re just waiting for the suns to go down, aren’t you?”

He glanced at her. “You know of our kind?” He didn’t sound surprised or particularly bothered by the revelation.

“Are you going to turn into dust if I open those curtains? And what’s the smell of blood about?”

“I wouldn’t turn into dust, but it would be unpleasant. The blood I bought from willing donors. I’m just checking the receipts right here.”

“You have receipts for buying blood?”

“Yes, because how else would I prove to someone like you that I’m not a blood-sucking monster? I like to keep things documented.”

Ilea chuckled. “I have a friend who would like you.”

“Speaking of documentation, is there a name I can call you by?”

“Lilith works. And you’re Kevan, I presume?”

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## Buddy Cops

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Ilea was a little surprised that they left before the suns had fully set. Kevan looked uncomfortable whenever the light touched him, but other than that, he seemed fine. He led her through the city with intent.

“What?” he asked, glancing over at her.

“You didn’t turn into dust.”

“I didn’t.”

“Where are we going?”

“You’ll see.”

Ilea wanted to learn more about him, but it was obvious that he wasn’t particularly interested in talking to her. Maybe because of the door.

Kevan led her into an area of Riverwatch that seemed more run down than most other parts of the city. He stopped in front of a dilapidated three-story apartment building, then went inside. Ilea followed.

There were six apartments in the building. Small rooms, no runes or enchantments that Ilea could see. They went up to the third floor and stopped in front of a flimsy door.

In her sphere, she saw a young girl with short hair, fifteen or sixteen years old. A seven- or eight-year-old boy was in the room with her, sleeping in a bed. The girl held a crude knife in her right hand. She seemed aware of Ilea and Kevan. Ilea saw how the girl positioned herself between the bed and the entrance.

“Quite aware, that one,” Ilea said, noting how the girl tensed up slightly. She decided to just go with the flow, seeing as Kevan didn’t share a lot with her.

Kevan gave her a glance and then knocked on the door. “Vin? It’s Kevan.”

“What’s my father’s name?” a quiet voice asked.

“His name is Eli. And he isn’t your father,” Kevan replied.

The door was unlocked and opened. Blue eyes stared at them.

The girl took several steps back and watched them.

### **[Rogue – lvl 62]**

“Can we come in?” Kevan asked.

Vin nodded and watched them enter.

“You can’t enter without someone inviting you in?” Ilea asked.

Kevan gave her a confused and annoyed look. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Who’s she?” Vin asked.

“A Shadow,” Kevan said. “Someone has tried to pin a murder on me. Did anything come up or change recently?”

Ilea closed the door behind her.

The girl looked uncertain, glancing at Ilea before her eyes went wide. “You’re a healer!”

“I am,” Ilea said, moving back her hood. She saw the girl’s lips twitch upward ever so slightly.

Vin focused back on Kevan. “Eli was murdered.”

“Oh dear, I’m so sorry,” Kevan said. He stepped closer to her but stopped when she flinched back. “Who told you? Did anybody come to find out more or to tell you not to talk?”

The girl shook her head. “No. I looked into it myself. He told me that he was onto something big. Smugglers. A week later, he didn’t come back. Can I trust her?”

“I don’t know, can she?” Kevan asked, looking at Ilea.

“I’m working on this independently. Did you need a healer?”

Vin moved the knife away from her back but kept a hold of it. “My brother isn’t well. He’s been sick for a week.”

Ilea walked over to the boy's bed. The girl watched her but didn't move in the way immediately, only following with an uncertain look and her knife in hand.

Ilea knelt down next to the old mattress and put a hand on the boy's head. *Fever*. She started to carefully move healing mana through his body. The boy's breathing slowed down, his face relaxing as his fever was removed.

"Just had a fever, also an infection in his left leg. I healed both," Ilea said.

Vin immediately crouched down and pulled back the pant leg and sock below to reveal perfectly healed skin.

"You did it," Vin murmured.

"The smugglers?" Kevan asked.

"They're called the Gray Company. I found a letter Eli left behind," Vin said, her eyes staring into Ilea's.

"Where's the letter?"

Vin led them into another room, closing the door carefully. "I burned it, of course. They killed him. What do you think they would do to me?"

"Why did this Eli investigate smugglers in the city?" Ilea asked. "Wouldn't it be better to work with the guard?"

Vin glanced at Kevan with an uncertain look in her eyes.

"Because the guard turns a blind eye to some of the things going on in this city."

*No wonder Alistair had to ask me to have a look at this. Perhaps this is something I should mention to Dale...*

"Guess we'll have to investigate on our own, then," Ilea said.

"You should be careful," Vin replied.

"Don't worry, I'm a Shadow."

"You don't look like a Shadow."

As Ilea moved her ashen armor over her body, Vin took a step back and raised her knife.

"How about now?"

Vin smiled nervously before she put the knife down. "You will find them?"

"What else did you learn? Is there a place where we can start looking?"

The girl nodded. "A warehouse twenty minutes south of here. Do you know Nal's smithy?"

Ilea looked at Kevan and shrugged. “You’ve been living here for a while, haven’t you?”

“I don’t exactly go to smithies. Everything here is just so... unsophisticated.”

“Compared to what?” Ilea asked, but he just waved her off.

*Is he from another realm too or what?*

“I’ll draw you up a small map,” Vin said. “Do you have anything to write on?”

Ilea summoned her notebook and a pen, handing both to the girl.

She checked the simple map when Vin was done and nodded. “Should be workable,” Ilea murmured. “We should be off, then. Figure out what those smugglers are about.”

Vin looked slightly troubled, glancing between the two of them before she spoke. “If... if you find anything...”

Kevan gave her a nod. “If we find anything that belonged to Eli, we’ll bring it back.”

They left the apartment, Ilea waiting outside for a few moments before Kevan joined her. “You get blood from them?”

“I do. Occasionally. There are other donors, and I pay them well. Both for the blood and for their silence.”

Ilea gave him a look and then nodded. “You knew Eli?”

“I did,” he said. “A good man. I’d like to say that I would’ve offered my help, had he come to ask for it.”

“But...?”

“He didn’t come to ask. And now he’s dead. And the foster children he took in are without a guardian once more.” He sighed and looked up at the dark sky. “Suppose the least I can do is avenge him.”

“Dangerous for someone at your level,” Ilea said, thinking of Trian and the Birmingales. “But then I suppose this isn’t an influential noble House.”

He glanced her way as they made their way toward Nal’s smithy. Ilea summoned her bone armor and smiled. *And I’m not the same either.*

They found the warehouse soon after, a nondescript place. A few workers stood out front and people occasionally came and went with wagons, all filled with various goods. None of it looked particularly suspicious.

Ilea looked down at the broad and simple stone structure from a nearby rooftop.

"Good at infiltration?" she asked Kevan.

"No," he said.

"I'll scout ahead then, see what we're dealing with."

"Do your shadowy business, Shadow," Kevan said with a dry tone.

Ilea smiled and jumped down, landing in a small alley. She wasn't sure what he would do in the meantime.

Two blinks brought her close to the warehouse and into an adjacent building. Wearing her bone and ashen armor, she listened carefully. Her sphere let her see into the warehouse, not obstructed by any enchantments.

Massive crates were stacked up to the high ceiling. She blinked behind one of them. *Potatoes*. There were at least ten crates as tall and wide as herself, if not larger.

Voces were audible but somewhat distant. Dim magical light shone from above. The warehouse was vast, sectioned into various areas with massive stone walls.

Ilea moved only with blinks, quickly mapping out most of the building. None of the cargo seemed particularly interesting to her. Vegetables and grain, mostly.

There were stairs leading down into a cellar with wine barrels lining the walls. Three men and a woman sat at a table playing cards.

*Why have them down there? Just to protect the wine?*

She'd seen some guards as well as workers walking around, but none in a group of four. Perhaps she would have accepted the space to be a break area, but it wasn't like the warehouse didn't offer space. And she'd seen other rooms as well. Rooms that had seemed more comfortable.

Ilea would've likely ignored it on a normal occasion, but based on what she knew, she was pretty sure there was more to it.

The area didn't allow for her to blink down without alerting them. *Time to level my wine resistance*, Ilea thought before she teleported into one of the barrels.

There was barely any air, and her sudden appearance pushed out the little there was. She hoped it didn't make an audible noise that alerted the guards. She held her breath and smiled. *Jackpot*.

Her ashen armor sizzled, acid slowly eating into it. *Wine drinkers really like their exotic stuff*. She watched her ashen armor regenerate continuously. *Weaker stuff than what the Taleen cook up. Not that that was enough either. Maybe I can stay here a little longer*.

Dozens of barrels lined the walls, so Ilea blinked into another barrel at the other end of the long underground hallway leading away from the group at the cellar's entrance.

**'ding' You have been poisoned by Unwitting Brew – You resist the poison**

*Switching it up, at least.*

At the end of the long cellar was a stone wall. Her sphere suggested there was just stone beyond, but she could also see faint magic from the area. The group of guards had their attention on their cards, so she decided to risk it and simply willed herself to appear behind the wall.

Ilea appeared in a dark stairwell leading down. Not a soul was around. She waited for anything to happen, for someone to shout or for running steps to resound from the guards outside.

But nothing happened. The guards seemed to continue playing their game, and whatever enchantments had hidden the entrance didn't seem to have notified someone immediately, nor did they cause an explosion.

Ilea smiled. *Now, let's see what they're hiding down here.*

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## The Gray Company

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“Somebody is here,” the new mage said, suddenly wide awake. His eyebrows quirked up, an expression of surprise on his face. “They’re moving... quickly. Arcane teleportation.”

Mason sighed and put down his pen. The contracts would have to wait. If an intruder got out and informed the wrong guards, he would lose quite a lot more time than this. *Might even fall behind.*

“Come on guys, flush out and incapacitate. Hit to kill if they turn out to be dangerous,” he said, grabbing his backpack full of ash, a shroud of dark gray forming on top of his armor at the same time. “Zair, was it? Show us where the intruder is.”

The mage looked at him with his one working eye, moving a towel to his other one. He dabbed it lightly to draw some moisture away, wincing at the pain.

Half the mage’s face had been burnt up, leaving him in this sorry state. Mason had considered not hiring the man because of his hideous appearance. It was distracting. Still, it was hard to pass up someone as useful as him.

His men got themselves ready, putting on missing armor pieces and preparing their weapons. Maces, swords, bows, daggers, and even that weird one with a whip. All present, all above level one hundred.

If Alistair had hired a Shadow Squad like Nolan had suggested, they had to be ready. Taking out their scout would be the top priority. After that, it

was simply a matter of cleaning up, finding and taking care of those who had talked, and making sure the city didn't have a reason to hire another squad.

"What do you think? Another brave hero?" one of the men asked, slurring his words.

"Are you drunk?" Mason asked. "Pan, get your ass over here and heal him. Anybody else that is still fucked up, line up."

Ash slowly floated out of his pack, a threatening gesture to make them get a move on. He was pretty lenient, all things considered. A mistake, he knew, but he'd had his fair share of annoying and arrogant bosses in his time. He'd promised himself that he wouldn't be like them.

The healer rolled her eyes, slowly getting up from her seat at the table where she'd been eating her breakfast. "You don't get to speak to me like that," she said as she moved up to him, a hand stroking the ash covering his chest. "We don't want something like that coming up in my monthly report now, do we?"

Mason glared at her and nodded. "Of course. Just heal them." They had an intruder in the caves, someone who had moved past the guards and all that acid and poison, all undetected. There was no time to argue with their only healer.

He sighed when she finally activated her spells, pulses of healing energy flowing through the room. His heartbeat slowed down a little, his mind and body calmed by the magic.

"Where are they now?" Mason asked, looking at Zair.

The bald mage bit his lip and shook his head. "Gone... too far. That way." He pointed, his finger slightly shaking.

*More inexperienced than I thought. Or is he just fearful?*

"Go. Pan and Zair, you come too. Stay between everyone else," Mason said, then he moved out.

Torchlight flickered in the dark tunnels, dug just broad enough to let two men move through side by side. Anybody unfamiliar with the location would soon find themselves in a trap.

He'd been annoyed at the complicated and downright paranoid setup of their hideout at first, but after a few intrusions, he'd really started to see the point. Nolan was on the right track.

"I can see them again," Zair said, pointing down one of the forking tunnels.

A light smile formed on Mason's lips. "The Hounds' Den."

He motioned for the group to follow. Ten warriors, five mages, the healer, and Zair. In these tight corridors, he preferred the company of warriors. Tougher to kill and not flinging around dangerous projectiles or spells.

None made a noise, all well trained and disciplined. The drunkenness from before was gone, focus and concentration replacing it. The last one who had come down here had killed one of their own, just the past week. And if there really was a Shadow here, they would likely not come out unscathed.

"Are they still here?" Mason whispered, coming up to the closed grate.

"No," Zair replied.

Mason moved his ash-covered hand over the rough wall. A little of the dry stone crumbled and fell to the floor before a rune glowed. A lock clicked, and the grate opened inward to the room, squeaking loudly all the while.

He waited and listened. "What about the hounds?"

As he asked the question, he smelled the heavy odor of blood. Grabbing a nearby torch, he held it out and moved into the more spacious room.

Stalkerhound corpses littered the floor. Vicious beasts, released as soon as someone stepped inside without activating the rune. All fifteen of them were dead.

The beasts were enough to kill most level one hundred mages and warriors. And here they were. Skulls smashed in, some damn near ripped apart. It looked like whoever did this was quite a bit stronger than your average intruder.

*Not a rogue, nor a mage.*

Mason frowned as he touched one of the corpses and stood up once more. "Be vigilant." He wouldn't want to face a Shadow alone, but down here, with his team, a healer, and his Classes, he was at an advantage.

He led them through the Hounds' Den and farther down, glancing at the trap at the base of the stairs. All that remained from the spears that had shot out was splintered wood and bits of steel. *A good shield or armor too.* He was getting a little uncertain. Someone who could bypass the guards wasn't supposed to engage the hounds or trigger any traps.

One of the main storage halls was coming up, and the team spread out in the widening corridor. The massive steel gate was dented in, slightly

prised open with brute force. Not quite enough to fit a person, but certainly enough to disrupt the enchantments that had been placed on it.

“What the hell?” someone behind him whispered.

Mason glanced back with an angry look. *Do you want to get us killed?*

One of the mages gave him a thumbs-up and moved a finger to his mouth. “We are silenced,” he said in a whisper.

“Good. Zair, who’s in there?” Mason asked.

“There was a teleport a minute ago, but since then... nothing. I can feel life forces, but... there are many,” the mage replied, uncertainty and stress obvious in his expression. He shifted his feet.

The men and women were clutching their weapons more tightly, preparing for the coming battle.

*No blood either. They’re probably not injured,* Mason thought.

“We have to be fast. It might be a Shadow, perhaps more than one. We go in and spread out – not far enough to limit Pan’s healing magic though. Ten meters at most. Rogues, teleport to the prisoners and grab a few. We might be able to stall them. The rest of you, immobilize the target and stay on the defensive. Let’s wear them down. We know the place and the traps. If four or more die, we retreat. Slowly and together. Do not run, or I will hunt you down myself.”

Breathing in deeply, he sighed and activated his Fury skills, his muscles tensing and his mind focusing. He held up a hand, ash flowing from his pack. It slid off his shoulders when everything was out, floating around him.

Slowly, the ash spread over the damaged gates before he pushed. Steel groaned as it was bent and forced open, the group of warriors and mages rushing in. Some teleported and others simply ran, forming up with weapons drawn.

The rogues vanished and appeared in the large caged section of the hall where their goods were held. Dim magical light shimmered above them all, just enough to let one make out the other side of the basic hall, carved and formed into the dirt and rock far below Riverwatch.

“Where is he?” somebody asked, the group glancing around the room, various spells and buffs adding light sources to the hall. Their blades and arrowheads reflected some of it.

Zair pointed to the prisoners. “In there...” he whispered, taking a step back. “They’re... powerful.”

“Be more specific,” Mason snarled. His eyes went wide when he both felt and saw ash spread within the caged section.

There was a series of dull impacts before one of the rogues suddenly appeared, flying out of the ashen mist and hitting the inside of the barred section with a loud crash. Blood flowed from his face as he coughed and tried crawling to the side.

Mason’s own ash spread out and formed lances as he watched someone walk out of the mist, dragging another rogue with each hand. Both were either unconscious or dead.

The warrior was clad in bloodied armor made of bone. Horns adorned his helmet, and blue eyes looked at the group with indifference.

Two wet thuds echoed through the quiet room as the rogues were dropped to the floor. One of them started coughing. He did not seem well, likely having sustained internal injuries.

“Who are you? And why are you here?” Mason asked, annoyed that he had been so thrown off by the ash. Of course there would be others. *Three rogues taken out in an instant.*

The warrior appeared outside the bars and looked at them. “Funny. That’s exactly what I wanted to ask you lot,” a woman’s voice replied.

### **[Battle-Healer – lvl ??]**

*A healer... what? With ash?*

Mason didn’t reply immediately, watching his men fan out a little more to get better angles to attack or react to a sudden teleport. Their own healer was protected by two men standing right behind her.

“I heard there were people for sale here. Thought I’d come and have a look. It’s a sorry state they’re in.” Her voice was cold. She shook her head and looked over the group. “Monster hounds trapped in cages, funny little traps, and then you come and flash your daggers at me?”

*What is she playing at?*

“You sneaked in and attacked my men. Who are you?”

The healer sighed and looked down, crossing her arms. “My name is Lilith. I’ve come to investigate our... competition.”

“Lilith... I haven’t heard of you before. Are you a noble?”

She shrugged. “I suppose I am. Is all this... for sale?”

*Our competition. Is she smuggling too? Looking to buy slaves? She's powerful, if anything.*

"Depends on what exactly you mean by 'all this,'" Mason said.

He had to try and solve this diplomatically, considering her high level. He dismissed the idea that she was a Shadow almost immediately. They were well-trained and strategically knowledgeable. None of them would just come in here, trigger traps, and bend open steel gates.

An eccentric noble, then. And those were nothing new to him. While this one had intruded on their base and potentially already killed a few of his men, it was a cheap price to pay to get in touch with someone this powerful. Maybe she was with one of the city lords or the Lily?

"The people in there..." She paused. "Also... that man," she added, pointing at Zair.

The mage took a step back, a drop of pus falling to the floor as he winced.

"I'm sure we can find an arrangement. I'm Mason, co-owner of the Gray Company. Would you like to discuss this in my office? With a drink?" he asked, glancing at the dead or injured rogues. He didn't know how dangerous she still was, but she'd stopped attacking and was showing no intention of fleeing. In fact, she seemed entirely calm.

He stopped himself from gulping. If she was a figure as important as he thought, then he'd better make sure to show his best self. This job was good, but his title of co-owner was more in name than fact, and he knew that there were always better opportunities out there.

Lilith glanced back at the rogues. "I didn't kill any of them. The rogues are alive. Nor are your goods damaged. I even healed some. You should take better care of them. It's a waste if they die."

Mason gulped and nodded. She'd sounded angry. "I'll take that into consideration. They're normally moved quite quickly. Fed and healed when necessary. We do take pride in the quality of our services and goods. I'm sure there are other things we can offer that you may be interested in as well."

She tapped the side of her vicious-looking horned helmet. "Perhaps... perhaps. I will have that drink."

"May I retrieve the injured?" Mason asked. "They didn't intend to attack you. We simply responded to your intrusion. I hope you understand."

Lilith turned and put her hands on two of the metal poles before forcing them apart with one quick move.

Mason kept his face schooled, looking over at one of the warriors. The man shook his head in disbelief. The metal was enchanted and strengthened, not comparable to what even the city prisons used. A single escapee could spell trouble after all.

The healer threw the bodies toward Mason and glanced at Pan. “Are you with an order?” she asked, her voice sounding amused before she turned and pulled the metal bars back into place.

They weren’t straight anymore, but it was enough to prevent anyone from escaping. Mason would have an enchanter have a look later. He forced himself not to sigh and smiled instead, gesturing toward the destroyed entrance, which made his left eyebrow twitch.

“The Corinth Order, child,” Pan said with disinterest. “But your uncivilized kind wouldn’t understand our ways.”

“Your ways...” Lilith said before she laughed.

“Pan.” Mason glared at her with an intense look. “Keep your wits about you.”

“What order do you belong to then, Lilith?” Pan stood with her chin raised. The words were laced with venom.

*Fucking healer women.* Mason ground his teeth. *If she fucks this up for me, I’ll have her head, no matter what those fucking paladins do after.*

He was angry, breathing slowly to make sure he didn’t do anything rash.

“None of your business. You say *I’m* uncivilized?” Lilith said as she slowly strolled toward them. “I didn’t know you would work for slavers... or whatever you consider yourselves. Mason?”

*She’s gauging us or trying to get a reaction. Perhaps she knows less than I assumed. Or she’s just playing.*

“We trade goods. All goods and all services we can provide. To any and all. As long as they pay.”

“Hmm.” Lilith sighed. “Could I buy an assassin to have her murdered?” she asked and pointed at Pan.

Mason looked at Lilith, keeping his face straight. “Yes. As soon as she’s not in our employ anymore.”

“You dirty bitch,” Pan spat. “And how dare you disrespect us like that! You know who I am... who I represent.”

Mason didn't react, but deep down, he felt a lot of joy at being able to humiliate her. He'd been around a lot of assholes thinking themselves more important than they really were, but Pan pushed even that.

"We have a reputation to uphold and a clear business model. You're not in danger as long as you're in our employ. I wouldn't dare offend the Corinth Order, and you know that very well," he explained.

Lilith laughed and walked to the entrance.

Mason nodded to one of the warriors, letting him lead the way. He was happy to find Lilith didn't care about having damn near everyone else walking behind her. He couldn't be sure about his assumptions, but one thing was for sure. She was confident.

He wondered what organization or people she associated with. Something about her casual display of power made him want to run away as fast as he could.

*Might be the most dangerous person I've had dealings with... Well, second most dangerous.* He smiled. *Whoever she is and whatever her goal is, she knows what she's doing.*

\* \* \*

Ilea had no idea what she was doing.

Most of the place was full of traps and complicated enough to make her retrace her steps constantly.

It had taken her dozens of blinks just to find the big iron gates, and she'd been stunned to discover people down there. People ready to be sold. Refugees from the west, refugees from the war, beggars from Riverwatch, and anyone else who few would care to look for.

She'd gone through a lot of emotions since then. Confusion at first. She'd seen the dead back on her first mission for the Hand, and she'd seen the start of the siege of Virilya. She knew conceptually that there were slavers in Baralia, but after her journey north, seeing these people imprisoned here just left her speechless. Why would someone take another's freedom in a world where magical wings existed?

Of course, she understood. Gold, even here, meant power. And some people were never done with grabbing more of it. And they would stop at nothing.

Still, seeing it before her was just plain strange. It felt so mundane. The prisoners didn't look to have been mistreated, besides being imprisoned against their will. They clearly weren't happy to be there – first fear and then hope had shone in their eyes when she'd appeared in their cage.

And the people who had come to fight her hadn't been screeching monsters either. They were well-equipped and organized, their leader thinking her some influential figure and inviting her to a drink.

It wasn't a pit of human suffering. It was business. Business that gave them gold, gave them power, at the cost of other people's freedom.

But now she was here. Not just here in their den but here in Riverwatch. Here in the Plains. Here in the south. And she had power too.

The question was how she would use it.

She could've fought them, but it was clear that the rogues had been trying to procure hostages from among the prisoners. Her bluff had worked thanks to her armor and level, the violence she'd shown likely dissuading them from a direct confrontation. She'd had no idea how to get the prisoners out safely, so she'd improvised.

At this point, she thought it had been a great idea.

She still itched to let loose, to paint the walls of the dark tunnel with their blood and guts. To rid the world of these people, a tiny bit of vengeance for all the suffering they had caused.

Yet she didn't. The people in the cage were safe, merchandise not to be damaged. And she was Lilith – powerful, mysterious, and, most importantly, rich. Alistair had sent her on this quest to get information. She would get everything she could.

And then she would kill them.

## Deal with the Devil

---

Ilea was getting bored of the talk. Even the food and drink were subpar for a rich smuggling company.

The smuggler had led her to a large hall. Tapestries, magic lights, luxurious carpets, and beautiful furniture adorned it all. It smelled of booze, incense, and sweat.

Mason wasn't alone in the spacious hall either. All the people who had accompanied him were close by, some playing cards, others just drinking. Most of them had their eyes on her.

That was half an hour ago. Now, she was pretty sure she could kill the man without anybody noticing for a few seconds. The Corinth healer had left, apparently annoyed by Ilea's presence.

Mason was careful. He didn't trust her fully yet – for good reason, of course. He gave her only the information she would require as a customer. What they had in stock, where, and how much they sold. And it was all so excruciatingly boring to her. It was clear to her by now that he was very proud of everything they had, everything they'd managed to acquire. He was all about wealth, all about coming off as important, and he reeked of insecurity.

And why wouldn't he? He'd not hunted any of the monsters or *earned* any of his gold. He had taken from others, had bought and sold whilst intimidating or killing his competition instead of *actually* competing. He'd

told her about it with sneering pride. And now he clung to all the goods he owned, thinking it was somehow meaningful.

A man with nothing else but gold. She wasn't confused anymore about why he would take other people's freedom. The power he held over his victims. It was the only way for him to feel in control. To feel any sort of significance at all.

She'd initially been confused, then angry, but now, all she felt was pity. She was sure there was little else that she would learn from the man. Not if their talk continued in the way that it had.

"You're an ash manipulator," she interrupted, his talk on exotic monster parts reaching levels of mind-numbing detail. All it did was make her want to fight them herself instead of buying parts that were inferior to her gear anyway.

He looked a little taken aback, sitting up in his leather chair as he studied her. "As are you," he said a moment later. "Are you interested in trading Class information?"

"I was just wondering... you're the first ash manipulator I've met. What happens if we both try to move the same ash?"

"The same thing that happens to two ice mages trying to move the same piece of natural ice," he said carefully.

"And what is that, Mason?" Ilea asked and sat back, glancing at the people behind her.

He gave her a look, not giving anything away in his expression. "The stronger one prevails," he finally concluded.

"Interesting." Ilea leaned forward. "I'm getting bored. Is there anything of interest you could tell or show me? Otherwise, I might just buy a few things, and that will be that."

"I apologize if none of our merchandise has piqued your interest. I assure you it—"

"Cut it out. You know what I mean. Something big. The rarest of rare. A pet demon, perhaps. Elven mercenaries. A cursed blade that can talk. Or perhaps the guides to finding hidden Classes. Those are the things I'm looking for, and if you really are this massive smuggling company, then you would have at least one item of the like," Ilea said, gauging his reaction both with her natural senses as well as her sphere.

"Lilith." The man started. "You must understand, I don't know you. We haven't done business before. I cannot risk endangering our rarest goods or

most valued associates on mere interest.”

Ilea sighed. “What then? Gold?” She started summoning gold coins onto the table. One hundred, two hundred... They began spilling over the edge, rolling across the floor.

That certainly got the attention of everybody else. Mason seemed impressed too, but he kept his reaction in check.

“This might interest you. A Shadow I’ve come across. A hunter, looking for me,” she said, summoning her own badge and throwing it onto the pile. “You could get into some interesting places with that, I suppose. If you could break the enchantment and match the mana signature, that is. Not that many would check to confirm. What do you think? You can have the gold that spilled onto the floor, and the badge, as a token of my trust.”

“We”—he glared at one of the men about to pick up a gold coin—“might have some things more aligned with your caliber of goods. I’m afraid we cannot accommodate you with demons or talking swords. I might, however, be able to offer authentic elven goods. Not a mercenary team, but their armor and blades, which are just as good, if wielded by someone like you.”

*Elven gear?*

She was less interested in the actual gear now, having seen what Niivalyr and the young elves had worked with. None of it had seemed particularly impressive to her. What interested her more was how Mason had gotten his hands on elven gear in the first place.

He seemed to interpret her silence as interest, summoned a thin, slightly curved blade, and handed it to her. The blade was near-white and reflected some of the light in the room.

### **[Wyvern’s Claw – Ancient Quality] Enchantments [Strong Edge 5 / Fire Affinity 2]**

She gave him a questioning look.

“Go ahead,” the man said, gesturing for her to try it out.

Ilea stood up and twirled the blade in her hand. She wasn’t as adept at it as a swordswoman, but she did have rather high Dexterity. And most of all, she had no fear of the edge actually injuring her.

“It’s a fine blade. Did you loot it, or do you have elven associates?” she asked.

“I cannot share that information, I’m afraid.”

“Associates, then. I know some too. Cerithil Hunters, mostly. Are you trading with the southern domains?”

He narrowed his eyes. “You... seem to know a great deal. We do have elven associates, yet I am not aware of Cerithil Hunters or the domains you speak of.”

“Hmm...” Ilea sat back down, more gold falling to the floor with the movement. She smiled. “I would like to meet them. Could you arrange that? I’m willing to pay what you have on your desk for that.”

“I—” Mason started to shake his head before he looked at the gold again. “Maybe we could... find a way. They are very particular in who they talk to,” he explained. “As well as... when and where.”

“When’s your next meeting, then?” Ilea asked, crossing her arms as she leaned back.

Mason seemed to be fighting with himself, unsure if he should share the information with her.

“Today. In two hours. These tunnels... provide several ways out of the city. We have a meeting in a cave near Karth. A dungeon, actually.”

*The gold won out, Ilea thought with a smile. Cerithil Hunters, then. Or some group I haven’t heard of yet.*

Ilea was even more interested now. She would have likely paid an insane amount of gold to meet them. To an actual merchant, of course, not a slaver.

“Good. Then we will go there later,” she said as she summoned back her gold.

“I request you leave half the gold as an advance payment,” Mason said, smiling brightly.

Ilea smiled too. “I have to admit, you have a rather interesting assortment of things down here.”

Mason looked at her, still smiling.

“However, there are some things that are problematic.” She got up and clapped her hands once to get everyone’s attention. “You see, I believe that people have the right to be free.”

The man was getting up now, his smile gone. “We are just doing business. If you wish to buy their freedom, then you can do that.”

Ilea grabbed the Shadow badge and looked at it. “I could do that, yes. But, you know, that would just be treating the symptoms. Not the root of it

all.”

Ashen limbs slowly started to form behind her. The men and women in the room were looking on, some grabbing their weapons as they got up. The atmosphere had changed in an instant.

Nobody made a sound as they all held their breath, watching on with various expressions. Confusion being the main one.

“You can’t be serious. There are hundreds of people, thousands, selling others into slavery. All over Elos. If you remove us, there will be another one to take our place. That’s just how the world works,” Mason said. “Some people are on top, others are not.”

“And here I thought you’d at least take responsibility for what you do. But you don’t. I suppose I shouldn’t be disappointed, but I am.”

Her ash flowed over her bone armor. It was a little funny to her that nobody had moved yet. They knew it was a bad idea to fight her. But here she was anyway.

“I will murder all of you. I don’t know how justified that really is. But I think I can live with that.”

Mason took a few steps back. Ash came from his pack as a veil formed around him. It covered him completely, just like her own Armor of Ash.

“Come on, people, time for a fight,” Ilea said, turning to the others.

The mage with one of his eyes missing ran away, causing a few people to turn and stare.

Then the room exploded into motion, spells and skills flaring up as tables and chairs were flung to the side, splintered by the raw power.

Ilea’s sphere lit up with various colors, projectiles flying her way as she stood there. Most of the people were below level two hundred. A few of them above. It wasn’t enough.

Ash exploded through the room, not her own but controlled by Mason.

Ilea ran forward. Her limbs shot out, cutting through the bodies of approaching warriors, teleporting mages, and stealthy rogues. She blinked through the hall, punching through heads and cutting through limbs. She spread her wings and caught an appearing rogue, slamming him into a wall with a dull thud.

Three warriors encircled her, their blades cutting into her armor with various spells and skills. Two of them, she pulled closer with their weapons, ashen limbs smashing through their heads. She blinked to the third as they took a step back, then moved her head slightly to avoid the blade aimed at

her eye. Steel scraped past her helmet before her fists met his chest, destructive mana flaring into the man, blood and bits of bone exploding from his back before his body dropped to the ground.

The room was quieter now, Mason the only one left standing. A single mage just barely over level two hundred was no threat to her. She let his ash hit her, even removing her armor. The sensation felt strange.

He circled her and continued to use his ash, Ilea also adding to the thick mist of darkness in the room. When he finished his barrage of spells, he rushed her and slammed his fists into her stomach. Ashen spikes bit into her flesh but found little purchase.

She was happy to find that his power increased with each strike. Perhaps he would actually be able to draw blood, even with her ash armor active. He seemed in a frenzy, his strikes increasing with intensity, his shroud of ash ripping in parts as he screamed until he finally drew blood.

Ilea took the punches until Mason's blows slowed down and his breaths became ragged. He was barely able to keep his hands up now.

*A berserker. With ash. Seems like quite a powerful combination.*

Ilea checked him with her healing. Dozens of cuts, internal bleeding, and obvious confusion. She'd gotten what she wanted from him.

**'ding' You have learned the General Skill: Ash Magic Resistance – lvl 1  
Ash Magic Resistance – lvl 1**

**You have found a being similar to your own, wielding magic you are not just familiar with but have mastered. A small increase in your resistance but perhaps a new insight into your own connection to ash itself.**

"Are you done?" she asked.

"You fucking b—"

Ilea stepped up and slammed her fist into the man's head, knocking him unconscious to the floor. His skull was fractured from the unaided punch, but he was alive. She made sure to keep it that way with her healing.

She willed the ash away, returning the room to its former state. It was quiet now, bodies littering the floor. It smelled of blood and death. Ilea checked the room with her sphere, taking anything that seemed interesting, including Mason's storage ring that she couldn't access. Not yet.

She breathed out with a sigh and cracked her neck. "What a fucking mess."

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## Edge

Mason woke up with a massive headache.

*What the fuck happened?*

He felt like he'd been mauled by three bears, healed back to health, and mauled again. It felt like he was floating.

*Ash... I feel... ash.*

He remembered then. Lilith. The Shadow.

His eyes opened wide as he turned his head and looked around. They were still in the tunnels of their hideout, and he was being... carried?

He looked down at his body and saw the thick, ashen ropes around him. *Limbs?* he asked himself as he followed them, finding their origin to be none other than Lilith.

She was walking in silence, glancing his way when she realized he was awake.

No words were spoken, neither by him nor by her. The situation was clear. He had lost.

*She hasn't killed me yet. Did I injure her?*

He had activated all his skills, pushed himself further than he ever had. No memory remained from what happened after, but he knew he'd tasted blood.

*Maybe she realized I'm of more use alive.*

He stopped himself from smirking, the thought flashing through his mind. There was a chance, but first, he would wait and see.

Mason could bide his time. He knew how to talk, and he knew there were things she wanted. Everyone wanted things. His storage ring was gone, of course, but she had no access to it, not until he was dead or gave her access. Waiting for his ownership to fade was likely not an option for the impulsive woman.

He heard steps then. Dozens of people were walking through the corridor, led by himself and Lilith.

*The slaves.*

And Zair was there too, looking his way with a frightened expression.

*That rat. I knew it.*

They were walking up to the exit that led into the warehouse.

*She's taking us out first.*

He was getting a little nervous but stayed focused. Every word he uttered, every action he took, could be fatal.

Lilith stepped up to the exit, a closed-off section of wall. Some of her ashen limbs moved and smashed through the stone as if it were paper. A couple of strikes later, and the passage was open.

“Where are the guards?” she asked, looking at the empty table in the room beyond.

*Those fucking lazy bastards.*

“Come on. Careful with the barrels – there’s poison and acid inside,” Lilith said to the slaves, then looked at Mason. “Don’t do anything stupid, or you’re dead.”

Mason ground his teeth. She would pay. He would make sure of that.

He flinched when he heard an explosion from ahead.

“Oh. Did he get bored after all?” Lilith said. “Come on, I want to see him fight.”

\* \* \*

Ilea led the group of people out into the hall, making sure to keep an eye on Mason. “I’ll check on the fight. He might need my help.”

“Should we wait here?” one of the people asked. A middle-aged man above level eighty with a long, scraggly beard. Many of them had armed themselves after she had freed them.

“There’s an exit over there, maybe that’s better. Just don’t go too far, or I won’t be able to help you. Some of the guards have been paid off too,” Ilea said as she walked over to one of the warehouse walls.

“There’s no ex—”

She summoned her olvor hammer and threw it into the flimsy stone wall. The olvor won out, destroying a section large enough for the people to leave through.

“I’m happy to have a chat after, but I’ll understand if you want to get the fuck out of here as fast as you can,” she said, producing ten gold coins for each of them.

“You... aren’t you a Shadow?” the bearded man asked.

“I’m Lilith, bitch,” Ilea said, summoning her hammer back. It slid slowly across the floor until it flipped upward and landed in her hand. Not nearly as cool and snappy as she’d hoped for, but she supposed there was only so much an enchantment could do with a hammer this heavy.

The man looked at the gold and nodded. “Thank you, Lilith.” The others thanked her too, quickly making their way out as a group. Some of them told her that they would wait.

Ilea gave them a nod and then moved an ashen limb in front of Zair, who had tried to go with them. “You stay.”

He gulped and nodded. It was clear that he was scared and that he hadn’t been in as deep as the others she’d fought, but he’d still worked with them.

“I’ll have questions for you,” Ilea added.

She dragged Mason behind her, hammer on her shoulder as she made her way through the warehouse, still hearing the sounds of battle.

Ilea passed a few sections full of crates before she could see out onto a large open space where she assumed wagons stopped to deliver their wares.

There, Kevan faced several people, blood dripping from a few wounds on his chest and left arm. Two corpses lay on the floor nearby, their heads nearly entirely gone.

“You will die here,” a gray-haired spear-wielder said, ignoring the two dead smugglers on the floor. “I’m glad you came, Kevan. Two more bodies you will have to answer for.”

Kevan groaned and glanced over at Ilea.

The spear-wielder followed his gaze and smiled. “Finally, the reinforce —” His eyes widened. “Mason? And the burned mage... What the fuck is

going on?"

"Hey," Ilea said and waved. "Sorry, I didn't mean to intrude. I cleaned up a little downstairs. Do you need help, Kevan?"

"You clea— what?" the spear-wielder stuttered.

"I do not," Kevan said. "But it's reassuring that you are here."

He jumped to the side and rolled to avoid an ice magic projectile from one of the smuggler mages.

"Almost sounds like you're starting to like me," Ilea said.

Kevan groaned again. He parried the sword strike of an appearing warrior with a silver rapier, then raised his pistol and fired. An explosion and a blast of blood red flashed into the warrior's face.

Ilea barely perceived a pellet-like projectile as well.

The warrior fell dead, and Kevan vanished in a mist of red before he started chasing the ice mage.

"Who are you?" the spear-wielder commanded, glaring at Ilea as his remaining allies stepped behind him.

"You should really focus on your enemy," Ilea said.

Kevan fired his pistol into a wall of ice, stepping past a barrage of icicles before blood flowed around his rapier.

The ice mage disappeared, but Kevan followed, almost in a straight line and through the air, his blade stabbing through the mage's chest. Instead of a small wound, a sizable hole burned through the man, and he fell.

Kevan appeared nearby with a mist of blood around him. "Three to go," he said.

"Very cool," Ilea said, clapping.

"Kill them," the spear-wielder spat and charged forward.

Kevan met them but failed to read a feint. The spear pierced through his stomach, emerging out of his back. He barely managed to parry a sword going for his neck.

The third warrior, who had leveled his blade to join in, was suddenly crushed by a well-thrown black hammer of unknown origins.

Ilea walked up to the remaining trio, extending her ashen limbs to catch the spear now going for Kevan's head.

"I thought I'd join in."

"I had them," Kevan said, coughing up blood as he put pressure on the wound on his stomach.

“Sure you did. And I’m sure you don’t need healing either,” Ilea said. She raised her eyebrows as she touched him, feeling the wound healing on its own. *He regenerates.*

She healed him anyway, watching the two remaining opponents’ looks of confusion and terror.

“Do something, Mason, you piece of shit!” the spear-wielder shouted.

“You’re the other owner, aren’t you?” she asked.

The man glared at her and spat on the ground. “You won’t ruin all of this.”

“Oh, no. You already did that with the choices you’ve made. We’re just the consequences of those choices.”

Kevan snorted.

“You laughed,” Ilea said.

He glanced at her and then focused on their enemies. “Up for debate. Let’s finish this.”

“Yeah,” Ilea said, spreading her wings, still holding on to Mason.

Kevan took care of the final fighter next to the spear-wielder whilst Ilea faced the leader. She didn’t strike, simply letting his spear cut into her ash. She could see the damage it would do and found it quite amusing. He was at level two hundred and thirty, but she considered him barely good enough to join the Hand.

Kevan appeared behind him, slashing at his arm. When the smuggler turned to face Kevan, Ilea leaped and spread her wings. She raised her arms and crashed into him, then kept flying until they hit a wall, broke through it, and then hit another wall.

As her momentum slowed, she watched him slump to the ground, his weapon dropped somewhere on the way.

“I’ll k—” he snarled.

She stomped her foot down on his head. His skull shattered.

Kevan appeared next to her and sighed. “I’d thought you uncivilized, but you really are a barbarian.”

She grabbed the man’s storage ring as well and accessed it now that he was dead.

“Is that why you came here?” Kevan asked.

Ilea smiled, seeing the documents and ledgers that were in the ring. “I’m killing a lot of birds here.”

**‘ding’ Your group has killed [Prodigy of the Spear – lvl 230 / Child of Lightning – lvl 224]**

*Higher level than Philipp and Viper, yet he was nowhere near as strong.*

“What are you talking about?”

“Don’t worry about it, Kevan.”

“What about that one?” Kevan said, pointing at Mason.

“He still owes me something,” Ilea said. “Can you go check on the survivors?”

“Survivors?”

“People intended to be sold. They should be nearby if they haven’t run off yet.”

Kevan sighed. “I didn’t come here to take care of a bunch of prisoners.”

“And I didn’t come here to save your ass,” Ilea said.

He narrowed his eyes. “Very well. What are you intending to do then? Our battle here will have attracted attention. Even with corrupt guards, there will be some who come and investigate.”

“Because of your gun. I still want one of those guns.”

“It’s a memento. You cannot have it.”

“Where do I get one, then?”

He smiled at her. “Maybe one day, you will come across a land of snow and blood. You do remind me of our kind, in a strange way.”

“Speaking in riddles. Very well, keep your secrets, vampire.”

He raised his chin. “I will go see those survivors and drink all their blood until they’re dry. Care to join me?”

“Was that a joke? I still have business in the tunnels below. Oh, and that guy over there was with the smugglers.”

Kevan sighed again. “Why keep him alive, then?”

“Because he seems new. Less bad, maybe?”

“I’ll take care of it.”

Ilea gave him a nod, hearing shouts now from outside. Guards calling for someone to respond. “I’ll talk to my contact after to clear your name.”

Kevan rolled his eyes. “I think I can handle losing a bunch of city guards.” He pointed at Zair. “You, with me.”

Ilea left them there, dragging Mason with her as she went back down. She summoned some of the ledgers and documents from the other owner’s ring and started flipping through the pages.

*Not even encoded. Guess he was confident that his ring wouldn't get stolen.*

“You guys had lots of connections,” Ilea murmured. She didn’t know any of the names, but she was sure Alistair could make good use of this.

Mason stayed quiet.

Ilea put the ledgers she’d flipped through away. Her eyes were focused forward as she walked down the stairs, straining her nose.

Poison and acid gushed onto the floor after she ripped through the barrels with her ashen limbs. It would make sure the guards who came to investigate knew about the dangers and provide her with some more time to snoop around herself.

When she reached the lowest step behind the destroyed wall, she turned her head and focused.

“You still want to meet the elves?” Mason asked, his face a mask that revealed nothing.

Ilea could imagine the hopes he harbored. Hopes of survival, of turning them against her. Part of her hoped they would. An interesting fight, perhaps, after all this boring slaughter.

“I do. But first, I need to find a healer.”

## Cursed Meeting

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Pan had apparently not noticed any of the commotion. She was brushing her luscious hair in front of a mirror in her glamorous and spacious room. It had a huge bed with various expensive pieces of furniture surrounding it, coupled with warm light from magical lights embedded into the ceiling.

She turned her head when the door opened, looking at the dark Shadow clad in ashen armor.

“What is the meaning of this?” she asked, her voice confident – annoyed, even. She took a step toward Ilea, recognition flickering in her eyes. “You are Lilith. Come to learn about our order, have you?”

Ilea dragged Mason in after her. “I’ve come to make sure you don’t get away.”

“Get away?” Pan glanced at Mason and back at Ilea before taking a step back. “I’m with the Corinth Order... Do you have even the slightest idea what that means?”

Ilea stepped closer. “I know exactly what that means. You represent an order that is happy to support humans being sold into slavery. I don’t recall slavery being a thing in Dawntree, or am I missing something?”

“Don’t throw me in with those savages. I was hired to heal, nothing else.”

“A hidden smuggler’s den with nothing but innocent people. Does nobody here have the guts to actually own up to anything?”

“If you so much as touch m—”

An ashen limb lashed out and took her head clean off. “Healer my ass. You’re not a healer,” Ilea said as she heated up her core. She collected what documents she could, but the woman did not own a storage item herself.

Half a minute later, she blasted the corpse and half the room, the fire digging deep into the stone, turning it to ash. That too was disintegrated by her true creation, leaving nothing but magical energy behind.

Mason looked on with wide eyes, trying to move away from her but failing.

“Stop thrashing around,” Ilea said.

**‘ding’ You have defeated [Corinth High Priest – lvl 120 / Corinth Mercenary – lvl 103]**

“Two Classes from the Corinth Order itself.”

*High Priest at level one twenty. And they’re one of the big ones.*

Ilea wasn’t sure what to make of it. Class names were just minor descriptions, of course. Her Medic Sentinels would have to deal with the Corinth Order at one point or another. So far, they weren’t making a good impression on her.

“That’s dealt with. Want to show me some hidden storage rooms before the guards find them and all the wealth goes to Alistair?” she asked. “We still have an hour or so until the meeting you mentioned. Oh, and do point out any traps that are still around. I’d like to... disable them.”

\* \* \*

*These fuckers were rich.*

Ilea had put everything into her bracelet to sort at a later time. Metals, artifacts, magical items, potions, armor, weapons, clothing, exotic animals, and Class and spellbooks, as well as history books and other treasures. Some of it was sure to help her Medics. The rest would go to Claire.

Mason pointed the way, and she ran through the corridors in silence. Most of them were dark – rarely traveled, it seemed, or perhaps kept that way intentionally.

*Glad I took this guy with me, otherwise this would have been impossible to find.* Neither her Sentinel Huntress skill nor her sphere showed anything

in the darkness.

The tunnels became more and more crude, parts of them even collapsed. Ilea blasted through those sections with her ashen limbs as well as Heart of Cinder, the focused version quite effective for the job.

Ilea ran through the tunnels until light became visible in the distance. A tiny speck, clear and bright to her enhanced senses.

“We’re coming up on the meeting point,” Mason said.

They emerged in a cave overgrown with moss, roots reaching over the walls and trees growing in the distance. Light came in from above, several cracks in the ceiling over a hundred meters above letting in air and sunlight. Thin streams of water flowed in from some of the cracks, pooling into creeks that led farther down into the caves.

### ***‘ding’ You have entered the Garden of the King dungeon***

Ilea slowed down and looked out into the expansive cave.

It stretched for hundreds of meters with exits visible that led both outside and farther down into what she assumed to be Karth.

“Where do we meet them?” Ilea asked Mason, who she still held with her ashen limbs.

“They will find us,” he said simply, the edges of his mouth quirking up ever so slightly.

She felt them arrive before she saw them, magical energy flowing over her. Her sphere lit up when four light sources appeared, with four elves corresponding to them.

“Oh, a new human. And she has bound the smuggler. Fascinating,” a voice spoke, excited and quick.

The speaker had blue eyes, a warm smile, and a hat covering his ears. Ilea also noted he wore human clothing – simple black pants, a shirt, and a jacket.

### **[Mage – lvl 322]**

*Interesting.* “Greetings,” Ilea said, smiling back at the elf.

“She’s the enemy!” Mason exclaimed. “She came and killed everyone! You can no longer trade with us if she stays alive.”

Ilea let him finish before she muffled him with ash. She wasn't surprised to find that the Elves didn't seem to care much.

"Human healer," another one of them spoke, his eyes completely white but focused on her. He wore a simple white robe that glowed brightly in Ilea's sphere. His hair, white as snow, flowed freely behind him, as if carried by wind. "You do not fear our kind?"

### **[Healer – lvl ??]**

Ilea smiled brightly. A healer amongst elves – and one she had yet to catch up to. "I have friends among your kind," she said. They were inside a dungeon, after all. The ash on her helmet receded to reveal the rune-like carving on her cheek.

The third one of them laughed, reptile-like red eyes glaring at her as his flowing red hair changed to a dark orange right before her eyes. "You're entirely too weak to carry that title, healer girl." He wore dark red scale armor, his helmet covering his face but letting his hair fall loose.

### **[Warrior – lvl 289]**

Ilea looked at the last of them, noting the tears streaming down his face. His skin was pale, more so than she had ever seen with an elf. His eyes were covered by a strip of black cloth, while his hair had an ethereal quality, light passing through as if unhindered.

### **[Mage – lvl 262]**

"Your level is lower than mine, scale boy," Ilea commented, not taking the red-haired elf's comment very seriously.

He was about to reply when the white-haired one spoke up. "Not a title bestowed to those of strong body alone but those of spirit and compassion. You know of the Hunters?"

Ilea smiled at the red-haired one, his hair going dark red now. She noted his twitching muscles, even below his armor. "I know of the Cerithil Hunters. You're inside a dungeon. Does that mean you're part of them?"

Mason was watching on with disbelief, saying something incomprehensible into her ash. He tried to free himself too, but to no avail.

“We are,” the white-haired healer said, then he pointed at Mason. “That human, he is bound, yet our associate. I ask you to explain the circumstance he is in.” He sounded old. Neither demanding nor anxious.

“He is part of an illegal smuggling company. They kidnapped humans and sold them. Among other things,” Ilea explained, glaring at the elf.

*This might be a difficult fight.*

She couldn’t help but get a little excited. Even escaping them might be dangerous. She hadn’t felt that way in a while. Alone against a near-impossible opponent.

*Don’t engage if there is no reason to. They’re Hunters, not part of the domains,* she reminded herself.

“I see,” the healer said. “And you oppose such actions?”

“I do. Every being should be free to choose their own path.”

“Marvelous... the diversity in morality. Splendid... even among those considered powerful,” the hat mage said, summoning a notebook and starting to scribble.

“We did not know of such actions,” the healer said. “I apologize, human. The words you said ring true.”

Ilea felt a breeze then. She gulped, hearing a strange high-pitched noise.

Mason was dead, cut apart without her ashen limbs having been touched.

There were deep cuts in the stone floor and the cavern walls behind her. She hadn’t even felt the attack coming.

“As you know of us, you perhaps know of our plight?” the healer asked without acknowledging what had just happened.

Ilea looked his way. *Could I survive that?*

The scale-armored elf hissed. A joyous sound. His eyes met hers. “An interesting human.”

“Your plight? The Taleen and their machines and the rules of the Oracles preventing you from doing anything about it?”

“Precisely. Though such information... is rarely shared with an outsider. I would be interested in meeting the Hunters you know,” the healer said. “Supplies, if not gathered ourselves, can be difficult to acquire. No elf would trade with the cursed. Few humans remain willing to trade or even

talk. Awakened and Dwarves alike shun our kind. For good reason, I might add.”

“What would someone as powerful as you want to trade for anyway?”

“Though we are powerful in magic, no craftsmen, smiths, or tailors remain amongst the cursed. It is through tools made by human or dwarven hand that we enhance our chance of survival in the depths left behind by those at constant war.”

“So you don’t buy humans to eat?” Ilea asked.

The mage in human clothes laughed. “Storage items, enchanted fire spheres, armor repairs, and a good bathtub. I like the comfort of a feather-filled bed just as much as any other mammal. Your kind has perfected such wares, and thus we sought a trader. A trader that is now dead.”

Ilea sighed. She’d come here to visit some elves, not set up trade agreements. “It’s really been a day. But yeah, I’m happy to set you up with someone else. I have quite a lot of connections.”

“I am interested in your proposal, healer and guardian. Though it is unfortunate that our trading partner has been... removed, you pose an alternative. How do you suggest we proceed?” the healer asked.

“I’ll have to think of how we could set this up. I hadn’t planned to cooperate with any more elves in the foreseeable future. If you’re staying in the area, I might be able to get you in touch with some people, though.” She thought about it and paced around a little.

*Smuggling company, a vampire with a gun, and now I need to find a new trading partner for a bunch of super high-level elves.*

Ilea felt a little overwhelmed. Then she smiled.

“I have to clear my head first. Can I fight one of you? The red one seems eager.”

“I am eager,” the scale-armored elf said.

“We will reside here until an agreement has been reached,” the healer said. “If battle is needed to clear your head, human, then so it shall be.”

*I do remember now why I like elves. Some of them, at least.*

The red-haired one hissed. “Finally, a human who can appreciate the finer things in life.”

Ilea smiled and then hissed back.

## Red Scales

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Ilea smiled as her buffs flared to life and she hit the elf with her full arsenal. Ashen limbs smashed into his armor before he reached her, glancing off the hard scales. Heart of Cinder started burning in her core as she felt the heat of his expanding white flames bite into her ash.

After her recent battles, just feeling the heat of his magic let her know that this would be different. *Finally, a proper fight.*

She dodged to the side as the elf slid to a stop and appeared before her, his claws slashing at her, each with a blazing white edge several centimeters long.

Ilea knew he would penetrate her ash halfway but no further. She let him hit her, then slammed her fist into his stomach, Absolute Destruction and Storm of Cinders pushing their mana into his scales and body, a big chunk of the energy blocked by his powerful armor. Against this one, she didn't have to hold back.

His claws penetrated her defenses, suddenly expanding and cutting through all her ash before scraping along her bone armor. She ducked under his other arm and grabbed his leg, twirling around before she slammed his form into the stone with all the might she could muster. Rock cracked as his massive weight came crashing down.

The elf seemed unfazed by the blow, getting up just as sixteen ashen limbs slashed into him, each delivering Storm of Cinders. He vanished in

the same moment, reappearing around twenty meters away in a crouch. His eyes narrowed before heat gathered in front of his face.

Ilea could feel it even from this distance. She braced for the attack, watching the white flame form, small at first but soon expanding in an explosive wave as if a dam had been opened.

She laughed and blinked away at the last moment, reappearing thirty meters to the side. Her eyes opened wide as she watched the cone of fire arc toward her, the other elves disappearing to avoid the attack.

Her wings appeared and formed a cocoon as she dived down. The fire enveloped her a moment later, quickly burning through her ashen armor, and she felt a chunk of mana come back through her absorption.

*Nice, but not quite enough!*

Ilea rushed him, flying into the stream of fire. Surprise flashed in his eyes before she slammed into him at full speed, grappling the elf before they tumbled to the ground, bouncing four times before they slid to a stop.

Both of them got up slowly. Ilea cracked her neck, and the elf hissed.

“Not bad... for a human.”

“Keep fighting,” she said and charged.

Ashen limbs continued to slam into him, scratching the scales but failing to penetrate. He dodged an attempted attack launched at the gap in his helmet, even while in her grasp.

She felt heat form and tanked it, a sphere of white flame expanding and pulverizing the rock below.

Her ashen armor reformed quickly, her bone armor blackened by the flames. She healed her burned skin and willed the ash he had created with his fire to slam into him from below. She charged forward and delivered two punches while his claws dug into her defenses. She felt his scale armor crack with the third punch before he vanished and reappeared ten meters away.

Ilea’s ashen armor reformed. *He nearly got through with his claws.* She noted the damage done to her bone armor, deep cuts in the already burned material.

“Fantastic!” the elf exclaimed as he touched a section of broken scales before a burst of mana rushed out from him.

Ilea crouched in surprise, feeling the sudden change in power. *And size.* She saw the elf begin to expand before an explosion of heat drew her attention away.

She jumped back, but the heat caught up to her. A massive cone of fire engulfed the whole area, and though her blink brought her out for a moment, the flames simply sought her once more.

This time, she healed her ash – both her wings and her armor – to make sure the flames wouldn't get through. As the heat faded, she blinked and then tumbled through the air, reforming her wings and healing the burns before her ash returned as well.

She couldn't believe her eyes as she floated in the air, white fire clinging to the tips of nearby trees and rocks alike.

Before her stood a dragon. Two arms and legs, wings, covered in red scales and dark horns. Red eyes stared at her from a dragon's head with teeth as long as her forearms. He was longer than a drake and taller too. Perhaps half the size of a Taleen Praetorian.

She landed a dozen meters in front of him and smiled. "I expected dragons to be bigger."

Laughter came from the floating elf in human clothes.

The dragon-elf frowned and shot a white cone of fire at the offending elf, who promptly vanished.

"None have faced my fire and emerged as unscathed as you, human. My name is Feyrair Kaa, Cerithil Hunter, and I am honored to have fought you." His voice was much deeper now, snarled in parts as if he had to get used to the difference in size and form.

"Likewise. My name is Ilea Spears. Shadow and Medic Sentinel." She crouched, her ashen armor at the ready, smoke rising around her from the singed ash and the burnt skin below. "We continue."

He roared, standing tall as he prepared another spell.

Ilea extended ten of her ashen limbs, aiming them at the small dragon, and sacrificed a thousand points of health. She felt heat and power flowing through her as her charged-up Heart of Cinder rushed at her foe.

The beam of energy and fire slammed into Feyrair before he could do anything, sending him skidding over the rocky terrain before toppling over and falling off a cliff, wings and legs tangled up.

Ilea flapped her wings and immediately started to charge Heart of Cinder once more. She heard a roar that reverberated through her very being.

*No Veteran warning?*

The red dragon beat his powerful wings, flying up as the light burn marks on his scales healed. He moved down and sped toward her.

Ilea appeared behind his head at the last moment, avoiding the massive claws before her charged fist slammed into the back of his horned skull. Destructive mana spread through him as her ashen limbs slashed at his wings, a few of them slicing through.

The dragon roared once more and turned with incredible speed, his claws lighting up with white fire and slashing at her. Ilea blinked back but saw him close the distance immediately, an unnatural movement, as if he'd teleported mid-swing.

*Why did I assume he couldn't use that spell in this form?*

She smiled before the claws raked out toward her, slamming her ash more than cutting into it. She was thrown to the side, her bone armor cracking before her ashen armor reformed. There was damage to her body. Some of her organs had been destroyed, and one lung had collapsed.

Her bones, however, were uninjured.

Ilea twirled in the air and landed on her feet, coughing up blood from her injuries. She spat it out, sending healing magic through her body.

She raised her fists and braced for the next attack. But it didn't come.

Instead, Feyrair stumbled before he caught himself.

*Did I knock his brain around a little?*

Blood was dripping from the corner of his mouth before another surge of mana exploded out. White-hot fire flared from his nostrils as he crouched in his dragon form.

He sped up, teleporting several times as he disappeared and reappeared.

A cone of fire enveloped her, but Ilea simply healed against it as she waited, forming as much ash before her as she could. When he appeared close to her, she slammed her fist, charged with Absolute Destruction, into his approaching clawed hand.

Mana exploded from her, pushing his arm aside. His maw opened, fire visible in his throat before it rushed out.

Ilea crouched to avoid the flames, feeling the burning heat pass above her. She took a step forward and punched upward, two hundred health sacrificed in the same moment.

She felt her uppercut slam into the elf dragon's chin, shutting his mouth as the last of the white flame puffed out of it. She felt the impact through her arm and shoulder.

His eyes rolled back before he collapsed.

Ilea blinked away and watched the dragon vanish, revealing the elf in his natural state, covered in slightly singed red scale armor that looked chipped and damaged in parts.

The white-haired elf appeared above him, producing a light breeze that glowed a green hue in her sphere. “You are a capable warrior indeed.” His voice was calm, dealing with this situation as if it were entirely normal.

She could see magic flow into the red elf, healing not just his skin but his scales too.

Feyrair coughed then, waking up and grabbing his jaw. “That is enough.” He motioned for the healer to stop, then sprawled out on his back and sighed. He glanced over at Ilea and smiled. “We should do this again sometime.”

Ilea smiled back. “We should.”

The other elves approached now as well. The one with the hat hiding his ears jogged toward her and clapped his hands. “Incredible performance... such visceral prowess.”

### ***‘ding’ Heat Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 15***

Ilea looked at the other elf. “What kind of magic do you have?”

“Oh no, I am not inclined to get injured today. But if you only wish to work on your defenses, there are some things I wanted to test with my ice magic. You’re a healer too, right, so we could try? Speaking of healing... a meal would be nice. Do you have any food to share? It’s been so long since I had a good human meal. One cooked by them, I mean, not human flesh... though that is delicious too. Not that I eat them.” He laughed and scratched the back of his head, his hat moving to reveal short light blue hair of a similar color to his eyes.

“I thought you only ate fresh meat?”

“Oh, not at all. Well, mostly. But it’s interesting to try new things, and you humans are so creative!”

*Dinner with a bunch of elves... yeah, why not?*

Ilea formed a table of ash, big enough to seat all of them, and chairs as well before she summoned a bunch of random restaurant meals she still had. She wasn’t sure yet if they deserved the divinity that was Keyla’s cooking.

The elf shrieked with delight and sat down on an ashen chair without complaint, looking at the food with a big grin on his face. He checked the plates and moved them around, sniffing at different ones before he looked at Ilea with a questioning yet ecstatic glance.

“Dig in,” she smiled.

He complied, quite literally slamming the food into his throat. She would have been concerned if he weren’t a level three hundred elf. Though she still was a little.

“You can have some too if you like,” Ilea said in the general direction of the others.

The healer appeared and bowed to her with a thankful expression before he sat down with grace, summoning a silver fork and taking the nearest plate. He smiled delightedly when he took the first bite.

Feyrair appeared next to her and slammed his hand onto her shoulder, causing the ground below her left foot to crack slightly. “You are... most certainly a Guardian of Cerith. Food.”

“Food,” Ilea repeated and joined them.

“How long are you staying in the area? I’d like to level up my resistances, if any of you are up for that.”

The supposed ice mage spoke, mouth full of food, giving her a thumbs up. “Of courshe.”

The last elf hovered a dozen meters away, facing their way but staying where he was.

“He doesn’t eat?” Ilea asked.

The healer looked at her. “Rarely.”

“How often do you eat?” the ice mage asked. “I’m Ben, by the way. Nice to meet you. This is excellent, some of the best food I’ve eaten. Reminds me of Southern Empire cooking. Ravenhall or Morhill, perhaps.” He grinned.

“Ben?” Ilea asked. “Wait, you know Ravenhall and Morhill?”

He chuckled and waved her off. “A rare name for an elf, I know. We usually change ours when we become Cerithil Hunters. I thought it fitting, more than the fancy titles most others bestow upon themselves. And I’ve visited a couple of times, yes. Years and years ago, of course. Nowadays, it’s difficult to get in unseen, what with the new leadership and the demon attack. Security is tight, with the war and all.”

“You know a surprising amount about humans and their dealings.”

“Ah, yes. My initial goal was to find information on the Taleen and potential allies to our cause. But I have found that your kind does not normally want to associate with us elves. And besides, high-level fighters like you are rare. It was fruitful, however, as I’ve become fascinated with human culture.”

*A level three hundred elf visiting Ravenhall. For the culture. I wonder if Dagon knows about this.*

She saw the distant elf still floating around and summoned another meal that she proffered his way with an ashen limb, not looking as the limb set the plate down on the floor before the ash disintegrated once more.

“I take it you’re not just in the area to trade, are you?”

The healer glanced her way. “These lands border the Naval Forest. It is the battlefield on which this war has been fought for millennia. Both elves and Taleen machines roam the forests and the lands beyond. We look for both – and places of creation where the Taleen scourge has reached.”

“And you go into these dungeons to destroy them? That’s why you’re seen as cursed by the other elves, right?”

“Such is our fate.”

Ben leaned forward. “We are looking for elves who may be willing to join us, and in the dungeons, we look for active teleportation gates that lead deeper into the network of the facilities that the Taleen have built.”

Ilea wondered if she should talk about the research Iana and Christopher were conducting in Ravenhall, but she decided against it. They didn’t have anything yet, and she didn’t know how trustworthy this group of elves was.

It still felt strange to her to know that there was this massive conflict happening so close to human lands. The research they were conducting was mainly to find Kyrian and, potentially, to figure out the secrets of long-range teleportation gates, but now that she’d met a second group of Cerithil Hunters, she wondered if maybe they could help them too.

She noticed that the last elf who hadn’t spoken much so far carefully approached the plate she had put out and grabbed it. Then a silver fork not unlike the healer’s appeared in his hand before he began eating in silence.

## Potential Allies

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Ilea and the elves finished their meal before she left, promising to find them an alternative trading partner and, of course, to return for more resistance training.

She was surprised to find not a single guard on her way up through the smuggling tunnels, only meeting the first of them when she emerged from the supposed wine cellar. She was wearing her bone armor, the damage done by Feyrair already repaired thanks to the timeless material.

Ilea stayed hidden and used both her sphere and her blink to attempt to escape unseen. She wasn't sure if she managed it, but nobody seemed to follow her. She made her way through the city and toward Alistair's office.

The atmosphere in the entrance hall was tense, with various groups engaged in heated arguments. Some people glanced her way, a few pointing, but before anyone could waylay her, a guard waved her over and led her through a back entrance.

"What was all that about?" Ilea asked.

The guard gave a sideward glance and smiled ever so slightly. "I wouldn't know, Shadow."

She motioned for Ilea to stop when they were in front of Alistair's office. One of the two guards beside the large door gave her a nod and knocked.

It took a minute before the door swung open. A group of three men rushed out, the first one of whom looked furious. He saw Ilea and glared at

her, making to speak, but the guard next to Ilea stepped between them and motioned for her to enter.

“This is not over, mercenary,” the man said. He was tall and slightly balding with a long drooping mustache.

Ilea didn’t move and met his eyes.

### **[Mage – lvl 204]**

“Is that a threat?” Ilea asked.

The man raised his chin, then turned and stormed away with the two others in tow.

Ilea watched them go, then entered the office.

Alistair stood facing the windows. He wasn’t alone. A few high-level individuals were present as well, including Valery and the old barrier mage. Alistair turned to face Ilea, but he didn’t speak until one of the guards shut the door behind her.

“Welcome back, Lilith. I hear your investigation has proved... fruitful.”

“You could say that,” Ilea said.

Alistair breathed in and then sighed. “I have a lot of angry people demanding to know why one of their associates was attacked. While I had anticipated your hands-on approach, I do hope you’ve at least retrieved some kind of evidence.”

Some of the other people in the room glanced at each other. It was clear they were nervous.

“The Gray Company was selling people to slavers, amongst other things.” She walked up to Alistair’s desk and took off the two storage rings she had taken and worn until now. “The contents should be proof enough, but if not, there are witnesses as well, one of them a mage who recently joined up with the smugglers.”

She set down the rings and allowed Alistair to access them. There were murmurs from the others in the room as Alistair started summoning ledgers and documents. He looked through them whilst everyone else waited, occasionally muttering to himself.

“Is it what you were looking for?” Ilea asked.

Alistair nodded slowly and then looked at her. He seemed distracted. “More. It’s more than I’d hoped for.” He sighed and closed one of the

ledgers. He smiled a tired smile. “But I’m not looking forward to what follows.”

Ilea gave him a nod.

“Valery and Esteban, take these and document everything. Every name that comes up, every transaction that suggests direct involvement. Jia and Piet, inform the guard and the Hunters that the city is in lockdown. Prevent anyone from leaving, but if things get violent, stand back. Note everyone who refuses – captains, guards, nobility, merchants, and anyone else.”

“Once they know we have evidence to back us up, they’ll collect everything they have and leave the city,” one of them said.

“I know, but I won’t have more unnecessary deaths because of all this. If we back them into a corner, they will lash out, so let them leave. We will be rid of them either way, and we know who they are.” He paused. “Lilith, a word, if you will.”

As he started summoning ledgers and documents, Valery and Esteban moved everything into a set of wooden boxes before they left. The others left as well, leaving only Ilea in the office.

“You’ve done Riverwatch a great service,” he said once the door was closed and silence returned to the room. “Other than the surviving mage you mentioned, what happened to the smugglers?”

“I killed them,” Ilea said.

“You did,” Alistair said, taking in a sharp breath. “We’ll know soon how much damage all that has done. Either way, the city will be in chaos for a little while. It irks me to know how confident they were, keeping all those documents. Blackmail too, I suppose, yet it’s troubling to learn how deep this goes – and how long it has lasted.”

He set down the two storage rings. “You infiltrated their den, and you defeated them. I only asked for evidence, and that, you have provided.”

Ilea looked at the rings. “As far as I’m concerned, what the smugglers have taken belongs to Riverwatch.”

“A noble consideration. But it is a lot of wealth you are passing up on. Are you sure?”

“What will you do with it?”

“Hire more tutors for our academy, pay smiths, tailors, cooks, adventurers, Hunters, and any other jobs for which we need to take on apprentices, and pay for the education and gear of anyone willing to take up a profession. We’ve been flooded with refugees in the past years, and many

capable craftspeople have left in the wake of the elven attacks and the war in Lys. There is a lot to be done, and this wealth you've recovered will help."

Ilea smiled. "Tell them that the gold came from Lilith."

"You wish to be known as the benefactor?"

"I think that would be a good idea, yeah. It's a start."

He gave her a questioning glance.

"Some of my... allies in Ravenhall are looking to get in touch with the leadership of Riverwatch."

"This is not public information, is it?"

She shook her head. "I suggest you contact the Hand. I don't know how much I can tell you."

"I will, once I can speak for Riverwatch. You've been instrumental in all of this, Lilith. What do you suggest would be appropriate payment for this job?"

"Call me Ilea, Alistair. And I don't need payment for this. I came here to help out, and that's what I did. Take it as a token of trust. As to the job, I think it's clear that Kevan is innocent."

"I'd assumed as much, Ilea. And I'd learned of your name before, of course, but chose not to use it. It was good to trust the judgment of Valery and Dale. They are good people, and so are you."

He stepped out from behind his desk and offered his hand to her. "I will get in touch with the Hand, and I will make sure that Riverwatch will honor the trust you have shown us."

Ilea shook his hand. "While I'm here, talking to one of the main leaders of the city..."

He motioned for her to continue, returning to his desk.

"Have you heard of the Vultures Brotherhood?" she asked.

"A necromancer group, hiding somewhere in the northwestern forest. As far as I understand, they've been categorized as a group of interest but not a high enough priority to be investigated. Do you have concerns about them?"

Ilea shook her head. "No. They're friends of mine. Just wanted to ask that they be left alone. They are harmless."

*Mostly, I think.*

"Consider it done. If you wish them any privileges to enter the city, do let me know. I won't be able to allow them to practice necromancy and dark

magics within our walls, however.”

“I’ll let you know. Thanks.” She turned to go but hesitated.

“Is there something else?”

“Yeah,” Ilea said. “You know, I found something... down in that smuggler’s den.”

She gave him a quick rundown on the elves she’d met in the north, making it clear that she’d been in Riverwatch during the attacks and that the Cerithil Hunters were a different faction within elven society, before telling the more recent story.

“Their leader killed Mason as soon as he learned they were selling people. But now they’re without a trading partner,” she said. “I promised that I’d look into options for them.”

Alistair looked frazzled for perhaps the first time since she’d met him. He moved a hand through his hair and sighed. “I trust you, Ilea. But no matter how we spin this, we can’t have trade relations with elves. Myself and anyone else involved would lose their credibility overnight.”

“I see.” Ilea considered her options. “What if you allowed the Vultures to trade with the city instead?”

Alistair narrowed his eyes. “A middleman. No word of this can reach anyone in this city.”

“Of course,” Ilea said with a smile. She knew that some of the necromancers had been very interested in the elven corpses she’d brought them before. Meeting live ones was probably not something they would refuse either.

“Once you have arranged a contact, I can get in touch with these Vultures to discuss potential privileges and trade. That is all,” Alistair said.

“Sounds good. Thanks, Alistair.”

He sighed again. “You bring both opportunities and chaos.”

Ilea smirked. “You sound like a good friend of mine. I’m sure you two will get on splendidly.”

“I will be looking forward to it. Will you be staying in the city for the foreseeable future?”

“I don’t think so,” Ilea said. “If nothing else comes up, I think I’ll get back to Ravenhall soon. I’ll make sure the elves don’t get close to the city either. Ignore any reports of me going back into that smuggler’s den.”

“Of course. If there is nothing else, I’ll bid you farewell. There’s a lot of work to be done.”

“I can imagine,” Ilea said as she went for the door.

“Until next time, Lilith,” Alistair said.

“Until next time,” Ilea answered.

Then she left, blinking out of the government building before she flew up to a nearby roof. *I hope he can fulfill all those promises. Though he does seem like one of the good guys.*

She could see guards rushing through the city, bells tolling in the distance despite the late hour. *All I did was kill some smugglers.*

She wondered what to do next. She’d have to talk to Walter and the Elves, and she wanted to train a little with them as well. Standing on the roof, Ilea summoned the sphere that Catelyn had given her. It looked the same.

*Going north for a while sounds appealing too. Oh, and I’ll have to visit Trian in a few weeks, see how far he’s got. Exciting*, she thought as she made her way back to the warehouse she’d fought in just a few hours prior. Not to go back in, but to find Kevan.

\* \* \*

Ilea didn’t manage to pick up a trail at the warehouse, and she couldn’t find Kevan in his mansion either. So she went to the apartment building where Vin lived, and there, she found him.

“It’s me,” she said after knocking on the door.

Kevan opened it. “The woman of the hour,” he said. “How did things go down in their den?”

“Good,” Ilea said. “Yeah. Really good.” She glanced over at Vin. Her eyes were bloodshot. She held the sword that Kevan had asked to take. A memento.

“She’ll need some time. We should go outside if you wish to talk,” Kevan said.

Ilea nodded and blinked out, Kevan joining her in a mist of red. She watched the mist dissipate and then looked up at the night sky over Riverwatch.

“You did good today,” he said.

She glanced at him and smiled. “Didn’t expect that from you.”

“I won’t repeat it.”

“You did too,” Ilea said. “Reckless as it was.”

He smiled. “They killed Eli.” He looked up at the faintly visible stars.

“You’re not from here, are you?” Ilea asked.

He didn’t reply for a while.

“I’m not from here either,” she added.

“I suspected as much. You’re far too interested in me. Most people fear what they do not know.”

“Not sure if that has anything to with where I came from,” Ilea said. “I told Alistair that you’re innocent.”

“I appreciate it, though I didn’t need your concern.”

“I know.”

“What about you, Shadow? More missions in the city?”

“Not for now, no. But I’ll be sure to visit you whenever I’m around, old man.”

He smiled. “Yes. Just knock more carefully next time.”

“Get some enchanted steel gates or something. What are your plans now, anyway? You could join the Hand. You have the guts for it.”

“I’m not interested in mercenary work or monster subjugation. No. I’ll go back to my mansion to read and to rest. And maybe I’ll visit here again tomorrow.”

“Why don’t you take them in?” Ilea asked.

“I’d hoped you wouldn’t ask that question.”

“You have a big mansion, you can protect them, you can get some blood here and there. I’m sure you’re pretty wealthy too.”

“I drink blood to survive, Lilith. I cannot stand the light of the suns, and I’m viewed with plenty of suspicion already. I’m an outsider to this town, even after all this time. They should not associate with me.”

“They should,” Ilea said. “You fought for them.”

He shook his head ever so slightly.

“Why don’t you go and ask?”

He was quiet.

“You fear that they will reject you?”

“No,” he said. “I fear that they won’t.”

Ilea touched his shoulder. “I’ll send a man called Walter your way at some point. I think you’d like him. And I’ll let him know about the two upstairs as well. Though I still think your mansion could use a few more

people to liven things up. Think about it. But you can also die alone and miserable, forever an outsider to this town.”

“You’re rather insufferable.”

“That didn’t sound like you meant it,” Ilea said with a grin.

\* \* \*

Ilea soon left the city to join up with the Vultures. They were still awake, lounging in the common room, when she arrived and told them about some of the things that had happened.

“Who did you find to trade with?” Walter asked, one hand massaging his brow, after Ilea had finished.

“A group of Cerithil Hunters – elven warriors and mages,” Ilea said.

“What? So close to the city?” Lucia blurted out.

“You want us to trade with them?” Harthome asked, a terrified look on his face.

Walter nodded slowly. Celene rejoiced. Even Indra looked excited.

“I won’t lie. This does sound intriguing. And we’d get access to the city? Without any restrictions or having to sneak inside?” Walter asked.

“I’ll get you in touch with Alistair, but yes, that’s how I understood it.”

“He won’t be able to guarantee it,” Walter said.

“Not yet,” Lucia said. “But with what Ilea has told us, he may very well be voted Governor by the end of the week.”

“Still, it is dangerous. Dealing with elves,” Walter said.

“Imagine,” Indra said, his hands shaking. “Trading, conversing, with true elves! Walter, this... we have to.”

Walter looked at the man and then back at Ilea. “I know. I want to meet them first, see what they’re like. See if it’s safe.”

“Sure. I wanted to visit them anyway. Think I can take you with me. We’ll have to get past some of the guards, though.”

“I was sneaking past city guards decades before you even arrived here, girl,” Walter said. “Don’t patronize me.” He smiled.

“Oh? Very well, then, Dark Sorcerer. Let’s go meet some Elves.”

“I want to come too!” Indra exclaimed.

“Me too,” Celene said.

“Me as well,” Grandpa Bones added.

Walter touched his temple and sighed. “I’m trying to keep you all safe.”

“You just want them for yourself!” Celene shouted.

“Can we leave?” Walter said to Ilea.

Ilea smiled. “Sure. Come on. And the rest of you will get to meet them soon enough.”

## Contact

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Sneaking past the city guards didn't turn out to be a problem for the level two hundred dark sorcerer. What Ilea hadn't expected was Maro turning up whilst they made their way through the city streets.

"Heard a Shadow attacked some people that she shouldn't have attacked," he said as soon as he turned up.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Maro."

"Of course you don't. So, what are we sneaking around for?"

"Meeting some elves."

"Can I join? Sounds fun."

"Sure."

"Of course, just like that," Walter murmured.

She led them through the tunnels once they were in the smugglers' den, the cuts that Ilea had left on the walls leading her.

Maro snuck in behind them, avoiding the guards still busy dismantling traps and searching through already looted rooms and halls. They would find some things left behind by her, but not much.

"We could have brought the others," Ilea said, glancing at Walter.

"I trust you, Ilea. It scares me a little at this point, but I do. Still, I won't let Lucia and the others just meet a bunch of elves. They have been our enemy for hundreds of years, for as long as I can remember. Always a looming threat, and never did they step up to try and talk."

"To be fair, you don't know if they *ever* did. Who in their right mind would try and side with elves?" Maro asked, twirling his finger near his temple.

"Smugglers, apparently," Ilea replied, looking at him as she shrugged and smiled.

"Or you, a fighting-obsessed madwoman who released a thousand-year-old necromancer from his prison and crypt."

"You two are stressing me out," Walter said. "Can you be at least somewhat serious? We are about to meet some elves."

"I am very serious," Ilea said. "I need to get some resistance training in too, after all. They have insane magical power."

Walter sighed in response.

They crossed the rest of the distance, running most of the way. After a while, the speck of light became visible again, and Ilea motioned for the others to slow down.

"We're nearly there. I don't want to surprise them."

Entering the cave, she found Isalthar and his group were still where she'd left them. Feyrair had made a fire, it seemed, and was playing around with a burning stick. The healer was floating in the air whilst reading a book, and Ben was apparently trying to copy a painting.

"Very busy," Ilea said. "Hey there."

Feyrair jumped up and spread two dark red wings. "Took you long enough. Come, let's fight!"

"Please. A moment," Isalthar said.

Ilea couldn't tell if it was a command. The wording didn't suggest so, but Feyrair stood down immediately, his excitement gone. He didn't even grumble to himself.

Walter and Maro stepped out of the tunnel, the latter hanging a little farther back. Ilea lifted an eyebrow at that but didn't comment.

"This is Walter, a dark sorcerer and leader of a small necromancer brotherhood that operates near Riverwatch," Ilea explained, motioning to the man. "And this is Maro."

Isalthar nodded to each of them, taking his time to look them over. "I am pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Likewise," Walter said, glancing over the elves.

Maro just nodded.

“Peculiar. I remember such symbols. Yet I had thought that Rhyvor was gone. Even before my own time,” Isalthar commented, facing Maro.

“Some remnants are still around,” Maro said.

Feyrair smiled. “Another one to fight. Death magic seems like a worthwhile addition to my resistances.” He showed his teeth and hissed.

“He’s like you,” Maro whispered to Ilea, completely aware that everyone could hear him.

“Nice of you to notice,” Ilea said. “I’m less brazen.”

“Really?” Maro asked. “Just because he uses red...”

“It’s not just that. Maybe he’ll show you later,” Ilea winked.

Feyrair smiled back, his eyes gleaming with excitement.

Isalthar landed near Walter. “It is you, then? The one to provide future trade?”

Walter nodded. “Yes. Once I’m sure you’re trustworthy. Riverwatch isn’t keen on us necromancers, but we’ll be able to get goods in and out of the city,” he explained. “But we won’t be able to meet here.”

“We are not bound to this place. We will accommodate your wishes,” Isalthar said. “Whenever you feel there is trust between our parties.”

“There are some questions that I’d like to ask,” Walter said.

Isalthar faced him and gestured for them to step aside. “We shall speak, Walter. I appreciate your arrival.”

He glanced at Maro, but the necromancer shook his head. “I’m mostly here to see the fighting.”

Isalthar sighed, though it was neither audible nor visible. Ilea could only tell through her sphere and the slight change in air pressure in front of his mouth. She smiled at that and noticed a subtle twist of his head.

*Perceptive, that one.*

Ben joined them as well.

The last elf floated nearby but didn’t seem particularly interested in any of them.

A high-pitched sound suddenly came from near Isalthar; chunks of rock were cut from the ground before levitating before him. Again, the air moved, and the pieces of stone fell, making a table and four chairs that slowly drifted to the floor.

Walter gulped audibly but took a seat nonetheless. “Why do I agree to these things?” he grumbled to himself.

“We intend no harm,” Isalthar reassured the man.

"That's what they all say. Now, let's discuss what you need, where we could get it, and when you would like to visit."

Walter sighed, reaching into his pack and removing pieces of paper and a pen. Isalthar focused on the man with an unreadable expression.

"I want one of those pens. Mine is nearly empty," Ben said immediately, taking a seat. "Also food. Do you have a way to store it freshly?"

"You have more than ten pens," Isalthar said, confusion apparent in his words.

"Yes, but what if they're all empty suddenly?" Ben asked, then shook his head. "Walter, right? I'm Ben. It's a pleasure to meet you. I hope you understand the importance of this. We have to eat wild beasts if you cannot deliver food to us." His expression screamed urgency.

"Don't you love eating people and animals?" Walter asked as he wrote something down. He glanced at Ben. "How many pens?"

"Five... no, ten," Ben said before he looked at Isalthar. "Okay, five. We do like eating humans, animals, elves. There is something beautiful about the fresh blood, the still-pulsing muscles, the warmth. Variety is the spice of life. I heard a human say this a couple decades ago. A marvelous saying, if you ask me. I most certainly agree. I am old, Walter. Older than many a human, and trust me, I've eaten many things. New flavors and experimental dishes are most welcome. If you lack a storage item, I might lend you one so you can provide fresh ones."

Walter nodded. "I can tell that this will take a while."

Ilea had stopped listening by then. Walter might very well be able to win them as friends with time. She smiled at the thought. Having Maro and these Cerithil Hunters defend the Vultures would likely make them one of the most powerful human organizations. Mostly human, anyway.

"You are so easily distracted from what is important," Feyrair said as he joined her.

"Just take him out on a date first," Maro said.

Ilea rolled her eyes. "I might, old necromancer." She turned back to Feyrair. "My Heat Resistance needs a few more levels. Feel like setting me aflame?"

Feyrair considered it. "Only in a fair bout. I will not stoop so low as to use my magic for your advantage alone."

"Fair enough," Ilea said, her ashen wings forming behind her and ashen limbs fanning out as she went into a crouch.

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## FORTY

### A Relaxing Afternoon

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Ilea enjoyed the sparring, but Feyrair didn't feel like continuing after she beat him three times in a row. He seemed down about it, but Ilea couldn't help but find him very impressive. Before her level three hundred evolutions, she was pretty sure she wouldn't have stood a chance. And he had yet to reach those.

Instead, he started a bit of a competition with Maro to see who could inflict the most damage on her. That way, Ilea supposed, he could accept joining in on some more conventional resistance training. As conventional as it could be, anyway.

**'ding' Death Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 2**

**'ding' Heat Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 16**

As time went on, Ilea got more and more interested in what the other elves could do. Glancing toward the elf who had yet to reveal his name, she found him facing her.

"Do you want to attack me with something too? I'd appreciate the resistance levels," Ilea suggested, smiling at him, though her face was still covered by a helmet. Ash, fire, and death were pummeling her all the while but were easily ignored.

“I don’t know if you want to go through that,” Feyrair said. “It’s unpleasant.”

“No more than burning alive,” Ilea said, speaking definitively.

The elf shrugged and didn’t contest her statement. He probably knew a thing or two about fire and its effects on living beings.

“Soul and pain,” the hovering elf said. A reply to her suggestion, perhaps?

“Soul and pain magic?” Ilea asked. “I’ve never met anybody who could do that.”

“Soul magic?” Maro said, looking at the elf with interest. “I would be very interested in seeing that. It’s been... a long time.” He casually fired another purple blast at Ilea as he spoke.

Feyrair didn’t interrupt, just giving the other elf a nod instead.

“I’d love to have more resistances, so you can try it on me,” Ilea said. “I have pain tolerance in the second tier, so you don’t have to worry about that part.”

The elf remained quiet, hovering near-motionless. Ilea didn’t know if he was considering it or if he’d given up on the conversation already. Either way, she was getting results from Feyrair. If the other one joined in, it would simply be a bonus.

The sound of ringing laughter suddenly broke the air, and Ilea looked around to see Ben walking over with a smile on his face. “Now this is what I call a good environment for experimentation!” He opened his arms wide. “You said you would be open to some ice testing?”

Ilea nodded. “Ice, fire, and soul – or whatever he has. Isalhar can join in too, but I’d like to at least try to tank your attacks alone first.”

Ben raised his eyebrows before he nodded. “You take risks I wouldn’t even consider. Very well, I won’t complain. Let’s just start very low and go from there. Can you stop for a while?” he asked, addressing both Feyrair and Maro.

Their magic ceased, both of them regenerating the mana they’d used. Ilea’s healing and ash hadn’t used much of her own mana, her regeneration enough to sustain it, even without her absorption.

“We can start with ice. Just let me know if you’re alright with joining after,” Ilea said to the floating elf, who hadn’t spoken another word. “Go on, Ben, I’ll let you know once it becomes an issue.”

She extended her ashen armor and prepared herself. Azarinh Fighting would inform her about any excessive danger, and should something damn near kill her, she had her second-tier Azarinh Perception that would accelerate her perception.

He didn't seem like the kind of fighter that Feyrair was, but unlike the fire-using elf, Ben was past level three hundred – quite a long way past.

He nodded excitedly, powerful mana emanating from him a moment later. Instead of heat, the air now cooled.

Crystals of ice formed on top of her ash near-instantly. Soon, her body started to cool down, but she noticed that the ice itself couldn't quite penetrate.

"You have a second-tier resistance," Ben noted, smiling brightly. "Perfect."

A chunk of crystals on top of her armor suddenly burst with a powerful explosion of ice and pure force. It didn't manage to penetrate or even heavily damage her armor.

"Marvelous. You are definitely a valuable test subject."

He used more mana in his next spell, and her entire body was now covered in crystals.

*I'm literally an explosion test dummy.*

Again, the force of the spell ripped through her, stone cracking below her feet as the others took a couple of steps back, but again, Ilea was unharmed.

It looked like Isalthar and Walter had become interested as well, the two now walking over.

"Done?" Ilea asked, looking their way as more crystals formed.

Ben was now covered in a thin layer of ice, reminiscent of the ice mage elf Ilea had fought back in Salia. Ben's armor looked much thinner, being mostly see-through and more flexible.

"For now," Walter said. "We will meet again soon, once I've met with Alistair and collected what the Hunters need."

"You're not staying?" Ilea asked.

"No. You make me feel inadequate at the best of times. I'd rather not see you monsters test magic on each other," Walter said dryly. "Check in again before you leave. I'm sure the others would be happy."

"You wouldn't?" Ilea asked with a smile.

“Depends on what kind of news you bring next. But I’ve nothing against sharing a mug of ale, of course.”

“I’ll see you then. Good luck with everything,” Ilea said, then gave Ben a thumbs-up to continue.

Walter gave her a nod. “Alright. Now to find my way out of these tunnels...”

Ilea glanced at Isalthar. “You can join in as well.”

“Perhaps I will. Do you have a second-tier Wind Magic Resistance? Otherwise, I would suggest acquiring that first,” the healer said.

“I do,” Ilea replied before an explosion of ice shards sent a shockwave over the group, Feyrair taking another step back.

“Marvelous, marvelous,” Ben exclaimed happily, watching her as he scribbled notes into a notepad.

Ilea had a feeling she would hear that line a couple more times during the day.

After ten spells, Ben even warned the others to make a little more distance. The already splintered rock below Ilea was so cold that it cracked further from her weight alone.

It was a weird sensation. The air was so cold she could hardly breathe, but as soon as it entered her lungs, it warmed up. Perhaps her resistance was helping or she was just resilient enough to deal with it.

To her surprise, Ben’s magic couldn’t match Feyrair’s raw power. The range, speed, and duration of his magic was vastly superior compared to the dragon elf, but in terms of sheer impact, it fell flat. Perhaps it would be more effective against someone who couldn’t heal, absorb mana from enemy spells, didn’t have a high Ice Magic Resistance, and couldn’t heat up their body.

Her ash froze and flaked off, whole chunks ripped out thanks to the explosions, but they weren’t forceful enough to rip through to her skin or rip her apart completely. Ilea had a theory that her second-tier Blast Resistance had something to do with it as well.

Even after trying for nearly an hour, Ben wasn’t discouraged. Quite the opposite. He was ecstatic. The man let loose all the spells and powers he’d wanted to try. He could even partially turn into ice himself, moving through the frozen stone, air, and ice he created out of nowhere.

He tried to crush her with huge chunks of it, tried to cut through her armor with spikes, lances, and shrapnel. He tried to squish her between

moving pieces, tried to freeze her ash and her body itself.

Nothing quite managed to leave a lasting impression. Ilea was too shock- and ice-resistant, her ashen armor and her body regenerating too quickly.

“Do you feel more comfortable trying your magic now?” Ilea asked the floating elf once more.

Isalthar hadn’t joined in yet either, but having felt his magic before when he’d killed Mason, she knew it was a little different from the rest. Besides, she already had Wind Magic Resistance. Something new would add to her Avatar of Ash, thereby providing a five- or even ten-percent increase to her toughness.

The elf didn’t respond, making Ilea focus back on the others. She did, however, glance his way again when he held out his hand. His other arm was moving back, as if drawing a bow.

In her sphere, Ilea saw exactly that. A bright whitish blue bow being drawn, a corporeal arrow placed on the string of light. Wisps of energy flowed over both bow and arrow, moving out as if to escape.

“Certain?” the elf asked, doubt and anxiousness in his voice.

“Soul magic partially damages your soul. Your healing will have a much smaller effect on it, or none at all. It is an incredibly painful and... unsettling experience,” Ben said, taking a couple of steps away from her.

“What happens if my soul gets destroyed?” Ilea asked, looking at the drawn arrow.

It did not look like there was any strain on the elf’s face. He simply held the arrow and aimed.

“The soul isn’t easily destroyed,” Isalthar supplied.

“Soul magic damages your health just as much as your mana. The added aspect of the soul is... difficult to discern or explain. This is information we learned when he joined the Hunters, provided solely by him,” Ben explained.

*So I’m trusting this random elf not to have lied.*

“How do I heal it?”

“Rest,” the floating elf said before he turned his head sideways by just a few degrees.

As he gave her a questioning look, she could see the sweat form on his brow.

“Shoot.”

He loosed the arrow, a streak of bright light flowing toward her. Azarinth Fighting informed her about some health loss, but it felt safe enough.

When the arrow hit, its energy moved through her, ignoring her armor entirely.

And with it came an unsettling pain. Deep and to her very core.

It didn't feel like anything physical was being damaged, nor did her Pain Tolerance negate the sensation. Her mouth was slightly agape as she staggered back a step.

She felt hurt in a way she'd not felt hurt before. As if something intrinsic to her had been damaged. A part of her that she had never felt before, but now that she did, it seemed it had always been there.

It felt like a chunk of her life force and mana was ripped out with the arrow as the thing flew off into the distance.

"What the fuck... was that?" she exclaimed as she stared at the elf, noticing her voice shaking. The damage was massive in comparison to the others. The mana situation was a little confusing because she'd both lost and won mana. The feeling was distinct and strange.

The elf lowered his hands and head, his mouth opening but closing again a moment later. He turned in shame, avoiding the group's looks.

"That was terrifying," Ilea said, noticing now that tears were flowing down her cheeks. "And beautiful," she added.

She shuddered, cycling healing mana through herself. It helped, slowly, comforting her. *This is new.*

"Can you do it again?"

The elf turned back a little. He seemed curious now. "Certain?" he asked once more, his voice scared, quiet, and unsure yet hopeful at the same time.

*Why am I doing this?*

Ilea gulped and then smiled.

*Well. If a monster with this type of magic surprises me, I'd better be prepared.*

She breathed out and braced herself. "Certain."

## Loot and Levels

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The sensation didn't get any easier to handle. Harder, actually, until the elf stopped attacking. Ilea took that as a sign to rest. Resuming her normal resistance training, that was.

She looked over to the hovering elf and felt a little strange. Embarrassed, perhaps? Insecure? She wasn't sure. She felt like he had shown her something indescribable and opened a door to a new aspect of herself. She could tell it would take time to understand more about it.

*I feel vulnerable. That's it.*

She smiled and looked at him. Even with his eyes covered, she felt as if he saw her. Truly saw her. And while she felt vulnerable, she didn't feel pressured or insecure. It felt like he had given something to her. A gift in some way.

"Thank you," she said, unsure what else she should say.

He hissed in a respectful manner and bowed his head.

Ilea had yet to gain a new skill, but she would try again in an hour or two. Maybe longer if the feeling of this deep and unsettling injury didn't subside by then.

"Do you have that resistance? Does it even exist?" Ilea asked, looking at Isalther.

The elf had watched on with curiosity, slightly twitching whenever an arrow moved through her. "You shall find out – soon." His voice was calm and kind.

“Interested in trying yourself against my defenses, then?” she asked, fully facing him now, ashen armor completely covering her bone armor below. It had regenerated during her bout with the nameless elf and was ready to be ripped apart once more.

“In fact, I am,” he said.

A powerful surge of mana washed over her, followed by a gentle gust of wind.

Ilea stayed where she stood, crouching down into a fighting stance.

“Do you have a way to tell?” Isalther asked.

“Tell what?”

“I do not wish for your death.”

There was not a speck of arrogance or superiority in his voice. He was simply asking if she was sure about this, about what she was getting herself into.

“I’ll teleport away if you’re about to kill me,” Ilea said. Even if he cut her in half, she would heal.

The elf nodded and raised his hand slightly. A thin line of air condensed and moved.

That was all that happened.

As obvious and simple as it sounded, it looked the same in Ilea’s sphere. She could have blinked away if she’d wanted, if she’d had an inkling about the incoming damage thanks to the third tier of Azarinh Fighting, but it would’ve been a very short window for her to react. The spell hit her nearly as fast as her brain could process it, even with all her enhancements.

As her ashen armor reconnected itself, a barely audible crack resounded as her bone armor was sliced vertically. It too repaired itself quickly.

Ilea felt a thin line of blood flowing down her body, starting at her brow and ending on her right thigh. Her bone was intact, but he had cut deeper than Feyrair’s claws.

*Was it not diverted at all? Did the second tier of my Wind Resistance not do anything?*

Isalther breathed out, having held his breath for a second longer than he normally did.

*He was worried. No wonder, with an attack like that. Is that the weakest he can tune it? No... he tuned it, according to me?*

She smiled to herself. She felt awed in the same way as when she’d seen Jyrai’s wings, when she’d seen that masked person flying in Virilya, and

when she'd first gone to the north.

"More," Ilea said. "To the bone."

The onlookers had various expressions. All of them knew what had happened and perceived it in their own ways. For some, it may have been too quick, but they had felt it.

Another line formed and moved through her. It was so thin that her ash barely moved as it was seamlessly separated. It moved faster still, denser in its fleeting connection.

"Nothing?" Isalther asked.

Ilea shook her head. "Not a crack." Her bones were all that protected most of her organs, especially her brain. She would be out for a split second or even longer once he got through. He would notice.

"Peculiar. Your body is resilient beyond anything I've seen at your level."

It was a compliment, but Ilea was acutely aware that he could bypass all of her defenses effortlessly.

She wasn't sure how to take it. Mostly, she knew that she wanted to increase her resistance. It felt exciting to know the heights that magic could reach, to see it, feel it.

Yet it also felt annoying, and wrong, that someone like him could cut through her defenses so easily – after all her work, after all the fighting. And he wasn't a monster. He was smart. She felt the same as she'd felt when facing the Birmingales.

Not quite the same.

Ilea smiled. Despite the fact that he could likely kill her in a fight, the confidence she felt in her own abilities, her own power, compared to when she'd fought in Virilya was night and day. What she saw and felt here didn't terrify her.

It inspired her.

*Another drake.*

She smiled and gave him a questioning glance.

"I do not wish to face you, guardian. Merely to provide assistance," he said, sensing her intent. "I merely seek to help my people. Fighting you in earnest will not benefit either of us."

Ilea sighed. "Your choice. Not even me moving around you, trying to approach?"

“Your teleportation is instant, arcane in nature. I have no way to stop it. I suppose it would be a battle of attrition, of who would land a killing blow first. If you wish to test your speed, I suggest you test it against him,” Isalthar said, pointing at Feyrair.

“It’s more about dodging. You could just do this, and I’ll try to evade. What do you say?”

She wanted to test herself against him but knew she wasn’t ready. Not yet. Nonetheless, it felt intriguing.

Ilea was glad that she’d made elven friends and that these Hunters weren’t her enemy. Perhaps she would have died today had neither of those things been the case.

“That is agreeable,” Isalthar said finally.

Ilea smiled brightly. “Then let’s continue.”

\* \* \*

Hours passed, the group falling into a rhythm. Those with the most powerful attacks had to rest most often, waiting to regenerate their mana. First to stop were Feyrair and Ben, then Maro and the nameless elf, who joined in once more after two hours had passed.

The arrows were worse than anything else, and compared to the usual excitement of unlocking a skill, all Ilea felt was relief when she heard a familiar noise.

***‘ding’ You have gained the General Skill: Soul Magic Resistance  
Soul Magic Resistance – lvl 1***

***The fleeting conscience of man and beast. Flesh, energy, motion, and thought. The soul stands separate entirely, yet intertwined all the same. Through hardship you have learned understanding, not through meditation and study. A brutal yet comforting truth, strengthening that which cannot be grasped.***

Ilea breathed out. She hoped the next arrows would be a little easier.

She next focused on the ice, exploding steadily around her ash, the lances boring into her defenses before they were melted away by white-hot

flame, decayed by the forces of death before a gentle breeze carried all away.

Night came in a flash, yet Ilea remained focused entirely on the training. The combined magic tested her skills and control all the way through, forcing her to decide on which injuries to heal, which parts of her armor to recover first, and how to use the split seconds her Azarin Fighting skill allowed her before Isalthar's attacks hit.

She did feel like she got better in the end, with slight variations in her stance and minute adjustments allowing her to mitigate a lot of the damage. His beyond-razor-thin attacks allowed for such.

Ilea was under no illusions. She was pretty sure the elf was more than capable of summoning more than single attacks. In the final two hours, he even did, using both horizontally and vertically aligned blades to throw her off.

She knew he had to hold back, and it annoyed her.

## Departure

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Ilea would have liked to continue with the training, but when the suns set, Isalthar called for them to stop. She checked her notifications and was pleased by the results.

**‘ding’ Ice Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 5**

**‘ding’ Ice Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 6**

**‘ding’ Heat Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 17**

**‘ding’ Heat Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 18**

**‘ding’ Soul Magic Resistance reaches lvl 2**

...

**‘ding’ Soul Magic Resistance reaches lvl 8**

**‘ding’ Wind Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 3**

...

**‘ding’ Wind Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 6**

**‘ding’ Death Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 3**

“This was a nice change of pace,” Ben said, stretching.

“Will you be in the area for a while?” Ilea asked.

“We will soon meet with Walter and the Vultures, but we will go westward again once we are ready,” Isalthar said.

“Is there a way for me to contact you?”

“We will meet with Walter every so often. If you have any messages for us, leave them with him. We will do the same should we need to contact you. Let us know when and where we could meet up with the Hunters you know, should they be willing.”

“I’ll be looking forward to our next bout,” Feyrair said and hissed.

“Make sure to get to three hundred before then,” Ilea said.

He smiled and spread his wings.

Isalhar ascended, the winds moving about him. “It was good to meet you, Ilea. I’m sure our paths shall cross again when fate wills it.”

Ben tipped his hat. “Good night to you, human. And thank you for the meal.”

Ilea waved at them. “I’ll see you around. Thanks for the training, and good luck on your journey.” She nodded toward the soul mage and smiled when he returned the gesture.

She watched them leave and crossed her arms.

“You could have asked if you could join them, you know?” Maro said. “You look like a lost child.”

Ilea glanced at him with the most innocent expression she could manage. “My daddy left. Will you be my daddy?”

“I will not be your daddy.”

Ilea tried to cry but didn’t quite manage. “I should train up an actress skill or something.”

“You really should. It’s more than worth the effort.”

“But no, it doesn’t feel right to join them. But who knows what fate will bring?”

Maro nodded sagely. “Ah yes, the paths of fate are always... nope, I got nothing.”

Ilea started toward the tunnel and laughed. “I thought you had an actor skill.”

“Actor. Not comedian. Deep insecurities and a need for validation, not depression.”

Ilea smiled, not about to double down on his self-deprecating joke.

They made their way back to the city, teleporting and sneaking past the guards.

“You wanna go for a drink?” Maro asked.

Ilea thought about it. She wanted to visit the Vultures again and maybe leave for Ravenhall in the morning. Standing in an alley, she

absentmindedly summoned Catelyn's sphere, tossed it upward, and considered Maro's proposal.

"I think I could go for a drink," she said, catching the sphere. Her eyes widened when she saw the sphere expanding, a faint pulse of magic coming from the enchanted artifact. "Shit."

"What is that?" Maro asked.

"Change of plans. I'm going north. It's a distress beacon from Catelyn in Hallowfort."

"A distress beacon? She's calling for help?"

"She is."

"And you're going there alone?"

"You can join if you like? I'm sure she'd appreciate the help."

Maro sighed and stretched. "As long as I don't get stuck there. Very well. This once, I will help. Do you have any idea what this is about? Or is there no further information?"

"None. But Catelyn told me she'd only use it in an absolute emergency. That's why I want to leave immediately."

"Then let's find out what this is about. I suppose we know the way, at least," Maro said, his armor appearing on his form. "Ready to leave then, great Lilith?"

Ilea looked up, feeling the night's first raindrops falling on her. Her ashen armor formed around her as she spread her wings.

"Yeah. Let's go."

*On my way, Catelyn.*

\* \* \*

Her wings moved in the dark skies, the storm clouds above obscuring the moon and starlight. Rain was pouring down, the water flowing off Ilea's ashen armor as if it rejected her form.

Maro, on the other hand, was soaked, his robe-like armor and helmet soaking up as much water as they could hold. Still, with his level and stats, neither the added weight nor the damp and wetness seemed to be a concern.

The two flew in silence over the forest, soon ascending to get over the Naraza mountain range and passing into the northern territories. The ascent

brought them through and above the clouds, where a sea of stars opened up. The storms and lightning were gone as they moved northward.

“Beautiful, isn’t it!” Maro shouted, a dozen meters to Ilea’s right.

“It is!” Ilea shouted back as she looked up.

When they finally crossed over the mountains, the rocky terrain of the north spread before them. For miles and miles, as far as the eye could see.

Ilea smiled when she saw it all. Perhaps she had already started to miss the wilderness of the north, or perhaps she was simply excited for more interesting battles after her time spent talking about contracts and fighting smugglers.

She was worried about Catelyn and Hallowfort, about Terok and Goliath. She hoped whatever had made Catelyn use the device was something they could hold out against, at least for a few days until help arrived.

Another part of her felt excited. Because the fact that Catelyn had called for help meant that there was a challenge waiting for her that was dangerous even for the level three hundred fox. Having faced Isalhar’s magic, feeling the power and the harmony he had with his element, she felt inspired to push to the same heights. And for that, she needed more than a bit of resistance training with adventurers and elves.

It would take a couple of days of travel to reach Hallowfort once more, but she was looking forward to flying all the way there. Because she could fly all the way there. And because she wanted to find out how quickly she could do it.

They went on through the night, avoiding the occasional flock of Famine Crows and diving through the crevices. She occasionally watched the Miststalkers, the monsters dancing through the northern landscape unbothered by worldly happenings.

The days and nights went by quickly. This time around, Ilea and Maro didn’t stop to take any breaks. A few days later, they reached the mountain that marked the Tremor dungeon and, with it, the entrance to Hallowfort.

It was early evening on the third day after they’d left Riverwatch when they landed near the cave entrance. Quickly, Ilea made her way to the massive crystal-lit cavern and the bridge leading over to the town.

But there wasn’t a bridge. Not right now.

On the other side of the damn near abyss was a wall built on top of the statue. Two Awakened guards were standing on top of it, both clad in black

full-plate armor, wielding a halberd and a war hammer, respectively, and the bridge was now fastened to the edge of the barricade and hanging loosely downward.

Ilea breathed out and relaxed a little. The flight had been long and focused. She didn't need sleep yet, but she had started to worry about what had caused Catelyn to call for her.

*The city is still standing.*

"Is Hallowfort closed? Why has the bridge been cut?" Ilea shouted, alarming the guards as she flew over the abyss.

They didn't attack or seem in any way apprehensive. Not of her, anyway.

"A security measure, healer of ash," one of them said.

"It is good to know you have returned. You are most welcome," the other one said.

"What's going on?" Ilea asked as she landed on the barricade. She noted that it spanned the full extent of the town, nearly melded onto and around some of the buildings it now shadowed.

"The Descent... is spewing up its kind. Monsters from the depths, corruption spreading amongst them. Lady Elana will instruct you. She is at the Hunter's Den," the first guard said.

*Corruption? The blood monsters? Or something else is coming up? And why now?*

"Thank you," Ilea said, jumping off the wall and landing smoothly on the stone floor beyond.

Dwarves and Awakened of various species and sizes were moving through the streets, shouting and working. Amid the many weapon racks, smiths and craftsmen were talking hurriedly to heavily geared scavengers and adventurers.

Food was being cooked in the well-lit streets, new magical lights having joined the existing ones. People seemed busy, unsure, and frightened.

Maro appeared next to Ilea and looked around. "Guess we won't be grabbing a drink first, then?"

## Slaughterhouse

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The Hunter's Den was busy. At least a dozen people were moving about, emptying the shelves of anything useful they could find.

Elana coordinated it all from the central table whilst talking to four people in front of her. They rushed out a moment later, the grim expressions on their faces not hidden by armor or masks.

"Ilea. And... Maro," Elana said when she saw the two. She sighed. "You really came."

"Catelyn called," Ilea said. "We're here to help out. Where is she?"

Elana nodded and approached them. "She is fighting in the first layer. The Descent. It has changed. Or the monsters within have changed. A corruption has spread amongst them, spread through blood. If you are injured, be advised to cut out any sections where the corruption has taken hold. The monsters are mindless and frenzied, rushing out into the first layer of the dungeon, attacking everything and anything that is not yet corrupted. We're trying to contain it."

"How long has this been going on?"

"A little over a week, but things have progressively worsened. More powerful creatures from deeper layers are breaking out onto the first. Our fighters are tired, and treating the injuries is difficult."

"We'll join in. See how things are."

"Good." Elana gave them both a look. "Stay safe, the both of you."

Ilea nodded and blinked out before she started running toward the abyss and the fastest way to the Descent. “Corrupted monsters,” she murmured.

“She was concerned,” Maro said beside her.

They reached the bar entrance that led below and rushed through it, past tired-looking warriors and mages, teleporting down the vertical stone shaft before continuing downward.

“She’s never concerned,” the former king added.

They emerged in the expanding underground cave of the first layer less than a minute later, Ilea spreading her wings as she took in the scene before her.

The vast forest was alight with blazing fires, the smell of burning wood and flesh reaching up to the highest point of the cavern where Ilea and Maro were hovering. Smoke plumed from various burning sections.

Steam was rising from the lake, and the explosions of fire and other magics lit up in the distance and rumbled through the cavern. The sounds of battle were apparent, even from this far away. Dozens of wide-spanning spells were visible.

“Looks like they could use some help,” Ilea said.

She flapped her wings and shot down and forward. A few seconds later, Ilea impacted the ground among the raging fires where a cluster of spells had exploded moments earlier, her weight and some of her ashen tendrils carving into the scorched earth.

A few Awakened hovered over the smoking remains of trees, while others were running past with their blades and weapons held high. Ilea followed them.

The screeching, snarling, and howling of various beasts was coming from up ahead.

As Ilea sped through the cavern, she saw scarred and scattered remains of unidentifiable creatures littering the blackened, earthy ground.

She saw a huge bear with singed brown fur turn her way, one black eye focusing on her as it roared, muscles rippling, some areas skinless and completely exposed. The right side of its skull was fractured, and dark orange sludge, pulsing with life and magic, was dripping out.

Ilea dug her ashen limbs into the ground to stop abruptly, turning with the movement to face the creature.

**[Corrupted Farngard – lvl 174]**

Ilea had no time to assess the situation as the monster charged at her immediately. Powerful steps propelled the massive animal forward with somewhat unsure footing.

Her ashen limbs flashed out, tearing through the beast's hide, body, and organs. Ilea made sure to target the orange sludge with one of her limbs.

The bear died the instant its body was ripped apart, unable to defend against or react to the attack.

**‘ding’ You have defeated [Corrupted Farngard – lvl 174]**

*Corrupted.* Ilea squinted at the orange sludge sticking to her ashen limb before she shook it off, splattering it to the ground.

She moved on, cutting through a group of wolf-like creatures that had wounds on their bodies with the same orange ooze dripping from them. Their lightning magic fizzled out against her ashen armor, though she avoided most of it in the first place.

**‘ding’ You have defeated [Kohlwolf – lvl 163]**

**‘ding’ You have defeated [Kohlwolf – lvl 178]**

**‘ding’ You have defeated [Kohlwolf – lvl 180]**

The beasts were attacking her on sight, utterly uninterested in their own safety. In itself, it wasn't much of a surprise. Ilea had fought monsters behaving similarly previously. No, it was something in their eyes, in the way they moved and their sheer ferocity, that stood out here.

A nearby Awakened was getting overwhelmed when Ilea appeared by his side with a blink. He had bright red chiton-like skin, or perhaps scales, and he carried an enormous sword.

Her ash tore through a dozen creatures, mostly wolves and insect-like monsters. All were below level two hundred. Gore, orange ooze, and blood splattered the ground as she helped the Awakened up, healing him in the process.

“What are those creatures?” Ilea shouted over the noise.

Another three wolves rushed them, only to be impaled on ashen limbs that completely skewered them before they were tossed aside.

The Awakened heaved for air and clutched his two-handed curved sword. “Corrupted... beasts. You just arrived?” He was looking around frantically, his voice suggesting exhaustion.

Ilea nodded and sent ten ashen spears into three oncoming mantis-like creatures, two meters tall and moving with high speed. They had thin legs and bodies, single near blade-like claws adorned their arms, and long, sharp teeth in their maws.

Her ash shredded through them, Ilea’s limbs finishing the two that had survived her spears. Their muscles twitched as she ripped her ash from them.

**‘ding’ You have defeated [Corrupted Jagged Mantis – lvl 238]**

...

**‘ding’ You have defeated [Corrupted Jagged Mantis – lvl 253]**

*Huh... two fifty.*

A corrupted bear broke through a damaged tree and was killed with a single ashen lance to its head, the momentary stun from it charging through the tree giving her ample time to aim.

By now, the Awakened’s attention was back on her. “They’re creatures from the Descent, various layers. The orange pus they all have on them is a—”

He was interrupted by a loud roar. A familiar roar, Ilea noted, seeing a lunging beast of towering size approaching, its hammer-like bone arms coming down toward her.

Ilea lifted her arms and took the impact, her ashen limbs tearing into the beast at the same time. They came to a stop a couple of meters farther back.

**[Blood Carrier – lvl 321]**

The disfigured form of muscle, bone, and gore was even more torn up than the last one she’d met, half of its torso pulsing with the orange corruption.

It died seconds later as Ilea pushed destructive healing mana into it and her limbs dug deeper with each passing moment.

**‘ding’ You have defeated [Blood Carrier – lvl 321]. For defeating an enemy ten or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted.**

*That one was close to death already.*

“Where is Catelyn?” she shouted.

“I don’t know... it’s chaos. I suggest you find the biggest fire. Thank you, ashen healer,” he grunted, looking for the next target.

“Where are the biggest groups?” Ilea asked, extending a hand to the warrior.

He caught on and grabbed her arm, his form much larger than hers. “No groups, they’re everywhere!”

### **[Warrior – lvl 221]**

Ilea ascended, carrying the warrior, looking for fires and spells. She spotted a number of flying archers and mages through the smoke and flames, all sending their attacks down into the burning forest.

The warrior pointed. “The cracks... where the beasts emerge.”

She could see them, open fissures in the landscape that she hadn’t seen before.

“Should I take you somewhere?” Ilea asked as she sped up, making for where he’d indicated.

“To any allies you can see!” he shouted in response.

She spotted four Awakened warriors fighting alongside a dwarf with magic support from above. They were facing dozens of monsters.

Ilea descended and let go of the Awakened, who landed in a roll, his blade cleaving a wolf in two. Her ash spread out, both healing the injured and ripping through the beasts.

She’d never seen many of the creatures before, yet they all had the corruption in common. She was about to move on when she noted that two injured warriors were still retching, orange pulsing growths forming near the injuries that wouldn’t heal with her magic.

She narrowed her eyes and stepped closer, impaling a jumping Pure Blooded with five ashen limbs, his blood splattering down on her.

A dwarf stepped up and ripped open the damaged plate armor of his ally. “Healing won’t help. We have to carve it out!” He unsheathed a blade.

“With a healer here, we can do it now!”

Ilea watched on in horror as the dwarf started crudely cutting into the pus and the wound, causing the warrior to scream in pain, attracting more beasts.

Ilea gritted her teeth and pushed the dwarf aside. She flowed healing magic into the injured Awakened as two more of her limbs formed thin-bladed tips, cutting out the corrupted wound in an instant.

A yelp resounded from below the helmet before the wound closed again quickly. Ilea grabbed the plate armor and forced it closed again. The Awakened’s chest heaved, and he cried as he clutched where the wound had been.

“Move back, form a defensible position. You’re surrounded,” Ilea said as she cut through the corruption on the other man’s leg. Then she healed the wound again, this one taking a little longer as half of his thigh had to be removed.

They nodded to her and grabbed the previously injured fighters, rushing back into the forest.

The smoke around her was making her throat itch and her eyes water slightly. Circulating healing mana made those sensations stop. A full-on forest fire was raging by now. Trees groaned before chunks of charred wood fell to the forest floor.

Ilea pressed on through the flames as she cut down every beast she came across. A flare of magic and fire made her turn to the left. She ran through the ruined and burning thicket.

Darting through the trees, she found the burning form of Catelyn, currently three meters in height and twice that in length. Her claws ripped through whole swaths of beasts that tried to latch onto her.

Any corruption in her wounds was burned away instantly, and the heat she exuded alone was enough to singe the monsters. And still they rushed at her, uncaring of their coming demise.

Ilea joined in, a quick flight bringing her to within a dozen meters of the fox, flanking her.

She raised her hand and released the heat she’d gathered, Heart of Cinder exploding out, disintegrating a cluster of oncoming creatures. Then she blinked away, reappearing with a flurry of limbs that ripped through bodies, skulls, and bones.

“Ilea,” Catelyn said, her voice deep and tired.

“Hey, Cat,” Ilea said, extending one of her limbs to check the fox’s health. “You’re in pretty bad shape. Sorry I took so long.”

### **[Mage – lvl 328]**

Catelyn opened her mouth, a massive cone of flame setting a dozen oncoming monsters ablaze. “I’ve been fighting... for some time.”

Ilea extended her ash and started healing her. “What’s the plan? Just slaughter everything that comes up?”

“For now... We need space... a perimeter, defenses...”

At that moment, a beam of purple energy slammed through more approaching monsters, decaying flesh and bone alike.

Maro was floating nearby. “What happened to this dungeon?” he shouted, continuing to cast more beams.

Catelyn roared, a loud noise to attract more of the beasts. Perhaps it had another effect besides the pure rage. Ilea couldn’t tell.

“We’ll thin them out,” Catelyn said.

An Awakened, one she already knew, landed a couple of meters away. His whole form was wreathed in shadow, four arms each holding a short sword, blood and orange pus dripping from the blades. A black metal mask, a horn jutting out from each cheek, hid his face. The vertical line of red paint was barely discernible behind all the blood.

“Ilas,” Catelyn said, nodding to the new arrival.

“More breaches west and south of here,” he said.

### **[Warrior – lvl 254]**

He vanished a moment later before he reappeared amongst a group of beasts. His blades moved similarly to Ilea’s ash, a flurry of steel reflecting the light of the flames.

*There’s so many of them,* Ilea thought as she saw the shadows move beyond the blazing fires.

Ilas returned and crouched. “We need to form a defensive position, to lead them somewhere, or we’ll soon be overwhelmed.”

“Here,” Catelyn replied, fumes rising from the edges of her mouth. Her eyes narrowed, focused once more now that healing magic was flowing

through her. She looked up before sending out a sphere of fire, the explosion above bright and broad.

*Here it is,* Ilea thought, then blinked after the warrior wreathed in shadows. She heard another roar behind her and focused.

There were more wolves, bears, Pure Blooded and their variations, a number of insect species, and the occasional reptile. All were corrupted, and all immediately focused on her, guided by sight, smell, sound, or magic detection.

A powerful stream of wind knocked her aside, forcing her to spread her wings to stabilize before she blinked into the group. Ashen limbs slashed through the snarling creatures before she looked up and saw a distant moth monster unleashing another wind magic spell.

Ilea watched as a set of ice spears impaled it, making the beast tumble in the air before it dived downward, focused on the mage who had attacked it. She saw at least a dozen of them flying above them, dodging out of the way when a massive creature rolled past her, coming to a stop with a roar.

### **[Corrupted Needlebear – lvl 324]**

It was a three-meter-tall bear with bone-like needles sticking out from its back. Ilea knew from her studies that they were used both in its rolling attacks and also from range.

*Alright, let's do this.*

Looking at the beast, she noted a deep gash on its belly, orange pus oozing forth. Four ashen limbs slammed into the ground behind her.

The bear jumped and curled up, rolling at her with increasing speed. It struck her with a heavy thud, the needles digging into Ilea's ash as its movement was stopped completely.

She grabbed onto one of the spikes and slammed her fist into its back, some of the needles splintering as she forced her mana into the creature. Her limbs slashed at the bear from all sides, adding to its injuries.

Ilea kept it in place and continued her assault until a *ding* filled her mind. No sooner had it resounded than a root slammed into her face, scratching past her ash before she grabbed it.

### **[Corrupted Night Forest Spirit – lvl ??]**

*Still below five hundred*, Ilea noted, smiling at the floating spirit, which was nearly as tall as she was. It had an owl-like wooden head, and its body was made of gnarled bits of wood, moving in ways that seemed wrong to her.

She let go as another Needlebear slammed into her, jumping up when a Blood Carrier crashed in from behind, dodging both with the movement. Both creatures were stunned for a moment, allowing her to unleash her Heart of Cinder, disintegrating them entirely.

Ilea spread her wings and rushed at the spirit, dodging the wooden spears and roots rushing at her before she crashed into it, slamming her fist down onto its head and chipping away at the owl's wooden form.

With a last crack, the head was ripped off, and the creature died.

**'ding' You have defeated [Corrupted Night Forest Spirit – lvl 438]. For defeating an enemy one hundred and twenty levels or more above your own, bonus experience is granted.**

More and more monsters came her way, but to her ash, it was all the same. Writhing tendrils slashed and tore through dozens of monsters with every passing second.

Ilea blinked and moved, sometimes flying up and landing again to avoid the magic and claws coming at her from the mass of monstrosities. Her ashen limbs helped her dodge and move from time to time, their reach and strength making them into additional legs for her to navigate with.

She released Heart of Cinder in cones, cast from several of her limbs, and it disintegrated dozens, if not hundreds, of the corrupted creatures. Every thirty to sixty seconds, she released the heat constantly forming within her. The longer charges allowed for a much wider area to be affected.

The battlefield was littered with corpses, blood, and bones, orange ooze spilling out of thousands of wounds as Ilea blinked and fought.

Monsters screeched and howled, fighting to get to her, to tear her apart with all their limbs and teeth, using all the magic they could muster and whatever strength their bodies could give.

Ilea flowed through them, soon lost in the fighting as she cut, punched, and burned her way through hordes of corrupted creatures.

She got to know them, their spells, their weaknesses, learned that the corruption was a weakness to exploit. Whatever instinct and intelligence

these beasts once had had been replaced by bloodlust and ferocity.

While they weren't fighting with any tactical understanding, they more than made up for that in their numbers. Ten and twenty times over. More and more monsters poured out of the crevices in the earth that led farther down into the layered dungeon.

Some of the beasts were at a higher level, so it took longer to kill them, their spells and claws cutting deeper into her ash. The few that got through left stinging wounds. Her healing managed to slow the spread of the strange orange pus, but she couldn't fully get rid of it. It was a strange sensation, both hot and cold. She had to cut out the affected flesh or burn it.

After a while, Ilea started to see more spells from other mages in the distance. Their magic cut through the uncontrolled masses as more and more flying combatants joined the battle.

Maro appeared nearby, the necromancer flying closer before ceasing his magic. "We can barely hold them back!" he shouted over the sounds of battle.

Ilea flew up to him, ignoring the thorns, lances, and bolts of lightning flying up from below. The beasts simply kept moving – the area she'd cleared was already crawling with monsters again, hundreds of them loose upon the terrain.

"We need more fighters!"

Ilea considered for a moment, then nodded. "Go look for the elves and Terok!" she shouted. "And recharge your mana while you're at it. I'll keep going!"

Maro gave her a nod and flew off into the rising smoke.

Ilea blinked downward, crashing into the mass of monsters, where she fanned her ashen limbs out and cut into the creatures.

She moved her wings and charged forward, a smile on her face.

## **"Healing"**

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Hours passed, but her body enhancement spells and healing skill kept Ilea topped off in both health, mana, and her ability to function efficiently. If anything, she got better. Whenever her stamina ran low, she would focus fully on her ash until she was ready again.

She had finally gotten a resistance against the corruption as well.

***'ding' You have learned the General Skill: Blood Manipulation***

***Resistance – lvl 1***

***Blood Manipulation Resistance – lvl 1***

***Your blood was tampered with through magic, but you have survived, making it harder for the next attempt by your enemy.***

The monsters' numbers were thinning – nearby, at least. It was good that most of the species had good senses, making them pick out and focus on Ilea the moment they got within forty or fifty meters of her.

She fought atop a literal mountain of corpses, limbs, and guts. Blood and the orange corruption covered her ashen armor. With her sphere and magic sight, she could make out some still-living monsters amongst the twitching, oozing sea of gore.

*I'll need a fucking massive fire to burn this down.*

She turned her head and braced herself when she heard and felt a rumble through the ground, shifting the soft earth and forming new cracks in the landscape of the Descent's first layer. Bodies tumbled into the fissures, as did living beasts trying to get away.

Ilea blinked up, stretching her wings. The masses nearby had dwindled once more, rushing along the mountain of bodies as they searched for prey to tear apart, to infect with their corruption. She flew alongside the monsters, the occasional spell or projectile flying her way, chipping or glancing off her ashen armor.

The flames had died down a little, perhaps trampled or swallowed by the earth, or maybe simply because there was nothing left to burn. It looked like much of the forest was gone.

It was easy for Ilea to make out the brightest flames, which came from the direction where they had made their stand. Small specks hovered above the area, spells raining down into the masses.

She passed the first mages quickly thereafter, exchanging glances with them before they focused back on the battlefield below.

Enemy numbers were still high here, with various streams of beasts coming from distant cracks and caves leading up into the first layer of the Descent.

Fortified stone walls had been erected in a simple circular shape with crude inner walkways manned by various defenders. Catelyn was outside the walls, a couple of hundred meters ahead, amidst the chaos. As were others.

Ilea waited a few seconds longer before she came down amidst the beasts, ten of her ashen limbs pointing toward the arriving wave before a beam of heat and energy tore into them, disintegrating a chunk of monsters in an instant. Many more were left crippled and burnt by the sheer heat.

“Better than last time,” Ilea said as she started healing the fox.

Catelyn jerked her head up and snarled. “We have healers too. Monsters are thinning out toward the West. We should—”

She was interrupted by another earthquake, more crevices forming both within the flood of monsters and amongst the groups of Awakened that remained.

“Healer of ash! Here!” someone shouted behind her.

Ilea turned and followed the Awakened, who led her into the center of the fortifications. She saw a few people waving her way and landed.

Another two healers were present. “The corruption is extensive with these. We can’t just cut it out anymore,” one of them told her.

Ilea saw blood on her brow and corruption marring her armor. She was a reptile-like Awakened, exhausted and clearly on her last legs, so she extended an ashen limb to her too.

There were six injured here, orange pulsing from various wounds on each body. She crouched down near one of them, a man with feline features and a mangled tail.

“Do we have anybody who can destroy the corruption from within?”

The healer shook her head.

“I’ll cut, you try and keep them alive. This one first,” Ilea said, then raised the Awakened up, at least ten open wounds dripping orange ooze. It was only due to magic that he was still alive.

She extended her limbs, forming sharp blades as the other healers stepped up and used their spells in addition to hers. “I’ll get as much out as possible. Let’s try to keep him alive.”

She focused and sacrificed five hundred health, her limbs cutting into the groaning Awakened. The corruption had gone deep, forcing her to remove two of his limbs before they could heal them back.

When it was done, Ilea sighed, wiping at her brow as one of the other healers gave her a nod.

“Next one,” she said.

\* \* \*

She finished removing the corruption on the last Awakened, a coal-skinned giant with a weeping orange puncture near his eye, before his skin reformed and his breathing first hastened and then stabilized.

“That’s all of them,” she said and turned around.

“Thank you,” one of the healers said, sitting down and resting his face in his hands.

The other one was crying.

Ilea blinked up and spread her wings, quickly making her way back to the maelstrom of death that was Catelyn.

Many of the Awakened warriors nearby kept quite a distance from the fox, fighting the stragglers that had ignored her.

Ilea started heating up her core again and landed near Catelyn, continuing her dance of destruction and death.

An Awakened clad in black armor rushed her, massive axe in hand. His breastplate was split open, blood dripping from the wounds within. Corruption had taken over, his eyes unfocused and lifeless.

Ilea was about to cut through him when the whole area came to a sudden standstill. Ilea felt mind magic pushing into her mind, her left eye twitching.

Everyone froze, including Ilea.

***'ding' You have felt the effects of an ancient beast invading your mind. You are paralyzed for three seconds.***

Ilea felt a slight headache forming. *What's going on?*

***'ding' Veteran reaches lvl 7***

The ground rumbled, the earthquake now stronger than before. Cracks formed all over the ground, some of the frozen beasts and Awakened falling through to the layers below.

When Ilea could move again, she started blinking around, collecting the frozen Awakened she could reach.

Silence hung over the vast cavern before the ground shook once more, something massive breaking through amidst the beasts and monsters still frozen in place.

A twenty-meter-wide scaled, worm-like creature rushed out of the collapsing hole. Dozens of beasts were flung aside, with just as many falling into its maw that split into four separate triangle-shaped jaws.

Ilea saw no eyes, just teeth. Teeth and brown scales. No signs of corruption were visible, but it was only a matter of time until it was injured by one of the beasts. For now, it didn't matter.

She flew back and collected as many of their allies as she could, leaving only Catelyn, who was still frozen in place.

The pressure had lessened by now, suggesting the spell wasn't permanent.

Ilea couldn't hold more than sixteen people, putting each load down within the barricade they had hastily constructed before she moved out to get more.

By the time Ilea had delivered the latest load, Catelyn was moving again, her tails swaying behind her as she looked at the massive creature.

The worm dived down and took another fifty creatures with it, breaking through the hard, stony ground as if it were mere mud.

### **[*Goliath Veramath – lvl ???*]**

As Ilea watched the massive worm flatten dozens of corrupted creatures at a time, the monsters turned to face the behemoth.

“Finally, something more interesting to fight.” Ilea grinned and landed next to Catelyn. “What do you think? Should we let it have some fun?”

Catelyn watched the massive creature with wide eyes and then focused on Ilea. “Yes, let it. Let’s get the rest to safety.”

Ilea flew off again, grabbing more of the Awakened. Some of them were moving again, but the same was true for the beasts.

Ashen limbs slashed through heads and bodies as Ilea collected the last of the frontline Awakened and dwarves close to Catelyn. Most of them were already past the paralysis stage and retreating on their own. There were at least a few hundred of them still standing.

“Retreat! Those able to fly, help the others. We’re going to use that worm to take out as many monsters as possible. Ranged mages with quick evasion and mind magic resistance, with me!” Ilea shouted to the groups within the stone barricade.

Nobody argued, and people quickly formed groups and either retreated or flew up to join her. Ilea absentmindedly noted that the distress in many of the Awakened lessened after hearing her instructions.

She watched the worm emerge again, now moving along the ground as it swept up hundreds of beasts, reforming the terrain with its massive form.

“Not much we could add,” Ilea said as she flew next to Catelyn, the two a couple of hundred meters above ground now.

“Not yet,” Catelyn said, staring down. “Mages, continue to rain fire onto those not focusing on the Veramath. We have to kill and destroy every last one of the corrupted, or they will infect our city and these lands.”

Heat formed in front of her snout before a series of fireballs slashed down and landed with deafening explosions.

A hail of crystals, ice, black sorcery, and lightning followed. Beams of red arcane energy cut through the masses, bodies exploding in their wake.

Ilea flew with the group of around thirty mages, herself the only healer among them. She decided to stay in the air, using her beam-like Heart of Cinder whenever it had charged long enough that it started to damage her own body.

Her casts were much less frequent than the mages around her, raining down their magic spells with each motion of their hands. Some held them as if praying, while others simply crossed their arms. Incantations were spoken aloud in various languages, and a few were even silent.

The result was the same: powerful magic cutting through the corrupted monster hordes, killing dozens with each strike. Heart of Cinder was perhaps on a par with one of Catelyn's spells. The frequency was the only issue.

The ashen projectiles she formed and shot down were much more frequent, but they had less of an effect due to her lacking related skills. Ilea took out her great bow to add some more ranged damage, even if it was marginal. Some of the arrows pierced and at least injured some of the beasts.

"It is slowing down," Catelyn said, the group watching the worm dig back down into the ground.

Hundreds of beasts were clinging to its protected scale shell. How many of them had managed to pierce its defenses was impossible to tell from this distance. Nor could they know how the corruption affected the beast or how fast it spread.

"We're going to have a frenzied Veramath on our hands soon," one of the mages said. His eyes were lighting up in Ilea's sphere – some kind of long-range visibility spell. "The corruption is spreading."

*I want a spell like that, too. Also fireballs.*

They made another round over the horde, which stretched across nearly half of the cave at this point, but a huge chunk of them were already dead, corpses littering the ground.

Suddenly, a wave of mind magic flowed over them. Two barriers around them flickered alight, one of them shattering. The group stopped, each looking at the mage who had put up the defenses.

Most of them held their heads, some of the magic still affecting them, but Ilea had barely felt the pressure. “Keep steady – I’ll heal your minds,” she said, extending her limbs to heal the group and their minds.

“Everyone without a resistance to mind magic should retreat now,” Catelyn said. “Once the Veramath is corrupted, its attention will be on us alone.”

“Shouldn’t we move in now, then? Damage it while there are still monsters attacking it?” one of the mages asked.

“Soon. There will be a point when it is weakened from the corruption yet still under attack. If we damage its body enough, then the corruption won’t take effect,” the mage with the sight spell said.

Most of the mages acknowledged the instruction and teleported or flew away, leaving only around ten remaining.

“Can we deal enough damage with this many?” Ilea asked.

“It is what we have,” Catelyn said. “The worm should not be able to regenerate, not quickly. We simply have to stop it from going further up. As long as there are people here to damage it, the beast will attack.”

“Veramath tend to flee if they are close to death, to rest and regenerate. Something must have angered this one for it to come all the way up and attack the monsters,” one of the remaining mages explained.

Ilea nodded. “Are they known to reside in one of the dungeon layers?”

“They reside in between. There have even been some sightings on this level, but never a Goliath. Perhaps its brethren were taken by the corruption,” one of them said.

Ilea nodded in silence, watching the behemoth flattening hundreds if not thousands of beasts and monsters. Corruption spread in its body from thousands of cuts and injuries too small to make out from such a distance.

*Not long, then,* Ilea thought, wondering how powerful its mind magic was from close up.

## Turning Tides

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The Veramath was still thrashing around, slower than before, but its sheer size did most of the work.

“It’s getting close,” one of the mages announced.

“Barrier ready?” Catelyn asked.

The barrier mage nodded, the steel mask on their face not revealing anything.

The tension amongst them all was obvious. It made sense that they would be afraid of something so powerful, but Ilea felt excited more than anything else.

“Then let’s move closer and attack it. Ilea, how is your Mental Resistance?” Catelyn asked as they moved down toward the raging beast.

“High enough for its mental attacks not to matter. Want me to get its attention?” Ilea asked with a wide smile.

“Yes, but don’t overextend. We retreat together if we can’t damage it enough.”

Ilea moved her wings and sped up. “Let’s find out how tough it is,” she said as she passed Catelyn, blinking to close the distance.

As she approached, she could see that the Goliath Veramath was at least three hundred meters long with a twenty-meter diameter and thick scales.

She could see orange lines on its scales at this distance, hundreds of cuts with orange ooze trickling out, some still holding the arms or heads of beasts that had sunk their talons in.

Ilea landed near its maw, right where its head should have been. The worm had slowed down, but she still had to hold on with both her hands and the help of her wings.

Ashen limbs lashed out and dug into the hardened skin, some of the blows glancing off while others found purchase.

Ilea could see the scratches in full now – thousands of tiny indentations from just as many claws and teeth. For every wound the beasts had managed to cut, there had been hundreds of failures, if not more.

Her ash had to dig in several times for all her limbs to puncture its scales. Heart of Cinder was charging, and while some of her limbs remained in the wounds to keep her balanced atop the moving worm, most dug deeper still. All the while, she pushed destructive mana into the creature.

The Veramath didn't seem to notice her, not until she ripped out a bunch of its scales, exposing the vulnerable flesh beneath. Her ash could now penetrate much deeper than before, tearing out huge chunks of flesh as Ilea quite literally burrowed herself into the monster.

Explosions and impacts could be heard from farther back, the mages having started their assault.

*This time, I won't go into its mouth,* Ilea thought, releasing Heart of Cinder into the open wound. Heat and energy smashed inside, scorching the flesh as the worm screeched.

**‘ding’ You hear the raging cry of an ancient creature. You resist paralysis.**

**‘ding’ Veteran reaches lvl 8**

**‘ding’ Mental Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 14**

The attack didn't subside, and her head pounded with the brute force of its mind magic.

*Good thing I met the Blue Reapers.*

As her ash cut deeper and deeper, Ilea found herself standing *within* the wound, blood-soaked and holding on with four ashen limbs as she felt the weight and tremors of its movements.

The worm had turned and rolled over the beasts still attacking it from all sides, crushing them with a cacophony of wet crunches and pops. Most of them were paralyzed.

Some found their way into the wound Ilea had created, where they were ripped apart by her ash. She burrowed even deeper before releasing Heart of Cinder once again, now in a sphere instead of a cone.

She was already several meters deep, and the worm was thrashing in pain as her healing pulsed through her mind. Its attacks had become more frantic and more powerful. More than just her healing was fueled by the magic she absorbed in turn, her mind trembling as she resisted and healed herself against the waves of near-overwhelming pressure.

Even with the influx of mana, her healing could barely keep up with the injuries. Her body took damage that she simply had to endure while she focused on staying alive.

### ***'ding' Mental Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 15***

Ilea had to use her instant recovery at that point, the damage too vast to simply heal with normal healing. She slashed mindlessly at the surrounding flesh, carving herself deeper into the worm with each passing second, focused and almost in a trance-like state.

Soon, she found dripping orange ooze beginning to seep into the deeper sections of the worm's body. Heart of Cinder extended the cavity more with each explosion, revealing more ooze.

Ilea felt the mind magic intensify as time went on, her digging pivoting toward the source of the attacks – which she could now feel.

The pulses themselves were crashing against her armor, the sheer amount of mana stripping away chunks of her ash. She could see the damage coming thanks to Azarint Fighting, but there was nothing she could do to mitigate it further. She had to push on and find the epicenter of the magic.

Finally, an area was ripped open to expose the organ responsible for the creature's magic. It was a sphere of what was essentially white stone connected to the body of the Veramath by various tendrils.

When her ashen limbs slashed into it, they were met with a concussive force like nothing she had encountered before. Ilea's sight became blurry, and she passed out. After what was hopefully only the barest of moments, she forced her eyes open, heaving as her sight returned, her ash still slashing through the incredibly tough organ.

Ilea carved through it, bits and pieces of flesh and white chunks ripped out with every strike. The pressure on her mind lessened immediately, but the monster wasn't dead yet.

Ilea released another wave of heat, all her offensive spells and ash lashing around in the small space. Her mana was topped off thanks to the massive mind magic waves, allowing her to charge Absolute Destruction.

She stabilized herself with all her limbs and waited, feeling the monster breathe slowly, its muscles limp as the corruption flowed through it.

Thin orange veins formed in the space she was in, moving slowly along the exposed, bleeding flesh.

*Twenty-seven...*

Blue runes lit up on her body, hidden below her ashen armor as she sacrificed two thousand points of health.

*Twenty-eight...*

The power emanating from her fist was palpable now, even without her sphere.

*Twenty-nine...*

The third tier of Aspect of Ash activated, and embers and fire started to dance around her arm.

With that, Ilea smashed her fist into the wall of flesh and released her fully charged Absolute Destruction, amplified by her third-tier auras.

Her arm was partially shredded on impact, her shoulder dislocated from the force as she was held in place by her ashen limbs.

It felt like half of her very being was expelled as a ripple of destructive mana flashed in her sphere like sunlight. A thunderous wave washed through the creature, its cells destroyed and burnt by the repurposed healing magic.

Ilea grinned as she lowered herself to the fleshy ground before she grabbed her shoulder and yanked it back into place. She watched as the orange veins faded, losing their magical energy as the breathing of the Veramath came to an end.

***'ding' Your group has defeated [Goliath Veramath – lvl 783]. For defeating an enemy four hundred and seventy or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted.***

**‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 312 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 313 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 311 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 312 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ Absolute Destruction reaches 3rd lvl 17**

**‘ding’ Sentinel Reconstruction reaches 3rd lvl 17**

**‘ding’ Azarinth Awakening reaches 3rd lvl 14**

**‘ding’ Sentinel Core reaches 3rd lvl 2**

**‘ding’ Azarinth Fighting reaches 3rd lvl 14**

**‘ding’ Armor of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 16**

**‘ding’ Aspect of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 10**

**‘ding’ Keeper of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 8**

**‘ding’ True Ash Creation reaches 3rd lvl 10**

**‘ding’ Heart of Cinder reaches 3rd lvl 3**

**‘ding’ Ash and Ember Unity reaches 3rd lvl 9**

**‘ding’ Heavy Archery reaches lvl 5**

**‘ding’ Blood Manipulation Resistance lvl 2**

...

**‘ding’ Blood Manipulation Resistance lvl 4**

Ilea took a deep breath, smelling blood and the vile stench of corruption. Her healing had already restored the health she’d sacrificed, her mana quickly regenerating with her activated meditation. She shook her hands and ashen limbs, blood and orange goo splattering all over.

*Now, where’s the exit?*

\* \* \*

Catelyn felt the mind magic even at this distance, several hundred meters away. Fire still rained down on the near-motionless worm as she watched the beasts topple, what remained of their minds ripped apart by the increasingly frantic and powerful magic.

The group of mages had retreated when the barriers fell, three of them unconscious. She had remained, of course, her resistance high and her healing stronger on her own body. Rage filled her mind, shielding it against the waves of pressure.

Even with the cracks she felt were forming, Catelyn held fast, the flames burning ever so brightly as she released spell after spell in the hope that the creature was close to death.

Fireballs exploded atop the massive creature, ripping out chunks of skin and flesh, the corruption now clearly visible, slowly taking over what remained of the worm.

A sudden ripple of blue energy washed through the creature, and Catelyn's eyes widened. The orange veins exploded outward, the light of their corruption fading quickly. Red mixed with orange as the creature bled out where it lay.

***'ding' Your group has defeated [Goliath Veramath – lvl 783]. For defeating an enemy four hundred and fifty or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted.***

Catelyn sighed with relief. She focused and sped down toward it, hoping that Ilea was still alive.

\* \* \*

Ilea stepped out of the dead worm, wings forming as she looked over the sea of corpses spreading for what seemed like miles.

It was quiet for the first time in what felt like hours. She smiled and looked up at the bright, fiery spot approaching her with incredible speed.

**Name: Ilea Spears**

**Unspent stat points: 0**

**Unspent 3rd-tier skill points [The Azarinth Sentinel]: 0**

**Unspent 3rd-tier skill points [Kin of Ash]: 0**

**Class 1: The Azarinth Sentinel – lvl 313**

**- Active: Absolute Destruction – 3rd lvl 17**

- **Active: Sentinel Reconstruction – 3rd lvl 17**
- **Active: Azarinth Awakening – 3rd lvl 14**
- **Active: Blink – 3rd lvl 12**
- **Active: Sentinel Sphere – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Passive: Sentinel Core – 3rd lvl 2**
- **Passive: Azarinth Fighting – 3rd lvl 14**
- **Passive: Sentinel Huntress – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Passive: Azarinth Perception – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Passive: Azarinth Reversal – 3rd lvl 6**

### ***Class 2: Kin of Ash – lvl 312***

- **Active: Armor of Ash – 3rd lvl 16**
- **Active: Aspect of Ash – 3rd lvl 10**
- **Active: True Ash Creation – 3rd lvl 10**
- **Active: Heart of Cinder – 3rd lvl 3**
- **Active: Storm of Cinders – 3rd lvl 3**
- **Passive: Ash and Ember Unity – 3rd lvl 9**
- **Passive: Ashen Wings – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Passive: Eyes of Ash – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Passive: Avatar of Ash – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Passive: Keeper of Ash – 3rd lvl 8**

### ***General Skills:***

- **Elos Standard language – lvl 6**
- **Harmony of the Drowned – lvl 1**
- **Heavy Archery – lvl 5**
- **Identify – lvl 9**
- **Meditation – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Veteran – lvl 8**
- **Arcane Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 16**
- **Ash Magic Resistance – lvl 1**
- **Blast Resistance – 2nd lvl 8**
- **Blood Magic Resistance – lvl 17**
- **Blood Manipulation Resistance – lvl 4**
- **Corrosion Resistance – 2nd lvl 7**
- **Crystal Resistance – lvl 18**
- **Curse Resistance – 2nd lvl 4**
- **Dark Magic Resistance – lvl 13**

- **Death Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 3**
- **Dust Magic Resistance – lvl 1**
- **Earth Magic Resistance – lvl 19**
- **Fear Resistance – lvl 9**
- **Health Drain Resistance – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Heat Resistance – 2nd lvl 18**
- **Gravity Magic Resistance – lvl 2**
- **Ice Resistance – 2nd lvl 6**
- **Light Magic Resistance – lvl 19**
- **Lightning Resistance – 2nd lvl 6**
- **Mana Drain Resistance – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Mental Resistance – 2nd lvl 15**
- **Mist Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 10**
- **Pain Tolerance – 2nd lvl 9**
- **Poison Resistance – 2nd lvl 9**
- **Silver Magic Resistance – lvl 1**
- **Soul Magic Resistance – lvl 8**
- **Stamina Drain Resistance – lvl 1**
- **Time Magic Resistance – lvl 4**
- **Void Magic Resistance – lvl 7**
- **Water Resistance – 2nd lvl 1**
- **Wind Resistance – 2nd lvl 6**
- **Wood Magic Resistance – lvl 1**

**Status:**

**Vitality:** 905

**Endurance:** 238

**Strength:** 232

**Dexterity:** 228

**Intelligence:** 881

**Wisdom:** 924

**Health:** 9050/9050

**Stamina:** 982/2380

**Mana:** 4281/9240

“You survived,” Catelyn said as she landed, looking around at the thousands of dead, corrupted beasts.

Ilea smiled and raised an eyebrow. “Did you expect something else?” She flew up and landed on top of the worm.

Catelyn joined her, their gazes focused on the monsters emerging in the distance. Killing the Veramath had had an impact, but in the end, it was just a short reprieve.

“I would have died,” Catelyn answered, not looking Ilea’s way. “Thank you for coming when I asked for help.”

“Of course,” Ilea said. “And I’m glad I came too. Monsters to kill and levels to gain. Not everyday you get to participate in something like this.”

Catelyn gave her a look but didn’t comment.

Some of the Awakened mages and warriors joined them, hovering in the air and preparing their weapons. The four-armed shadow Awakened appeared close by.

They watched the beasts approach in the distance. Their numbers still seemed high, most of them now coming from the gaping tunnel the Veramath had created.

“They will not rest until all of them are dead and burnt,” the masked Awakened from the first layer said.

“Neither will we,” Ilea said gruffly, squinting dramatically into the distance, then she winked at him. “Thanks for that setup.”

“The barricades now have an additional layer of protection thanks to the Veramath corpse. Those in need of rest and meditation will retreat. I will organize rotations depending on enemy numbers. It seems the sudden calamity has proven useful after death.” The Awakened landed and walked over to Ilea. “I am Ilas, Guardian of the First Layer. We have met before.”

She smiled. “We have.”

Ilea looked back at the gaping tunnel. Given how extensive the hole left behind by the Veramath was, she supposed the monsters might now come out from a single place instead of the hundreds of various cracks and fissures in the ground.

“Any idea how many monsters we’re expecting per layer?” she asked, glancing at Ilas.

“We do not know.”

“Only one way to find out, then,” Ilea said, shaking out her wings. “Don’t worry about hitting me with your magic. I’ll try to attract as many as

I can. Just send your spells into the bulk of them.”

Some of the mages gave her an apprehensive look, but most nodded.

*Now, my dear corrupted beasts, come to me,* she thought with a smile, flying over the field of the dead.

The screeches and howls grew more audible as she approached, the noises of frenzied beasts on their way to sink their teeth into something. Dozens of warriors gathered on top of the dead Veramath, emboldened by the victory and ready to unleash their spells and arrows from above.

They had their perimeter and people to organize the troops, and now they were ready for whatever came out from the depths of the Descent.

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## Fire and Ash

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Ilea was back in the thick of it, fighting the various denizens of the Descent. Gradually, the enemy numbers were thinning out a little.

Ilea let another powerful gust of wind mixed with air blades flow over her, the magic slightly digging into her ashen armor but mostly just providing a little bit of mana and a sliver to her next level of Wind Resistance.

Two corrupted Old Blooded rushed at her with long, lanky limbs, their movements a little uneven due to the corruption running through their veins.

Ilea grinned, readying her limbs when a barrier suddenly formed between them, the monsters crashing into the shimmering magic. Two purple beams came down from above, accompanied by wooden spears that buried themselves into the creatures.

Ilea looked up and smiled. “You made it!”

Maro waved at her. “Quite a massacre.”

He raised his arms, a surge of power fanning out over the area. A moment later, dozens of dead, corrupted beasts twitched and slowly rose up, readying their fangs and claws.

“My kind of battlefield,” Maro said as he floated down, the now undead monsters rushing past Ilea and toward the corrupted.

She looked on with amusement before she nodded at Elfie as the elf floated closer. Neiphato, Seviir, and Heranuur joined too, their weapons at

the ready as they hissed with excitement.

“You called, and we have arrived,” Elfie said.

### [Mage – lvl 295]

“Close to three hundred as well now. You’ve been busy,” Ilea said.  
“Thank you for coming.”

“Finally, something other than machines,” Heranuur said as he walked past.

“Let’s stay close together in case anyone gets injured,” Neiphato said and followed, giving Ilea a nod as he passed.

Sevir rushed past with claws extended, joining the creatures Maro had raised.

Ilea took a moment to breathe as she watched the undead fight the corrupted. *The boons of a necromancer*, Ilea thought. Then she joined the fray again.

\* \* \*

Hours of fighting later, Ilea could finally sit down and eat something.

She was sitting on top of a stone structure near the tunnel-like hole the Veramath had left behind, which led down at a steep angle.

Little was visible but an abyss and the creatures still coming up, frenzied and taken by the corruption stemming from farther down. They were fewer and more scattered now and were being taken out by the rangers, rogues, and mages who could attack from such a distance.

Walls had been put up around the tunnel entrance, as had several layers of defense. Spikes and obstacles of various elements were still rising within the tunnel as well as on the battlefield around the opening.

The crevices and cracks on the first layer had been sealed to force the corrupted monsters to emerge from this main path. Various mages were now scouring the air, looking for stragglers and crevices that had not yet been shut. Some of the Awakened had also started piling corpses into holes before setting them ablaze, but given the numbers, the task was monumental. Even with powerful magic at their disposal.

Various structures had been set up, all with the intent to be defensible should another massive creature break through the ground. So far, the Goliath Veramath had been the only thing that had managed such a feat.

Ilea was enjoying some vegetable soup, not quite in the mood for meat after the endless slaughter. The nearby smells didn't exactly add to the experience, but she didn't want to go too far from the entrance, just in case something interesting showed up.

She was resting on the wall of a dome-like structure, elevated and grown out of a natural boulder and not closed off at the top. Maro was discussing the effects of the corruption with Catelyn, Niivalyr, and Lucas. The former elder of the Shadow's Hand had joined to help with a group of Awakened from the Vineyard Caves.

"Curse magic has an effect, but it can only slow the corruption," Elfie commented, looking down at the corpse they were standing around. "I have to learn more about its nature before I can do more about it. This is the first time I have come across such a potent corrupting force."

"It latches on to wounds, to blood," Maro said. "It kills slowly, depending on how aware a being is of the circumstances."

"I don't feel blood magic resonance," one of the Awakened said. "It is alchemical in nature, not the result of magic."

Ilea gave him a glance. He wore dark red armor, and she saw through her sphere that a reddish glow was emanating from him.

"The blood containers found within the fourth layer have properties unlike anything found elsewhere, to our knowledge at least," Catelyn said, back in her smaller form now. "Someone might have experimented with them."

"The expedition caused this. It must've been them," one of the dwarves grumbled. "The Descent has been quiet for a hundred years, and now, suddenly, when they push farther into the unknown, it changes."

"Whatever the cause, the corruption is here now, and we will deal with it," Catelyn said.

"I say we seal it all off and forget about it. Collapse the whole damn thing," the dwarf said.

Protests immediately came from some of the Awakened.

"Eighty of our own went down there. Do you suggest leaving them to die?" one of them said in a deep, gravelly voice with a near-ethereal quality to it.

“What else can we do? The monsters are corrupted, frenzied, and looking for blood. If we wait, who’s to say what else will come out of the depths?”

They started bickering until Catelyn cut in, silencing the group immediately. “This... corruption cannot be allowed to exist. The Descent is vast. Ancient. We have no idea how many ways lead out of it, back to the surface, or into other dungeons farther away.”

“Let them kill each other and die to the storms and blizzards,” the dwarf said.

“They retain their level, mostly,” Ilas said as he stepped up. “The longer we let this corruption run free, the higher the chance it will infect things like the Veramath. Creatures we cannot defeat.”

“What do you suggest?” Catelyn asked, looking at the four-armed shadow creature.

“We go down. Only a small group, those best suited for survival within the dungeon, its traps, and the monsters within. Those able to destroy the corruption, to seal off exits,” Ilas explained, looking at Catelyn. “We reduce the risk of more corruption spreading, find out more about the corruption and its source, and look for the expedition, see if they’re still alive.”

“I agree. We must find out more. About both the corruption and what happened to the expedition. If they’re still down there, we won’t leave them to die,” Catelyn said with finality. “The first layer and Hallowfort must be further fortified. Those finding their way up must be destroyed.”

“That much we can do,” the dwarf said.

Catelyn looked at the group. “I will lead this delve into the Descent. Who is with me?”

“I will be at your side,” Ilas said.

Catelyn gave him a considering look but then nodded.

Elfie hissed. “I will join this endeavor, but the other Hunters will remain here.”

There were hisses from Heranuur and Seviir, but they didn’t complain further.

Maro sighed. “Yeah, I’ll join. One last time.”

“I’ll join, obviously,” Ilea said.

“So will I,” Lucas said. “I wish to study this corruption. I will not join any fighting, but I’ll be able to close pathways and heal your wounds.”

Catelyn nodded. "Then so it will be. We will meet here in two hours. Prepare for a long journey."

Ilea blinked back up to the stone wall that some of the mages had set up, reappearing with her legs dangling over the side and a view over the expansive cavern. Far below, the tunnel left behind by the Veramath was now nearly enveloped by stone, crystal, and wood.

Fires were burning over the distant fields, thousands of corpses still littering the ground as far as she could see. At least, given how high up she was, the smell wasn't as bad anymore.

She summoned another meal and started eating, enjoying the light breeze of somewhat fresh air coming from the direction of the lake on the first layer. Finally, she had some time to look over her gains.

The kill notifications were too numerous and were quickly skipped as she moved on to the more interesting bits.

**'ding' The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 314 – Five stat points awarded**

**'ding' The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 315 – Five stat points awarded**

**'ding' Kin of Ash has reached lvl 313 – Five stat points awarded**

**'ding' Kin of Ash has reached lvl 314 – Five stat points awarded**

**'ding' Azarinth Awakening reaches 3rd lvl 15**

**'ding' Sentinel Core reaches 3rd lvl 3**

**'ding' Sentinel Core reaches 3rd lvl 4**

**'ding' Armor of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 17**

**'ding' True Ash Creation reaches 3rd lvl 11**

**'ding' Heart of Cinder reaches 3rd lvl 4**

**'ding' Heart of Cinder reaches 3rd lvl 5**

**'ding' Storm of Cinder reaches 3rd lvl 4**

**'ding' Ash and Ember Unity reaches 3rd lvl 10**

**'ding' Keeper of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 9**

**'ding' Blast Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 9**

**'ding' Blast Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 10**

**'ding' Corrosion Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 8**

**'ding' Crystal Resistance reaches 19**

**‘ding’ Crystal Resistance reaches 20**

**‘ding’ Crystal Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 1**

*Crystals aren’t just shiny decorations in old ruins and caves. You have learned that arcane scholars found ways to turn this beautiful natural phenomenon into something rather more deadly. Now less deadly to you with this skill.*

*2nd stage: Your body adapts, and crystal growth and transmutation are now exponentially harder to achieve on your tissue.*

**‘ding’ Dark Magic Resistance reaches 14**

**‘ding’ Dark Magic Resistance reaches 15**

**‘ding’ Earth Magic Resistance reaches 20**

**‘ding’ Earth Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 1**

*The earth trembles as arcane beings bend its nature to their will. You have found stone and earth to be a worthwhile opponent yet stood unmoving in its destructive path. This skill will help you negate more of its damage.*

*2nd stage: Your skin and bones harden, adapting more and more to the element that threatened your life again and again.*

**‘ding’ Ice Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 7**

**‘ding’ Lightning Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 8**

**‘ding’ Wind Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 7**

**‘ding’ Wood Magic Resistance reaches lvl 2**

**...**

**‘ding’ Wood Magic Resistance reaches lvl 12**

## Depths

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“Rations, light sources, magical items that might help, healing potions, bandages, materials for building shelters and anything that will help against harsh climates and magical conditions...” Ilas read the small list he had prepared, several bags of various items sitting next to him.

The group stood at the beginning of the Veramath-made tunnel, behind the expanding defensive spikes and low walls that slowed or even stopped approaching beasts.

“Can we finally leave?” Maro asked, sitting on one of the low walls with a group of skeletons and undead behind him. He was using only the most powerful of his minions, their levels all above two hundred.

“Each will take a pack,” Ilas said and grabbed his own, easily lifting the massive backpack that was at least twice his size.

Ilea walked over and put one into her bracelet, not about to argue over free provisions. The Awakened was the expert on the Descent, after all, even though she already had everything she really needed: a bed, Keyla’s food, and her magic.

Catelyn stored one, putting it into an item not visible on her body. Perhaps it was a skill of hers. Then Maro stood up and stretched, making one vanish as well, and Niivalyr did the same.

Ilas seemed to glance between them, his mask revealing nothing.

“Mhm, a well-equipped party indeed. Do not look at them with such surprise, young one. It is no shame not to possess an item of power. I

myself have lost those I found,” Lucas said casually, smiling as he stepped over to his pack and groaning as he lifted it.

Ilea went and stored a few more of the backpacks, and she saw the others with storage items doing the same. Lucas sighed with relief as his pack was taken off him.

“So, head downward, kill the corrupted, and seal all exits?” Ilea asked, stepping ahead before turning to glance at the group.

“Sounds simple enough,” Maro said. He got up, his skeleton crew following behind.

“We fight what we can fight, but our goal is to find out what happened and if there’s another way to stop the corruption and its spread. Lucas will focus on healing, Niivalyr on keeping the corrupted at a distance, Ilas will conceal us with his shadow magic as needed, and the rest of us will fight,” Catelyn said.

Elfie grinned at Ilea, his robe suddenly replaced by a set of black metal armor, reflecting little light. Engravings showed where various enchantments had been placed with intricate elvish writing and magical runes.

His robe then reappeared on top, hanging open to expose the armor below. His face was hidden behind a mask similar to Feyrair’s, his hair flowing out from underneath. The gray mist in his eyes, visible through small slits in his mask, seemed to swirl as he focused on Ilea.

“Let us purge this dungeon,” he said, brimming with power and confidence.

Ilea clapped and smiled at him. “Nice.” Her ashen armor expanded from her back to cover her bone set.

*Fire fox, ash healer, curse elf, wood pacifist, death king, and the four-handed shadow. Ready to steamroll through this fuckery.*

“The second layer is mostly comprised of dark tunnels, filled with various insect-like creatures,” Ilas explained as they walked down the massive, nearly twenty-five-meter-wide tunnel.

There were no light sources in the tunnel itself, so Catelyn and Lucas provided the group with hovering flames and balls of light. Soon, side tunnels appeared, and Lucas closed them off with his wood magic.

“The third layer is mostly underwater, housing various monsters that thrive in such an environment. The worm must have moved through the dry

parts, otherwise I see no way for the creatures to have reached the first layer," Ilas continued, his swords drawn and at the ready.

Ilea was moving just a couple of meters ahead. Her sphere extended through the whole tunnel, and she quickly took out each beast they encountered with her ashen limbs. The others didn't seem to mind, only stepping in when the monsters grew more numerous.

Ilea glanced back at the group. "Please feel free to attack me with your magic while there are so few enemies. In the fights as well. I'll let you know when to stop. Helps with my resistances."

"We should focus on why we're here," Catelyn said.

Ilea smiled. "I am. I might need the resistances later."

"Can't help it," Maro said, a beam of death magic extending from one of his fingers. "She's a great target practice dummy."

Catelyn and Ilas glanced at each other as Elfie joined in with a joyous hiss and his curse magic. The others obliged in time, even Lucas, who added his light and wood magic to the mix.

"When do we reach it?" Maro asked as he resurrected the intact bodies of some freshly killed insect-like humanoids and sent them running ahead. He couldn't gain information from them, but the sounds of battle gave the group plenty of foresight. Some of the undead even managed to take out a couple more beasts before they fell.

"The upper layers tend to blend into each other. It is hard to say which one we reside in," Ilas said. "Due to the lack of water, I assume we are still in the second one."

Ilea shredded through an Old Blooded that rushed them, the beast screeching until its last moment when a barrier slashed through its neck. Elfie would reach his three hundred evolution in no time if they continued to encounter so many of the high-level beasts.

"Done. We may move on," Lucas said from the side of the tunnel, massive roots covering the previous opening to the second-level cave system.

\* \* \*

*Another storm.*

Hana looked through the stained-glass window, the flying sand soon blocking the view. She still didn't know if the sandstorms down here were part of the dungeon or conjured up by some high-level creature. She didn't know which answer she'd prefer.

She was tired, not having slept for nearly two weeks. It was a strain just to stand, to hold her blade. So many different hazards, so many different monsters, and she couldn't face most of them.

*Shameful.*

Her armor lay damaged and in tatters, cut apart as if it had been made of cheap copper. One of the shoulders was still fine, but the rest was unusable.

*We should have left once the monsters became too powerful to face. Foolish, avoiding monsters you cannot kill in the hopes of finding riches.*

It was the way of the scavenger, and most here in the north lived by it. Perhaps now, her willingness to follow them would finally catch up with her.

Carefully, she stepped over the gray metal floor of the deep underground facility. She wasn't even sure which layer of the dungeon they were on anymore. What she knew was that any unnecessary noise had a chance to alert the high-level monsters hiding in the sands beyond.

She sighed and moved her attention to her nearby companion. *She's still sleeping.*

Hana moved her hand over the woman's brow. The fever was gone and the wound had healed, but it had been taxing on her body. She checked where the healer, Jonna, had been pierced by one of the monster's stingers.

She'd been sure the woman was dead, but somehow, she'd pushed through, healed herself despite the pain and the corruption. It hadn't been easy, cutting out the infected parts and adding to her torment, but Hana knew better than to question a healer at her own profession.

*Should never have come back down here.*

She sighed and sat down next to the sleeping human, her eyes focused on the steel door of the remote room they had fled to.

The sounds of skittering monsters had calmed down a few hours ago, but she had no idea how many of them there were and if any of the other Awakened were still alive. Their food and water were running low as it was. She would hold out as long as she could, but soon, they would have to go out there again.

\* \* \*

“What’s this?”

Ilea looked back at the waiting group, shaking her arm. Said arm was now sporting a monster eel that had immediately jumped out of the bordering body of water when she had gotten closer and attached itself to her.

### **[Corrupted Widow Eel – lvl 242]**

Orange veins pulsed along the side of its slippery pale white skin, on which bite marks were visible and filled with orange pus.

Most of the eel was still in the shallow water, writhing wildly as it tried to pull Ilea in. Or tried to eat her arm. Or pull itself out. She wasn’t exactly sure what it was trying, but regardless, it was corrupted.

Her ashen limbs pierced the creature, killing it instantly. It slumped down, still lodged in her ashen armor. Ilea ripped it off and threw it back into the water.

The tunnel had opened up into a cave, a rocky beach extending for hundreds of meters to her right. The Veramath had mostly avoided the water when it had dug its tunnel, the way down leading into the rocky wall away from the beach.

“There are more creatures down there,” Ilas commented from a distance.

“Yeah, but we wanted to kill all the corrupted ones, didn’t we?” Ilea asked, looking at the approaching shadows as she took a couple of steps back from the water. Ten of her limbs were planted deep inside the cave walls to make sure she wouldn’t be dragged into the deep.

“Even the swimming ones?” Ilas asked. “They can’t exactly walk up...”

Catelyn glanced at Ilea. “We should move on.”

Maro took a few steps back. “I think it’s too late for that. We already have proof that some can leave the water. Ilea, stay right there. I think you’ll make wonderful bait.”

Ilea smiled and gave him a thumbs-up. “I’ll do my best,” she whispered, seeing the first creatures approach within her sphere.

Maro raised his hand, and the dead eel twitched back to life within the water before it was ripped apart by an oncoming fish.

*That one's huge.*

The creature shot out of the water, the twitching eel carcass in its turtle-like beak, and came crashing down on Ilea. Two eels followed right after, the same size and level as the one she had already fought.

Five smaller fish followed, their form confusing Ilea a little.

### **[Corrupted Salmon – lvl 1]**

*What?*

One of them slapped into her protected face, twitching as it fell to the ground, unable to breathe. The others followed, crashing down and snapping at her. The turtle head moved fast but only met ashen limbs that pierced its thick skull, releasing blood and corruption.

The eels were pierced before they could wind themselves around her body. Purple beams, barriers, and fire slammed into the frenzied swarm that leaped out of the water without any concern for their own survival.

Barbed tongues suddenly lashed out from the water and slammed into her ash, trying to drag her down into the deep. Ashen limbs cut them loose immediately before the beasts were revealed.

### **[Corrupted Leveran – lvl 230]**

Ilea watched the thing fly out. It was a giant two-meter-long pufferfish-like creature that sprayed not only blood but also dark blue acid when it was pierced.

The sizzling noise of acid eating into the various corpses around her added another wonderful ambient sound. Coupled with the fumes released as the acid ate into the corrupted flesh, she decided she really, really hated that creature.

Ilea chucked some of the dead back into the water, some of them twitching with Maro's magic as they shot off to find corrupted fish to attack. Elfie was rather helpful with his barriers, moving dozens of the dead monsters back into the water with every spell.

She walked along the cave wall, her anchored limbs still keeping her steady. She really didn't want to fall in or get dragged into the water.

The pufferfish had an acid spit attack that she gladly let splash against her, the corrosion eating into her ashen armor, and she kept some of them alive to drench her again. The horrific smell came from it eating through fish flesh, not her ash, so at least it wasn't adding to the fumes.

Catelyn stopped burning the beasts at Ilea's request as it was mostly adding a vile odor to the cavern instead of doing anything helpful. Aquatic creatures had decent resistance to fire and none of them posed a challenge anyway, so Ilea didn't need the help.

Few of the monsters were above level three hundred, giving Ilea little in terms of experience. Nor did she particularly enjoy fighting them. Seeing her allies, she could tell they were concerned about the number of monsters coming at them, but she actually hoped there were more dangerous beasts waiting for them.

Beasts from lower layers continued to emerge occasionally from the tunnel leading below as their group walked along the underground shoreline. Those creatures were taken out by Catelyn and Ilas, who were waiting by the mouth of the opening.

Ilea raised her eyebrows as she watched a shrimp-like monster crawl out of the water a dozen meters away, colorful scales protecting its soft skin. Its eyes moved to look at her, pulsing orange veins visible under its defenses.

### **[Corrupted Cannon Shrimp – Lvl ??]**

*Wait, didn't I watch a documentary on something like this?*

The thought went through her mind right before she felt the attack coming, her wings spreading in front of her as she braced for the damage.

The one-meter-tall shrimp moved its small claws before a wave of force exploded outward, cracks forming as it rippled through the stone ground. Ilea was pushed back, smacking hard against the cave wall as her ashen limbs tried to stabilize her.

She decided to stay near the wall, watching chunks of the stone beach break off and fall into the shallow water, cracked and splintered by the sheer force of the magic.

“Are you alright?” Maro shouted from further back.

Ilea waved him off. *Finally, something interesting.* She braced herself by driving a few more ashen limbs into the stone.

Ilea tanked a couple more blasts from the shrimp. She was delighted to find that it nearly managed to break through her ashen armor.

*Give me that Blast Resistance.*

She smirked and let it live. Anything that came between it and Ilea was shredded by the shrimp's magic as well as Ilea's ash.

When it charged her and attempted an uppercut swing, Ilea pushed away the shrimp with two of her limbs.

"Blast attack. No claw stuff," she said to the beast, making a blast motion with her hands and imitating its little claws.

The monster complied, and Ilea soon settled into what would hopefully be a productive training partnership.

\* \* \*

**'ding' Blast Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 11**

**'ding' Corrosion Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 9**

**'ding' Curse Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 5**

**'ding' Death Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 4**

**'ding' Light Magic Resistance reaches lvl 20**

**'ding' Light Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 1**

**Light Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 1**

*The power of the suns harnessed and enhanced by magic. You have experienced the burning heat of light and pushed ahead. This skill will help you be more resistant.*

*2nd stage: Staring into the light should really have blinded you at this point. Instead, you have gotten used to it. Your eyes are much less sensitive to the negative effects associated with light. You are mostly immune to sudden blinding changes, be they an abrupt abundance of light or a lack thereof.*

**'ding' Wood Magic Resistance reaches lvl 12**

...

**'ding' Wood Magic Resistance reaches lvl 18**

Slowly, the wave of monsters thinned out as they made their way along the beach. Ilea had made some decent progress on her resistances as her allies continued to pummel both her and their enemies. Her Wood Magic Resistance had benefitted greatly due to Lucas' power and its relatively low level, and her Light Resistance had even reached the second tier.

Ilea eventually killed the last corrupted shrimp with three of her lances, its defenses not nearly as formidable as its attacks.

***‘ding’ You have defeated [Cannon Shrimp – lvl 452]. For defeating an enemy one hundred and thirty or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted.***

*Yeah, I need, like, fifty more of you guys.*

Ilea saw another tunnel leading farther down where the beach ended.

“We might have only killed some of the corrupted monsters in this layer,” Ilas said as he joined her.

“I’m not diving in there,” Ilea said.

“None of the remaining beasts can survive on land, corrupted or not. This is enough,” Catelyn said as her fire beam cut through a distant Pure Blooded that emerged from the tunnel ahead.

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## Powerburning

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“The fourth layer, the Heroes’ Descent. City of the Red Church,” Ilas said ominously, all four arms crossed as he peered into the darkness.

“Think it was them? I did find some weird machines, trapped skeletons, and red blood-like fluid in the inner circle,” Ilea commented as she stepped up to him, a layer of ash falling to the floor and, with it, the last of the acid and gore that had clung to it.

“This layer, while dangerous, is known and has been explored before without causing such a reaction. No, whatever caused this outbreak lies deeper still,” Ilas said.

“You think there are still beasts in these layers fighting the corrupted?” Ilea asked after a short while of walking.

They had to jump down through the outer section of the ancient city, where the Veramath had broken through. Squashed remains of various monsters still marked the route of its ascent.

“They want to live, just as we do,” Catelyn said. “I suspect there are many still hiding from this menace even in the second and third layers.”

“It is my hope that most of the remaining corruption will be dealt with by the denizens themselves,” Ilas commented.

“Are there sapient ones down here? The ones we’ve seen so far didn’t strike me as such,” Maro said as he looked over the group of undead walking by his side.

"There are stories, yes. However, nothing confirmed by myself or anybody I trust. I do not believe there are any beings of higher intellect in the upper layers, at least," the Awakened replied.

"The Veramath already helped us," Ilea said, looking down the path that the worm-like creature had carved through the stone. "Albeit not exactly willingly."

Ilas stopped and crouched down. "We are getting close to the next layer."

"With all the Pure Blooded we've already fought, I doubt there are many left down here," Ilea said.

"Much of the fourth layer remains sealed off. Many of its secrets and beasts are hidden away," Ilas said as he stood back up. "The corruption may not have reached those. We should press on, destroy any remaining, and follow the Veramath's path."

"I agree," Catelyn said. "The monsters on this level are only marginally more aggressive than they were before. Those still sealed do not concern us."

Flickering lights were visible now, chunks of the Red Church's city ripped out by the passing worm. The tunnel led into various sections of perfectly rectangular hallways, tattered carpets with a hint of forgotten red adorning the ancient floors.

All of it seemed empty, flushed out, and quiet.

"Should we make some noise? Attract the remaining corrupted?" Ilea asked, glancing back at the group.

Ilas glanced her way and then at Catelyn.

Catelyn sighed and nodded, summoning three fireballs that slammed into the nearby hallway walls. The explosions of fire ripped through stone, sending deafening waves of sound through the corridors.

The group waited, all in silence, using their enhanced hearing to listen out for any reaction.

*Nothing? Have they all come out already?*

Ilea's unvoiced question was answered by several screeches, frenzied Pure Blooded and other variants running into the corridors leading toward the group.

They were all corrupted.

Their activity apparently prompted yet more of them to follow behind, the screeches combining into a horrifying orchestra of gurgled voices.

“Here we go again,” Ilea commented, then charged forward.

\* \* \*

The fight lasted for a while, but Ilea was more than familiar with the monsters by now. She did enjoy the added magical support from her teammates, very much encouraging them to fire directly at her as she pulled in all the frenzied creatures.

It was quiet now, and most of the magical lights nearby had been destroyed. Only the flames still clinging to carpets and bits of corpses remained.

Catelyn cast four more thunderous fireballs, and the group waited once more. This time, they were met only by silence.

“Let us move on,” Ilas said a minute later.

The tunnel led farther down, through and past the city of the fourth layer. Eventually, it opened up once more into near-complete darkness.

“Fifth layer?” Ilea asked, seeing only as far as her sphere reached.

“Yes. The bears and wood spirits should have been from around here,” Ilas said, his voice a little more quiet now.

Catelyn and Lucas moved their lights a little farther down the slope, trees and grass faintly visible.

“The light should attract those that are corrupted. Others might stay away,” Ilas added, looking around.

The group was waiting once more.

“Anybody home?” Ilea shouted into the darkness.

Ilas flinched at the noise and flashed her a disapproving look.

“What? We want to find the corrupted ones, don’t we?” Ilea said with a raised eyebrow.

“Seems like they’ve all found their way up already,” Maro commented idly.

“Quiet,” Catelyn hushed him.

Ilea could make out the sound of light footsteps in the distance, coming closer. Dozens. Hundreds. She prepared her spells and waited.

The light reached the beasts before her sphere did. Squirrels – frothing at the mouth, glints of orange ooze among them as hundreds of them charged the group.

“Catelyn, some fire, please,” Ilea said as she slowly took a few steps back.

### **[Corrupted Rabid Biter – lvl 48]**

*Rabid and corrupted. Well, at least I won’t die from being eaten by level four hundred squirrels.*

A burst of heat washed over her, extending in a sea of flame into the rabid monsters about to overrun the group.

Ilea felt the fire bite into her ash from behind and spread her wings in front of her, the critters quite literally exploding in flashes of blood, bone, and blood. All of it once more quickly engulfed in flames.

A wall of ash was formed from both Ilea’s creation magic as well as what remained of the beasts after they fell to Catelyn’s magic. Elfie filled the gaps with his barriers, the low-level monsters not making a dent in either of these defenses.

There were, however, hundreds of the creatures. So, Ilea just waited for them to die.

“This is disgusting,” Maro commented, looking over the burnt corpses.

Catelyn cast her spells in silence, a continuous stream of fire enveloping the raging squirrels. Lucas averted his eyes as the flickering light reflected off Ilas’ armor and swords.

The swarm didn’t slow for fifteen whole minutes, smoke rising as far as the eye could see. A couple of trees had caught fire near where the squirrels were coming from, adding to the conflagration.

The fox didn’t stop burning the creatures even after the last of them had been killed, instead continuing and turning whatever remained of them to ash. The scouring fire cleared most of the smell and corruption away.

Nobody said anything for a while as they walked further down the slope and into the forest. It seemed like the trees were absorbing whatever light the group’s spells were giving off.

“Peculiar,” Lucas noted as he brushed a hand over a tree he passed. “It is unlike anything I’ve come across.”

“Like most of this bloody dungeon,” Maro said before he suddenly stopped and shook his head.

“What is it?” Catelyn asked as she glanced back.

“It’s just strange. The Soul Rippers were different, too,” Maro said.

“Most of the creatures and beings we’ve encountered so far have been new to me. Doesn’t mean there’s a connection,” Ilea said. “I’m more interested in the layered nature of the Descent. Or is that a common occurrence?”

“It isn’t,” Maro admitted.

“These trees have light-absorbing properties,” Lucas commented. “Interesting possibilities. We could line tents with this wood or build whole camps out of it to keep hidden from monsters.”

“Don’t most beasts dislike fire?” Ilea asked. Then she noted movement in her sphere. “Something is close by,” she warned. She prepared herself, looking in the direction where she had seen the beast, but she’d caught too little of it to make out its size or shape.

“I don’t sense anything,” Catelyn said. “If it is corrupted, it will come for us.”

Ilea nodded. “It’s gone again. Not corrupted, I assume. They can see and hear absurdly well.”

“It may vary between species,” Niivalyr said.

“Just be on your guard,” Catelyn said. The flames around her intensified, pushing a tiny bit farther into the forest.

“Is anybody keeping track of where we are? I have no clue where we’re going,” Ilea said. The forest felt claustrophobic. Even the light and fire magic conjured by her allies seemed subdued, almost like the trees were swallowing them.

“Downward,” Ilas said, pointing in what seemed like a random direction. “We should be getting close to the next layer.”

When Ilea saw something in her sphere again, she blinked and spread her wings. A flying forest spirit faced her as it drifted away.

### **[Night Forest Spirit – lvl ??]**

*Not corrupted.*

“Hey! Wait, what are you doing? Why are you following us?” Ilea shouted after it.

No answer came as the spirit vanished into the darkness. *Seems like it’s just observing? Or is it a trap?*

Her instinct was to pursue the creature, see if it was sapient. After a second or two, though, she slowed down, not about to lose her group on a

wild goose chase after some spying spirit.

“Ilea?” Catelyn asked when she returned. “What did you see?”

“A spirit, uncorrupted. It’s following us, observing,” she replied.

“Hunting?” Niivalyr asked. “No... It would have struck during our battle.”

“Maybe. We know little of these creatures. Perhaps they understand that we are purging the corrupted,” Ilas suggested, looking up.

“Could some of them be Awakened?” Maro asked.

“Possibly,” Catelyn agreed.

Lucas grabbed a couple of branches and pieces of splintered bark, turning them over in his hands. They lit up with magic from time to time as he muttered to himself.

Ilea smiled and focused forward again. “Know anything about the next one?” she asked, the question directed at Ilas.

“An abyss. The moths are likely from there. Let us hope we do not get swarmed,” he said, apprehension in his voice.

Ilea nodded and followed him in silence. No more spirits showed up until they reached the lowest part of the pitch-black forest.

They had reached what looked like the end of this layer, an even stone floor set into the ground that looked to have been constructed instead of naturally formed.

“An actual floor?” Ilea asked.

“The Red Church?” Niivalyr asked.

“We do not know the extent of their influence on the Descent. Either they have built separations between the layers, or they were there already,” Ilas said.

*Is the whole dungeon constructed?*

Now that they had left the treeline, light traveled easier once more.

“Marvelous,” Lucas said, still staring at his little collection of bark.

Ilas led them to cracks in the stone, crevices as much as two meters wide. Nothing was visible beyond, just darkness.

Catelyn looked down and started floating.

“Can all of you fly?” Ilas asked as he looked down into one of the cracks.

When nobody answered with a no, the Awakened grunted approvingly before he started floating down through the opening.

Ilea followed him, her wings moving silently through the air before she came out into open space. Immediately, she felt lighter, the space around her less suffocating. *Fucky forest.*

She looked up and watched Lucas float down. Balls of bright light formed out of nowhere, floating through the air and into the distance. Catelyn kept her fire close, its brightness not reaching far enough to make a difference.

A strong wind brushed past the group, coming from below. They braced themselves against it. Ilas had a hard time against the wind, as did Elfie. Perhaps it was simply because they were not yet above level three hundred. Maybe their flying magic just wasn't as good or at the same skill level as the others.

"Hey," Ilea started and looked into the distance, squinting her eyes. "Don't moths really like light?"

"They do," Maro said.

Another strong gust of wind brushed over them, this time coming from the side. *Where is this wind even coming from?* Ilea wondered as she looked toward the source, though she couldn't see far in the darkness.

The hum of moving wings became audible then, each of them preparing as Lucas flew back up to the cracks leading into the fifth layer and its forest.

Ilea smiled and waited, her wings slowly moving in the wind as her Heart of Cinder charged. An aerial battle was something new to experience, and she was ready to rip out some wings.

"I'll try to draw them to me," Ilea said as she saw the swarm of wings approach.

A blink brought her into the masses, at least a dozen of the large creatures visible in her sphere.

She dodged most of the wind blades, clearly discernible within her sphere, letting herself be impacted by those that her Azarinh Fighting skill made out to be harmless as her ashen limbs cut into their thin wings and bodies.

Eyes and wings were impaled, the corrupted beasts having little sense of self-preservation other than attacking from a distance. Ilea simply moved closer with her teleport. Heart of Cinder was released into a large cluster of the creatures, disintegrating many and clipping the wings of those that managed to avoid the cone-like beam.

One of the monsters tackled her from the side, its sharp teeth and claws digging into her ash as its body was slashed at by sharp, dark gray tendrils. A punch with Storm of Cinders and her destruction spell sent a wave of mana into and through its head.

Their trajectory suddenly changed as a volley of wind blades slammed into the dead creature, some of them cutting into Ilea's wings. A blink brought her up once more while the corpse slowly fell into the darkness below.

Ilea reformed her ashen wings before she sped up, focused on where the attacks had originated from. The bright magic of her allies flashed here and there.

Ilea focused on the wind blades coming in from the beasts. Some of them hit, digging into her defenses. She laughed and pushed on, moving in a straight line as dozens of wind spells cut and slashed into her, pushing her back down.

She used her healing spell to make her wings and armor regenerate near-instantly, keeping it active as the cost was more than covered by her mana recovery coupled with whatever she absorbed from the enemy attacks.

*There's no stopping me.*

The thought made her smile broaden as she pushed on, blinking from time to time to at least make some distance.

As Heart of Cinder started damaging her, eight of her limbs moved ahead before she released the heat, trying to focus it into a smaller cone.

It worked – somewhat. It wasn't comparable to one of Catelyn's or even Maro's attacks, but the cone was considerably smaller and more focused. The range, in turn, was increased, the beam reaching the attacking group of visibly corrupted moth creatures, searing a broad line into the flying swarm.

She blinked and finally reached the beasts again.

### **[Corrupted Moth Diver – lvl ??]**

She saw one of the moths careen into another, a faint glow of necromantic mana visible when the two passed through her sphere. *He's reviving them.*

Ilea smiled and blinked up, a sphere of heat and fire exploding near her before she twirled, ashen limbs cutting into the heavily burnt beasts. They

weren't very durable, considering their high level.

*Maybe their wind magic is supposed to be the dangerous part?*

She braced herself as another four wind blasts impacted her, but the spells didn't even cut through her ash.

Seeing her allies being pushed back with Lucas still waiting in the layer above, Ilea blinked close to Elfie. "Did you get hit?" she asked as she extended an ashen limb and started healing him. A nasty cut going nearly to the bone was clearly discernible.

"My barrier broke," the elf hissed, moving his hands to shield the others with more spells. He seemed tense.

Maro avoided most of the strikes, but his armor showed shallow cuts as well. The necromancer was slowly being pushed back by the onslaught of wind magic.

Ilea moved on and appeared near Catelyn, her massive form an easy target despite her speed. Compared to Maro and Elfie, she at least had a higher level.

Dozens of cuts were visible as Ilea got closer, most of them already closing again. Her own healing mana helped speed up the process as the fox released several beams into the moths.

"Where's Ilas?" Ilea asked, looking around.

Catelyn pointed one of her tails toward a cluster of moths that seemed to be focusing on themselves. She released two small spheres of fire that exploded in blinding light mere moments later.

Ilea squinted her eyes but couldn't make out the Awakened. She did, however, see one of the moths suddenly lose a wing before it started to fall.

"There," Catelyn pointed again as a group of seven flying beasts approached.

Ilea nodded and shot off, blinking thrice to reach the creatures. A cone of heat killed three, her limbs killing another one before her spears burrowed through two more.

The last moth was eviscerated by a purple beam, its head decaying rapidly as it fell. Ilea looked for more but found the last couple already being scattered into blood and bits by fiery explosions.

"Is that all of them?" she asked when she returned to the group.

Ilas showed up then, a little unsteady as he floated closer. Ilea extended an ashen limb and healed the damage. He had deep cuts on his back and one of his legs. His armor was slowly repairing itself, though.

“Timeless armor?” she asked and smiled when he perked up.  
“I thank thee,” the Awakened said with an exhausted voice. “It is, yes.”

### **[Warrior – lvl 266]**

*They’re not nearly as durable as I would have expected. Well, they do have me to compensate. And they’re leveling fast as well. That’s six levels for Ilas since we left.*

Maro had risen to level three fourteen, and Elfie was close to his evolution at two-ninety-eight. Ilea smiled at him, hoping he would receive something as cool as she had.

Elfie hissed as she stared at him before checking his armor for damage and summoning a small glass bottle, lifting his mask to drink from it.

“Are we clear?” Lucas shouted from above.

“Yes. For now,” Maro replied, sending out his remaining necromantic moths to scout ahead.

Ilas watched them as they passed. “Can you see through their eyes, as if they were thine?”

“No,” Maro replied. “But I can tell when one of them dies... well, dies again. Tells me what I need to know.”

“I doubt there are many more – corrupted, that is,” Catelyn said, floating ahead into the open space. “We move down. Ilas, beyond this point, we have little information – is that correct?”

“Yes. Even scavengers dare not move past this point. Climbing down and up is incredibly difficult without appropriate flying skills.” He looked up and pointed at the roots breaking through parts of the ceiling. “I believe some have tried fixing ropes and chains to the roots. Yet I have not heard of anyone succeeding.”

Ilea took the few moments of calm to check her few gains.

**‘ding’ Blink reaches 3rd lvl 13**

**‘ding’ Wind Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 8**

As the group slowly flew down into the darkness, Ilea wondered what they would face next. She couldn’t help but smile at the possibilities.

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## Mine Residents

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The tunnel ceiling rumbled, chunks of stone falling down as a set of ashen limbs pushed through.

The group was waiting, hovering over the huge pointed rocks spreading over the ground of the sixth layer.

Ilea was wedged between the rocks, her ashen limbs digging into the ground and ripping through the several-meter-thick ceiling of the tunnel below. She'd found the tunnel with her sphere after they'd flown over the lowest point of the layer for a couple of minutes.

"Did it!" Ilea exclaimed as she broke through, her wings moving to keep her in place. Chunks of rock tumbled down with a deafening crash.

"Thank you," Catelyn said and floated closer. "Shall we?"

Ilea gave her a nod and moved down, landing in the crude tunnel.

"Hello!" she shouted, waiting for a moment before she waved to the others. "Nothing here."

Ilea walked along the tunnel, the others quickly following behind. The way bent after a while, leading downward. The angle became too steep to walk, so the group used their various flying magics to get down.

After about a fifty-meter descent, Ilea could see the shattered remains of the stone that had once likely separated these layers. "Number seven," she said with a smile.

"Indeed," Ilas said as he touched the chunks of differently colored rocks jutting out of the tunnel walls.

"If the corruption has reached this deep, few beasts will have been able to get up to the higher layers," Catelyn said, sniffing the air. "I believe something has burrowed through here."

"The corruption has reached the higher layers. We must assume this natural barrier is not enough to stop the beasts lurking below," Niivalyr said as he looked down.

"Going to be hard to find all the monsters if they can burrow through stone," Ilea said, lightly punching the wall.

The tunnel ended a couple minutes of flying later and opened up into what looked like a long-forgotten mine.

Ancient withered wooden beams supported parts of the walls and ceiling, and metal sockets made to hold torches still clung to the walls. Every single one was empty. Spheres of warm light, cast by Lucas, drifted into each side of the corridor to illuminate it.

Ilea activated her Sentinel Huntress skill and checked both ways with her sphere. There were signs of magic, as well as some faded tracks, but nothing she could pin on someone or something, let alone follow.

"A mine," Niivalyr commented. "Crude, human. To extract metals and the like. It seems dangerous, so deep within the dungeon." He looked around before his eyes fixed on the ancient wooden beam sitting five meters above them. It didn't look like it had been meant to support the tunnel for more than a couple of years. "So much risk."

"The dangers men are willing to go to are directly correlated to the rewards hiding within these walls," Maro said, knocking on the stone.

"We would survive a cave-in," Ilea said confidently as she got up from her crouched position.

"You would," Maro replied. "And no, we're not going to test that. There is no cave-in resistance."

"How would you know?" Ilea asked in a whisper, her ashen limbs slowly moving to a nearby wooden beam.

"Please, do not," Ilas said and extended a hand.

Ilea rolled her eyes. "I'm joking." She paused and looked down the tunnels. "Where to? Should we attract the beasts again?"

"It seems unwise," Ilas replied. "Unlike previous layers, we know not what lurks here."

"The monsters have been getting progressively stronger. We should be careful," Catelyn said.

Ilea gave her a look and then nodded before she continued walking.  
*Finally, it's getting interesting.*

\* \* \*

They came upon a fork in the tunnel about twenty minutes of walking later. Two tracks of rusted metal led along the newfound tunnels, dented and ripped apart in the sections still visible to the group.

Ilea looked at the Awakened, their now pretty much official map person and guide. She assumed he had some kind of innate ability not to lose his way in a labyrinth of tunnels, able to tell north from south even without a compass or any stars visible.

He silently pointed to one of the tunnels.

"Looks like whatever destroyed these burrowed out from below," Maro commented as he crouched down near the tracks. "Hard to say what it was."

"Veramath, perhaps," Ilas added. "We will find out soon enough."

Catelyn walked ahead. "We should look for a place with more space before we try to attract any beasts. I'd rather not fight in these tunnels."

"If this is just a mine carved into solid rock, then we won't be finding any massive caverns," Maro replied.

"Quiet," Ilas said, putting his head on the floor. "Prepare. It seems... something is approaching."

The group tensed up, spreading out in the broad mining corridor. Ilea started tapping the floor with two ashen limbs. She watched as the others began flying, while Lucas moved to the back.

"Any of you need light to fight?" Ilea asked.

Nobody replied for a time, mana exuding from them as their spells came to life.

"The forest would have been difficult," Maro finally said. "These tunnels are fine."

Ilea felt it too now – slight vibrations coming from below. Something was burrowing up toward them. They got stronger with each passing second but were still barely notable even with all her skills.

The creatures entered her sphere and broke out of the ground at nearly the same moment, one coming straight at her. Ten-meter-long centipede-like creatures with black shells protecting their upper body. Instead of feet, they

had hundreds of fang-like protrusions coming out of their bottom side, each humming with magic.

Ilea felt the attack before it came and decided not to blink in that instant.

### **[*Shade Shredder – lvl ???*]**

The thing was over a meter in width, and it quickly wrapped itself around Ilea. Its shell bulged as a surge of mana rushed through it, the fangs grinding over the ashen armor suddenly extending and sharpening.

*Wind magic?*

Ilea felt the somewhat familiar mana cut into her ash, digging deeper with each passing moment. Her own mana was pushing into the creature, her ashen limbs not finding purchase on the powerful shell or the sea of blades below.

Storm of Cinders and her reversed healing were dealing damage as she counter-healed the damage done to her armor. She withstood the crushing damage and tried, unsuccessfully, to get her arms out to deliver some punches. Instead, she tumbled to the floor with the beast still wrapped around her.

Sharp wind-magic-enhanced claws, spikes, and teeth-like protrusions moved past her face and dug into her eyes before she covered them with ash as well.

They rolled through the tunnel, Ilea's limbs slashing into the creature as it cut into her. When she was far enough from the others, she released Heart of Cinder, which burned into the screeching monster.

It didn't let go, however, despite the burn marks showing on both its shell and the skin around its bladed stomach.

The beast grew more frantic, moving faster as its magic increased in power. It managed to get through the ash and grind against the bone armor below.

The harsh grating sound pounded in Ilea's ears as she reformed her ash and continued her assault, slamming the grappling beast into the walls with whatever purchase she got with her legs or wings.

Blinking didn't work at the moment, but she wasn't terribly concerned yet. While the beast outdamaged her armor's healing, it hadn't reached her skin. Her third-tier recovery didn't work on her ashen armor, but it did work on her body.

She released Heart of Cinder again, more smoke rising from the creature's already burnt skin. The stone around them was disintegrating, both Ilea and the creature tougher than the tunnel's walls.

Her strength wasn't enough to get out of the grip of the Shredder, which wrapped around her more and more tightly. By now, Ilea's armor had been ground away, the bone armor providing a momentary barrier but nothing compared to her ashen defenses on top.

A thousand lines of red blood formed slowly as the Shredder moved around her now-exposed flesh. Ilea got her elbow free and started punching the creature, and while she could use little force, she had the benefit of being able to add Absolute Destruction.

Pain disabled, Ilea continued her attacks, noticing that after another few hits, the creature was slowing down. Its wind-aided blades weren't digging as deep as they had before.

Sentinel Reconstruction also now outweighed the damage dealt, her destructive mana still flowing into the creature from both her touch as well as the sixteen limbs that pushed past and through the gaps left behind by the creature, delivering Storm of Cinders continuously.

Its grip finally loosened, and the creature untangled itself from her before its head dived toward the ground, black blood dripping from the various dents and cuts the ashen limbs had managed to cause.

Her ashen armor reformed on her torn and bloody skin as her limbs wrapped around the creature, her legs closing around it as it started to burrow into the ground with some sort of stone manipulation skill.

*What is it, I wonder?*

Ilea held on, most of her limbs now trying to stop the Shredder from moving further into the stone. It was bleeding profoundly now, various injuries obvious as it struggled against her hold.

She would have likely not been able to hold on had the creature been at its full strength. However, with all its injuries and Ilea now focusing on the open cuts with a few of her limbs, its screeches and struggles soon became death throes.

She finally ripped it out of the floor, pummeling it with punches and her limbs until it lay there twitching, a few of its fangs still flickering with wind magic from time to time.

**‘ding’ You have defeated [Shade Shredder – lvl 532]. For defeating an enemy two hundred and ten or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted.**

**‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 316 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 315 – Five stat points awarded**

Ilea ignored the messages and rushed back to the others, her bone armor regenerating from the bits and pieces that had survived the ordeal. The whole right side of her helmet was gone, as were most of her breastplate and leg pieces.

Her body was wet with her own blood, but she had no time to take care of it now, instead blinking back down the corridor before she saw the light of fire.

One of the creatures was burrowing into the stone, bleeding and scorched, a huge chunk of its middle section missing. Decayed.

She focused on the one still going, flickers of magical barriers visible where the monster had latched on.

Maro was off to one side, heaving in shredded armor as a dull purple fire blazed around him. He looked rough in her sphere but alive. Lucas was healing him, creating wooden roots to protect them.

Catelyn now filled nearly the whole of the tunnel, her fire surging as she burnt the sides of the remaining creature, trying not to injure the grappled elf.

As she approached, Ilea saw glimpses of Ilas, his blades cutting into weakened portions of the Shredder. Her ashen limbs moved through and started healing those injured, the sound of cracking and shattering barriers audible.

One of her limbs ripped off a chunk of the monster’s shell, and Ilas immediately appeared, his steel digging into the newly exposed flesh. The creature screeched in pain, and the combined damage overwhelmed its predatory senses. They weren’t corrupted, after all.

It slowed down and let go of Elfie before quickly slithering away.

Ilea immediately caught Elfie, whose armor was mostly in tatters. Her healing flowed into him as she sent a couple of ashen spears at the fleeing

creature. Two of her ashen limbs extended and released Heart of Cinder in a cone.

At the same time, Catelyn teleported past her and unleashed an inferno that scorched the ground and walls near the group. When it disappeared, only a smoldering husk remained of the Shredder.

Catelyn moved on to the third one, its plated and protected head with four eyes and circular maw frantically pushing through the rock as it tried to carry its heavily injured body away from the fox.

Another screech filled the tunnel before Catelyn shrank once more, revealing a several-meter-wide red and hot crater behind her.

***‘ding’ Your group has defeated [Shade Shredder – lvl 510]. For defeating an enemy one hundred and ninety or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted.***

***‘ding’ Your group has defeated [Shade Shredder – lvl 468]. For defeating an enemy one hundred and forty or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted.***

***‘ding’ Sentinel Core reaches 3rd lvl 5***  
***‘ding’ Wind Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 9***

Ilea blinked over to Catelyn, catching her collapsing form and healing the dozens of cuts lining her body. The fox glanced up at her and sighed.

Ilea looked at the husk of the burnt creature and rolled her shoulders. “So those are Shredders.”

## Recovery

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Ilea waited for more of the creatures to show up as she healed Catelyn. She noted that Elfie was still sitting up against the wall, Lucas taking care of the rest of his wounds.

Elfie's mask was destroyed, his chest piece a mangled mess of steel. His wounds were mostly healed by now, but blood still covered where he'd been cut.

Maro didn't look much better; his helmet was gone entirely, and his armor looked like mere pieces of metal clinging to his form. "Unholy Mother," the necromancer cursed, his voice lacking his usual sarcastic undertone.

Ilas looked uninjured, likely having hidden from the beasts with his shadow magic.

"That was way too close," Catelyn murmured.

Ilea shrugged and summoned a meal. She could see the others needed a break, but she hoped they weren't done with this layer. She could definitely handle a few more. Perhaps the others could hang back next time.

*Although getting caught alone by a swarm of those things probably isn't a good idea... yet.*

"These creatures... they weren't corrupted," Catelyn said. "Have we already moved past the origin?"

"We should investigate further," Ilas replied. "I have yet to find traces of the expedition. Uncorrupted beasts remain in the fifth layer – these

creatures were simply spared.”

“Or they just killed everything that tried to corrupt them,” Ilea suggested, chewing on her food.

Maro sighed as he stood up. He breathed in deep and shuddered before he glanced her way. “You could try to swallow before you speak.”

She nodded toward his crotch area, where little of his armor remained. “And, respectfully, you could try to cover your privates, necromancer king,” Ilea said as she took another bite.

The man sighed, a fresh armored robe appearing to cover him up. “I hate Shredders.”

“Not ordinary ones. Never have I heard of them above the three hundredth level,” Ilas supplied.

“Wait till we find the corrupted ones,” Ilea said with a smile.

“The corruption will complicate things. They are rather fast and capable of breaking through each of our defenses. That is, if they managed to injure you?” Catelyn asked, looking at Ilea.

“They did. But it’s just a matter of ripping out the corruption, isn’t it?” she asked.

“From a thousand cuts?” Catelyn asked. “Well... I could burn it out of you, I suppose. Or perhaps your heat spell would do the trick, the corruption not being part of your body. It worked for me back in the first layer.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. I think dealing with frenzied ones will be easier, even if the corruption comes into play. Just let me take point,” Ilea said and finished her meal. “Ready?”

“I’ll have nightmares about those teeth for months,” Maro muttered.

She had a feeling that the others were no longer quite as enthused about this endeavor. Although, really, she was the only one who was excited. The others were doing a job. *What a dull way of living.*

A sudden flash of magic made her turn, and all eyes focused on Niivalyr.

He opened his eyes, a dull white glow emanating from them as he floated up from his sitting position.

### **[Mage – lvl 300]**

Ilea crossed her arms in front of her and gave him an expectant look.

The elf hissed at her, exposing his sharp teeth as he smiled. “At least this expedition hasn’t been entirely fruitless.”

A shining white barrier formed in front of him. Runes and letters Ilea couldn’t read spread across it, visible both to her naked eye and within her sphere.

“Shiny letters. What do they do?” she asked, watching the barrier split into various smaller shards that blinked out of existence before reappearing around Ilea.

“Go on,” she said, her face covered by ash again before the shards finally slashed into her armor.

As they hit, the familiar feeling of a powerful curse flowed through her, now affecting her more directly than his previous application via runes formed on the ground or simply using some form of ranged curse magic.

With her resistance and healing, she could bear it. She got a strong feeling of nausea accompanied by what felt like reduced regeneration of all her resources. It would be difficult to heal with this curse afflicting her, though she wondered how her third tier would be affected.

“Marvelous...” Niivalyr said to himself as he summoned another set of barriers and inspected his own magic.

Ilea slammed her fist into it with full power, sending a shockwave against the nearby walls. Yet not a crack showed on the shimmering surface. Niivalyr smiled wide at that.

“Let’s hope this one’s enough to protect you from a Shredder,” she said, returning the smile.

\* \* \*

The group moved through the tunnels more carefully now. Ilea was at the front, walking rather than flying. The rest followed, floating. A few of Maro’s skeletons were walking beside Ilea too, keeping enough distance between them to allow for individual Shredder attacks.

They didn’t talk anymore, simply moving through the tunnels, Ilas occasionally pointing the way whenever a fork presented itself. A while later, Ilea felt a weird pressure in her mind and gestured for the others to stop.

“Mind magic,” she whispered. It was subtle. The complete opposite of what the Veramath had thrown out. She felt it vanish once more, perhaps because she had injured whatever creature it was with the feedback from her resistance.

“It’s stopped again,” Maro said. “Very subtle. You have the second-tier bonus too, right?”

Ilea glanced his way and nodded before they continued walking. She came across an entrance to what looked like a resting place for the ancient miners.

It had once been fortified, but the steel and wood were now bent and broken. A few simple beds, chairs, and tables remained, visible under the ground and behind the walls.

*Cave in?* Ilea wondered as she saw the hidden furniture in her sphere.

She picked up something else as well, a weird spot on one of the walls. It was fuzzy and confusing, not an absence of something, and she felt compelled to look away, to ignore it. And still, she knew it was there.

Ilea walked closer as the rest spread out in the hall, then called out, “There’s something here.”

She poked the wall.

A row of teeth suddenly became visible, biting down on her arm.

Ilea smiled, her battle precognition informing her of the unimpressive damage.

The teeth ground on her ash but failed to penetrate. A second later, a bolt of lightning impacted her, as did a mental attack, both of which she easily shrugged off.

### **[Blighter Stone – Lvl 283]**

The group had walked closer upon her call and watched the wall.

“A Blighter Stone,” Maro said. “At such a high level, too. I didn’t know they could reach that far.”

“What are they?” Lucas asked as he watched the wall’s changing color with fascination.

“They pick a spot and hide, usually using some form of bait, light, or magic to lure prey in front of them,” Catelyn explained. “Not the first time I’ve seen one, but it’s certainly the first to use mind magic.”

“Mimic,” Ilea said with a smile.

The thing continued trying to bite her arm, working its way up but getting stuck, unable to digest her protective ash.

“Not corrupted either,” Ilea said before she pushed destructive mana into it, holding on to the tongue when it tried to run away on tiny legs that suddenly formed under it.

### **‘ding’ You have defeated [Blighter Stone – lvl 283]**

*Feel kinda bad about that one.* Still, she decided it was better to kill it than let someone else get eaten.

“Let’s have a look around while we’re here. Maybe rest,” Catelyn said as she started walking through the hall.

“Rest seems dangerous with Shredders around,” Ilea commented, feeling very slight vibrations in the ground. There were more of them, but not close by for now. She shook off the dead creature before she joined the fox.

“I agree. We should go on for another few hours to find something more defensible,” Ilas suggested.

## Hiding Beasts

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Other than some downright ancient pickaxes and mining gear, the group found nothing in the hall within the seventh layer of the Descent. At least the search didn't consume much time, given the various perception skills of the high-level group.

"What kind of metal do you think is found around here?" Ilea asked as they progressed further down the tunnels, illuminated by spheres of light moving ahead and behind. She remained the only one walking on the ground, accompanied by three skeletons.

Nobody replied, keeping themselves hidden from anything that might be listening.

"My bet is on gold," Ilea said, peeking around a corner. Only a dark mining tunnel looked back – the same sight she'd seen for the past hour.

Ilea moved her hand over a mine cart that likely hadn't been moved in a thousand years. The loud squeaking noise it made upon forced movement certainly suggested that.

Ilea felt a familiar pressure a while later, stronger and coming from a less focused point. "More mimics," she said, glancing back at the group. "Follow?" she asked, getting a nod from Catelyn in response.

The mind magic increased in intensity before it ceased entirely. Following the direction of the attack, they found a spacious cavern a couple of minutes later.

This one looked natural, stretching high and far, and lacked any wooden beams or sockets for lanterns. It did look like whoever had once mined down here had dug into sections of the walls, and rubble and stones littered the ground. The cave floor itself was uneven, lacking the flattened nature of the tunnels.

“Smells in here,” Ilea said, sniffing the air.

“Decay,” Maro said.

“Perhaps something recent?” Ilea suggested as she followed the smell around several boulders.

She found a dead Blighter Stone, burnt and showing various piercing wounds. She crouched down and checked the area with her skills.

“It injured someone. Heavily. There’s a ton of dried blood here, most of it not from the creature,” she surmised.

Maro moved closer and landed next to her, examining the blood as well. “It’s pretty old,” he said, floating upward again. “Could be the expedition we’re looking for, could be a random scavenger or beast.”

Elfie smelled it too, brushing a finger over the blood and tasting it, quickly lifting his mask and putting it back into place. “Dwarf,” he said with certainty.

“Their blood tastes different?” Ilea asked.

“It does,” the elf said simply.

“Any trace of them?” Catelyn asked.

“Only one way leads out of here,” Ilas said, pointing toward the other end of the cavern, barely visible in the dim light of Lucas’ spells.

Ilea nodded and checked the cavern, finding four hidden Blighter Stones, responsible for the previous mind magic. They were quickly dispatched.

They continued through the small tunnel at the end of the cavern. This one was much less refined than the previous corridors, either made at a later time or perhaps a first effort to go deeper.

Another cavern opened up after Ilea had passed through the tight tunnel, which barely left her with enough space to get through. Orbs of light spread into the space, revealing more sections where digging had started. It was also a possibility that all the metal had already been excavated.

As the others emerged behind her, Ilea started to walk into the middle of the room. Again, the smell of rot filled the air. Soon, the light revealed

scattered bodies. All was ripped apart – both their gear and the flesh and bone below. Three spines remained, one barely recognizable.

“Cuts,” Ilea said, examining the pieces in her sphere.

A slight vibration suddenly ran through the ground. Her sphere picked up movement, coming in quickly from below.

There was no time to speak, to warn the others. A Shredder shot out the very moment she recognized the disturbance.

Ilea jumped back, dodging the beast as it rushed out of the ground, pulsing orange lines visible on its elongated body.

### **[Corrupted Shade Shredder – Lvl ???]**

Her ashen limbs immediately slashed into it, and Ilea used that grip to dodge a second monster coming out of the ground behind her.

Maro’s corpses were ripped apart in mere instants, chunks of flesh and bones falling to the ground with wet sounds.

The cavern exploded into motion, spells raining down on the corrupted creatures as they frantically sought out their targets.

Ilea tried to get to all of them, using her ashen limbs to injure each one as she ducked and weaved through the fast-moving corrupted.

Five of them were focusing on her already, pushing at each other as they rushed to trap her in their fangs.

Barriers of bright white light were visible in the corner of her eye, floating at the highest point of the cavern. Beams of red and purple came down and injured the creatures but failed to reduce their momentum.

“We have more coming!” Ilea shouted, sending ten ashen spears into the oncoming swarm of thoughtless monsters.

Some of them struck true, others glanced off the creatures’ defenses. All it did was agitate them further, if such a thing was at all possible.

Ilea separated her limbs in the last moment before the swarm hit her, blinking above them as the creatures rushed past. Heart of Cinder activated and burned into the creatures.

Her ashen limbs rushed down and slashed the monsters apart, their defenses much less durable than those of the uncorrupted beasts. The reaction, of course, was quite different – the frenzied monsters weren’t concerned with their survival as they thrashed and turned, looking for their vanished prey.

"There's too many!" Maro shouted, making her turn and look his way.

Two corrupted Shredders had burrowed in from above, biting at his white barriers that kept them at bay as fire and death engulfed them.

"Find a way out of here!" Catelyn shouted, her massive form slamming down as her tails swept away two of the creatures, a cone of bright fire engulfing the swarm below Ilea.

Ilea kept her focus on the beasts. If anybody had a chance of surviving this, it was her. Clad in her ashen armor, she blinked toward the beast closest to the edge of the group and the cavern, slashing all her limbs into it as her fists punched into its corrupted form, her offensive potential at its maximum.

Walls of ash formed close to her as the monster curled around her defenses, its life burning away as her reversed healing mana and all her spells slammed into it.

It moved quickly, shredding through her ash. Still, it was overwhelmed by the damage before it could get to her, suddenly going limp and sliding away.

Ilea heard the noise in her mind but simply focused on the next foe, the beast already pretty much wrapped around the previous Shredder, waiting for its turn to rip the healer apart.

"A way leads out – on me! Teleport through the wall. Metal—" Ilas shouted before he paused and reappeared after dodging one of the creatures. "Metal they will find hard to burrow through! There are too many!"

He vanished once more, barely noticeable in the edge of Ilea's vision.

There hadn't been enough time for her to reform her ashen defenses, and the second monster was now digging into her armor with frightening speed. Then she heard a roar, coming from Catelyn a couple of meters to her right.

She couldn't see anything other than teeth and claws, orange pus and black blood smearing onto her rebuilding ash as her punches and ashen limbs ripped the flesh around her apart.

When the creature died, she noticed some cuts on her body and an invading force pulsing with orange light as pain shot through her body.

Ilea had three cuts on her arm. She blinked, flying as high as she could as two of her limbs slashed into her own skin, ripping out the corrupted flesh. Her healing pushed against it but wasn't able to overcome whatever substance it was.

It felt different, a mixture of something she knew and something else. Poison, curses, acid, pain itself. A cool feeling of creeping death.

Then, as fast as it had spread into her, it was ripped out again, muscle and skin reformed once more.

Catelyn was hovering with a Shredder moving around her tails, cutting deep into her as she roared and burned it.

Maro was already gone, as were Lucas and Ilas. The lights, however, remained, indicating that Lucas was close. Niivalyr hovered nearby, his barriers protecting him against the lunging beasts, which couldn't get purchase on his magic.

"I'll get her out – move to where they are!" Ilea shouted to the elf as she blinked into the flames, her offensive skills slashing into, and through, the creature holding on to Catelyn.

More of them were coming from below, barely deflected by Ilea's and Catelyn's spells and attacks.

Ilea released Heart of Cinder into the writhing mass below, the Shredders using each other's bodies to get higher. To reach the floating fox.

Flashes of white appeared, blocking the lunging worms, which were now coming from above as well.

"Teleport as soon as this one is off," Ilea shouted, the flames burning away at her armor as they finally killed the creature.

Both of them vanished, appearing close to the wall Ilas had indicated, three flying orbs of light pulsing to mark the exit.

One of the Shredders shot out of the ground the moment they reappeared. Ilea shoved the fox away with her limbs, one fist slamming into the creature's head. Her ashen limbs followed, as well as a surge of ash to engulf it.

Again, though, she was entangled, blades of bone shredding through her defenses, some brimming with wind magic and others merely drenched with corruption. Her mana was slowly draining as she used all her spells in quick succession. The wind attacks brought some of it back.

Her flurry of attacks killed the injured creature – at a great cost to her mana. The ash around her condensed into thick walls before three more Shredders slammed into her and the stone walls of the cavern.

She could see beyond the wall now, five meters of thick stone followed by something else, more durable, harder for her sphere to penetrate.

Her ash was still connected to her body and the beasts, her attacks keeping them at bay but preventing a teleport at the same time.

Inside the protected space, Catelyn had shrunk and lay collapsed on the ground. Beyond her, Maro was resting against the side of the wall with his head turned toward the cavern. Ilas paced around while Lucas watched on with a worried expression, torn and unsure.

*Just fucking stay there,* Ilea thought, finishing another one. Her defenses had been eaten through from three sides now, all her spells only giving momentary pause to the creatures as she delivered more destructive mana into them.

Elfie was still in the cavern, preventing more of the worms from getting closer to her as he floated, teleporting to avoid the beasts as they scratched past his barriers.

Ilea's bone armor now barely clung to her body, and numerous orange lines pulsed under her skin. Her ashen limbs were both attacking the Shredders and cutting the corruption out of herself.

Meditation and her resistance against wind made sure her mana was regenerating quickly, but it wouldn't be enough for much longer.

She staggered back with a smile, hitting the wall before Heart of Cinder burst from her chest, burning away the corruption and pushing the creatures back. The stone behind her was reduced to ash, her spell stopping when it hit the steel that protected her allies.

Her ash was banished when Elfie teleported in front of her, a set of barriers appearing a split second before the Shredders slammed into them, cracks forming after a moment.

"Get out of here," he said, the barriers flaring with light.

Ilea's ashen armor was reforming, blood dripping onto the stone floor as she stepped toward him with a grin on her face. "My knight in shining barriers."

"Leave, now!" Elfie said, focused on the monsters.

"You first," Ilea said as she watched dozens of frenzied Shredders bang their claws against the elf's magic.

"Why are you so much like us?" he asked, sounding tired.

Then Niivalyr vanished, and Ilea followed just before the corrupted beasts reached her once more.

She reappeared in the room beyond, her ashen armor closing around her chest as a last portion of blood and corruption splashed to the floor. The

wounds had already closed, only blood and orange goo remaining on her body.

“Ilea!” Lucas exclaimed as he moved closer, stopping a meter away.  
“Are you alright?” He seemed hesitant.

“Yeah, of course,” she said with a smirk, spreading her limbs to check on the others.

After a moment, she withdrew her limbs, her damaged bone armor vanishing into her necklace as she scrubbed the remaining blood off herself with her ash. Both black and red alike.

The ground and walls here were made of steel instead of stone, its metallic sheen reflecting the light from the group’s spells.

Ilea proceeded to walk to the wall that separated them from the Shredders. She watched with amusement as the monsters tried to burrow through the thick reinforced steel.

A smile spread on her face as she knocked on the wall with her fist.  
*They’re not getting through that.*

“We can’t fight them,” Lucas said.

Ilea grinned. “We’ll see about that.”

## Safety?

---

Lucas was watching Ilea as she knocked on the steel that separated them from a chaotic sea of teeth and claws. “Is Catelyn alright?” His voice quivered a little as he spoke.

“She’s not injured anymore, at least,” Ilea said.

“Can the Shredders get to us?” Ilas asked. The blades he held were nearly completely black now, drenched in the beasts’ blood. Streaks of orange still showed on them too, the corruption dripping onto the floor.

“They are failing to penetrate the steel,” Elfie replied. “Quite durable.”

Ilea nodded. “Yeah, they’re scratching it, but if they can’t wrap themselves around this whole place, I doubt they’ll make much progress. I’d love some of this steel for armor. Any idea what it is?” she asked, looking at the elf.

Niivalyr hissed. “I do not.” He sighed and sat down against the opposite wall.

“Should have brought Goliath with us,” she murmured.

*Maybe I can carve out some of it?* She tried cutting into the wall with an ashen limb but made only the barest scratch despite applying nearly all her power. *Nope. That would take ages.*

“There’s magic in the steel. Either enchantments or something else,” Maro said. “I doubt it will be the same if you cut it out.”

“I agree with the necromancer. Please refrain from weakening our only barrier against those creatures,” Niivalyr said.

Ilea looked at the group and crossed her arms as she leaned against the steel behind her. “I know it was dangerous, but I thought we were doing quite well. Only around ten of them remaining, I think... wait, no, twelve.”

Niivalyr hissed. She didn’t know if he was ashamed or angry. Maybe both?

“Dangerous is an understatement,” Lucas said.

Maro gave her a look and breathed out, avoiding her eyes.

“Isn’t this why we came here?” Ilea asked.

She didn’t get a reply. The others seemed dejected.

“We should discuss how to proceed once Catelyn is awake again,” Ilas said.

Ilea tapped the steel wall again, looking at the corrupted Shredders still scraping the other side through her sphere.

“Well, while we’re waiting, I won’t let this opportunity go to waste. I’m nearly topped off again.” She murmured the last part before quickly looking through her notifications.

**‘ding’ You have defeated [Corrupted Shade Shredder – lvl 520]. For defeating an enemy two hundred or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted.**

...

**‘ding’ Your group has defeated [Corrupted Shade Shredder – lvl 462]. For defeating an enemy one hundred and forty levels or more above your own, bonus experience is granted.**

**‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 317 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 316 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ Sentinel Reconstruction reaches 3rd lvl 18**

**‘ding’ Sentinel Core reaches 3rd lvl 6**

**‘ding’ Armor of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 18**

**‘ding’ Storm of Cinders reaches 3rd lvl 5**

**‘ding’ Blood Manipulation Resistance reaches lvl 5**

...

**‘ding’ Blood Manipulation Resistance reaches lvl 8**

**‘ding’ Wind Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 10**

She put her bone armor back on, the timeless material slowly regenerating. “We’ve killed eight of the creatures already. Nearly half.”

Elfie gave her a glance. “I can support you, but I’ll stay at a distance.”

“Ready when you are.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. We barely got away with our lives!” Lucas intervened, stepping between the two.

Niivalyr hissed as he straightened his enchanted cloak. A ripple of powerful mana exuded from him a moment later. “Ilea can kill them.”

“And you can get me out,” she added. “Can you see through the wall?”

“I can see the magic in and beyond it,” the elf supplied.

“So you can see my ashen limbs?”

“Your form is unmistakable, yes.”

“You’re not seriously going back out there?” Lucas asked, his eyes continuing to widen as he looked between them a couple of times.

“They can burrow underground, Lucas. If they find their way up to the first layer, it will be chaos. I’ll go out, kill a few, come back here, and heal up. Easy.”

Maro chuckled to himself. “What have I gotten myself into?”

“You’re free to join in,” Ilea said with a smile.

“Respectfully, fuck no,” Maro answered.

“All the more for me, then,” Ilea said.

“Elfie, I’ll scratch the wall with one of my ashen limbs if I need you and your barriers. Can you cast them through the steel?” she asked. The possibility would make the whole thing much easier.

“I will have to come to the other side. The beasts, however, are slow to react to flying enemies. Especially if you have their attention.” The elf walked closer to the wall, reaching a hand out to it.

“Should work well enough,” Ilea said. “Ready?”

Niivalyr hissed.

Ilea focused on her skills and auras, Heart of Cinder charging as she watched the thrashing Shredders still scraping fruitlessly against the steel.

Then she vanished and reappeared amongst the screeching beasts.

It was chaos. Ash, teeth, fire, and wind.

\* \* \*

Ilea's mana and health came and went as she fought amongst the writhing armored mass of corrupted enemies. Two of them died before they could get through her defenses and cut into her flesh and muscles below.

Ilea finished a third one, healing herself through the damage and using her third-tier recovery, before she extended an ashen limb through the bloodthirsty monsters and scratched the steel wall behind her.

Elfie appeared immediately and sent his barriers between the monsters and Ilea, allowing her to breathe for a moment.

She blinked back through the wall as soon as she was no longer in physical contact with the monsters, and Elfie reappeared beside her straight after. She sucked in a huge lungful of air, her ashen armor reforming as blood and corruption dripped to the floor.

Ilea wrung out her hair as the last of her wounds healed, the remaining corruption cut out with her ash.

"Three killed already," Elfie commented.

"There are more approaching," Maro said.

"Good," Ilea answered, cracking her knuckles.

\* \* \*

Ilea went in and out of the fight six times before the last of the creatures was felled. She felt pretty comfortable dealing with them in the end, and while more had appeared, their numbers were limited.

She counted fifteen corpses in total when she finally stood alone amidst the gore, her armor reforming. Elfie floated above her, surveying the cavern as they waited for more.

"I think that was it," she said after a while and blinked back inside the steel chamber.

Niivalyr reappeared next to her. "For now, at least. I do not think that was the extent of the seventh layer's creatures."

Sleeping bags had been rolled out, and a small fire rune was heating up a stew inside a heavy-looking cooking pot. The smell was very welcome after the corpses and gore outside the facility they had found themselves in.

Catelyn had been covered by a heavy blanket and was now quietly breathing. Maro was resting in an actual bed, getting an approving smile from Ilea when she saw it. Lucas and Ilas were still waiting vigilantly, the latter keeping his attention on the corridors leading away from their position.

They were located in a corner where two steel hallways met. The corridors each forked around fifty meters away in each direction. It looked like the corridors ended in closed-off walls.

Ilea summoned her own bed, lifting Catelyn with three ashen limbs before she tossed the fox onto the soft feather bed. After giving her an ashen rinse, of course.

The Awakened curled up a little more, pulling the blanket closer as her expression relaxed.

“Very cute,” Ilea observed.

“You brought a bed with you as well?” Lucas asked.

“What else are storage items made for?”

Lucas looked at her for a few seconds and then nodded slowly, turning his attention back to the stew. Ilea grabbed some from the pot, then sat against the steel wall.

**‘ding’ You have defeated [Corrupted Shade Shredder – lvl 503]. For defeating an enemy one hundred and eighty or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted.**

...

**‘ding’ You have defeated [Corrupted Shade Shredder – lvl 521]. For defeating an enemy two hundred or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted.**

**‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 318 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 317 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ Sentinel Core reaches 3rd lvl 7**

**‘ding’ Aspect of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 11**

**‘ding’ Blood Manipulation Resistance reaches lvl 9**

...

**‘ding’ Blood Manipulation Resistance reaches lvl 11**

**‘ding’ Wind Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 11**

Catelyn stirred after a while. “This is nice,” she murmured before her eyes opened wide and she sat up sharply, looking around.

“Good morning,” Maro said.

“Morning,” Ilea added with a wave.

Elfie hissed.

“What happened?” Catelyn demanded.

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## Bunker of Steel

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“At least the Shredders have been dealt with, but we’re getting into territory that is far too dangerous for us to face directly,” Catelyn said after the others had brought her up to speed.

“Maybe that’s exactly what the expedition did, and now we have this corruption to deal with,” Elfie said. He hissed.

“We could always turn back,” Lucas said.

“And leave the others to die?” Catelyn demanded.

“To be fair, they could already be dead,” Maro said, his arms crossed. “If the monsters are getting more dangerous the deeper we go, then I have serious doubts about their survival.”

“We’ve found nothing about the corruption, nor have we found anything about the fate of the expedition,” Catelyn said. “I suggest a more cautious approach from now on, but I do want to push on – if you all agree.”

Ilea glanced at the others as they thought about their options. She could tell they weren’t of one mind, and she had her own thoughts on the matter as well. If the expedition had delved deeper than they could handle, somehow causing this outbreak, she didn’t know how them doing the same and sneaking past whatever monsters lived deeper in the Descent would help. But on the other hand, she really wanted to fight those creatures.

“We can think about our options while we rest,” Ilas said. “But we’ve made it this far and found this strange facility – we should at least explore it.”

Catelyn gave him a look and made to speak but then sighed.

“I can check it out while you rest and think,” Ilea said.

She checked her armor, then walked down one of the corridors. Elfie appeared by her side and floated next to her.

At the end of the corridor, there was a thin, barely visible line in the steel wall. A door, perhaps, that was currently shut.

*This seems familiar,* Ilea thought as she looked at the magic within the door.

“Can you figure out the enchantments?” she asked, glancing at the floating elf.

“There are none,” he said a moment later.

Ilea slammed her fist into the steel with full force. The metal creaked and dented, the loud crack traveling through the hallways.

Ilea waited a while and listened. Nothing replied to her call. Magic but no enchantments, then.

A rectangular room opened up beyond the door. Machinery whose purpose was unknown to Ilea was built into the walls, and there were four stone tables in the middle of the room. A dim light shone from a magical light built into the ceiling.

*I know who built this place,* Ilea thought as she walked over to some of the machines, their design distinct, judging by their color and feel.

Ilea toyed with the machine, but nothing happened. “This whole thing, I think it was built by the same people who had facilities in the demon realm.”

She moved over and checked the stone tables. Runic carvings had been etched into the stone from bottom to top, the four tables notable for their crude design.

“We don’t know if the entire Descent was built by whoever built this,” Elfie said. “This small facility here could simply be a hideout.”

Ilea glanced up at the shimmering light. “Hideout? It looks more like a research facility or something. We might not want to mess too much with this. Not knowing the purpose of it all,” she added.

“Enchanter’s work,” he agreed, wonder in his tone.

“What could they have done here?” Ilea mused.

“It is not Taleen in nature,” Elfie said. “But there are other forces and civilizations out there, long-forgotten ones and some perhaps simply hidden away.”

“You’re thinking you can use what we find here against the Taleen?”

“I’ve agreed to help because you asked, but my battle is with the Taleen. You know this.”

“I know. I haven’t found a good moment to mention this yet, but when I was in the south, I met a few Cerithil Hunters. Told them I’d met a group of them before.”

Elfie hissed, eyes wide and intense. “You did? Is there a way to meet them? Did you learn their names? What did they look like, and how powerful were they?”

“Yeah, I can probably leave a message for them. One of them was a soul mage, one an ice mage close to my level who called himself Ben, the third one was a fire or dragon mage of sorts named Feyrair, and the last one was a super high-level healer and wind mage. His name is Isalthar.”

Niivalyr was quiet for a long moment, his eyes wide. “The Val Akuun,” he whispered.

“The what?” Ilea asked.

He blinked and then shook his head. “It’s... not important. Thank you, Ilea.”

“So, you want to meet them? They wanted to meet you.”

He nodded, lost in thought. “Yes, maybe. Can I let you know?”

“Sure, whenever you’re ready,” Ilea said. “Now come on, we should let the others know what we’ve found.”

Once they were back, Ilea shared the findings from their little scouting trip as well as some of her theories.

“We had assumed the dungeon wasn’t entirely natural,” Catelyn said. “It’s concerning to know that there is possibly yet another party involved. But between the Red Church and whoever the builders of this facility were, we still don’t know what their purpose here was.”

“They could be one and the same,” Lucas suggested.

“Unlikely. The architecture is too different, nor is there anything known about the Red Church using such advanced technology,” Ilas said.

“We’re here to stop the corruption. Maybe this facility will offer some more insights. I’d like to have a look, but if we don’t find anything quickly, we should go on,” Catelyn said, looking around the group. “Two hours, and then we leave. Any objections?” She glanced at Ilea.

“Sounds good to me,” Ilea replied, then blinked over to her bed. “Wake me up if you find anything interesting.”

Ilea managed to fall asleep rather quickly, waking up again with a furry tail tapping her nose. She squinted and saw the fox standing near her bed.

*Doesn't feel like any time has passed at all.*

Meditation and healing mana flowed through her, and Ilea's body immediately awakened. She felt rested, even though a part of her disliked the notion.

*Two hours just isn't enough. Even if it is.*

Her bed vanished as she stood up, still in her bone and ashen armor. *Time for breakfast.* She summoned a meal and started eating.

“Found anything?” she asked as she chewed.

Catelyn shook her head. “Nothing. Just devices we don’t understand. I’ll want to have a chat with you about these facilities you found in the Demon Realm.”

“Devices we don’t understand summarizes it pretty well, but I’ll tell you what I know,” Ilea answered.

Catelyn nodded. “Eat and drink. We leave in fifteen minutes.”

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## Don't Fear the Reaper

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**'ding' Your group has defeated [Corrupted Shade Shredder – lvl 482]. For defeating an enemy one hundred and sixty or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted.**

...

**'ding' Your group has defeated [Corrupted Shade Shredder – lvl 494]. For defeating an enemy one hundred and seventy or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted.**

Twenty-eight, twenty-nine... thirty-two of the fuckers and not a single level-up. Ilea sighed. I really need to fight solo again after this. The penalty is ridiculous.

**'ding' Azarinh Fighting reaches 3rd lvl 15**

**'ding' Aspect of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 12**

**'ding' Heart of Cinder reaches 3rd lvl 6**

**'ding' Heart of Cinder reaches 3rd lvl 7**

**'ding' Storm of Cinders reaches 3rd lvl 6**

**'ding' Keeper of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 10**

**'ding' Blood Manipulation Resistance reaches lvl 12**

...

**‘ding’ Blood Manipulation Resistance reaches lvl 18**  
**‘ding’ Wind Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 12**

Other than a few more Shredders and the same tunnels Ilea would have gotten lost in without Ilas, they didn’t encounter anything new for the next few hours.

At least Niivalyr got his second Class to three hundred, vastly increasing the power of his curse magic, which made the subsequent fights a little easier.

They reached the next separating stone floor sometime later. Smaller caverns led down into the eighth layer, a vile odor rising from them.

“Finally,” Ilea murmured.

“Looks like the Shredders burrowed down,” Maro commented as he looked at the area. “Smells like poison and death.”

“Poison?” Ilea asked with a smile.

“It’s concerning that you sound excited,” Catelyn said as she looked down.

The Shredders hadn’t burrowed straight, making it impossible to see what was waiting in the next layer.

“You should expect as much from her,” Elfie said, then gestured to one of the holes. “Scouting?”

Ilea nodded and jumped down, blinking through the small carved-out section of stone, noting the smell of corruption on the walls.

*So they didn’t just move up.*

The air got thicker, and her nose was already itching as something burnt her airways. Finally, the tunnel opened up into the next layer. Dark once again.

She lit a torch and had a look around. “Well... it’s purple,” she surmised, nodding to herself.

**‘ding’ You have been poisoned by Mild Rupture Fetor – You resist the effects**

“What’s with these unnecessary notifications? I was just about to get excited.”

Ilea rolled her eyes and waved her torch around, but other than a purple mist, there was nothing to see.

“Poison in the air, but I can’t see anything else!” Ilea shouted.

Then, suddenly, her gaze snapped downward as a tentacle-like protrusion shot up and tangled itself around the torch.

“Let go, this is mine,” Ilea said, holding on to the thing as her ashen limbs spread.

### **[Tangled Reaper – lvl ???]**

“You should maybe come down now!” she shouted up to the others as she slashed at the limb, separating it after several deep cuts from her ash.

A squeal could be heard from below and within the mist before the bleeding tentacle slithered down into the unknown once more.

Ilea raised her eyebrows right before a beam of purple energy impacted her ashen armor. She grinned at the familiar sensation of her ash quite literally decaying. It was similar in power to Maro’s beams but less focused and physically broader, nearly encompassing her whole torso.

Elfie appeared next to her, shards of white forming around him as he extended his hand downward. The squeals immediately intensified, his curse taking effect before the shards rushed down. Wet sounds of meat-cutting followed – the beast didn’t seem to be that far down.

“You seem to enjoy the fight,” the elf said as he glanced at Ilea, placing a shining barrier in front of him in case the beast changed its target.

“Yeah, don’t worry about me,” Ilea said, seeing the rest of the group come down to join them. “Same as before. Let me try myself against this one first. Just to see if I can survive. I’ll shout or send some ash up to you should I need help.”

“I’m not going down there,” Maro replied immediately.

“I agree. It would be safer if you stayed up here as we survey,” Catelyn confirmed, giving Ilea a look.

“You don’t need to come down – just carpet bomb my general direction,” she said as she started floating toward where the beam was coming from. “Also, call for me if the poison becomes an issue.”

The others exchanged a few glances. Maro gestured for her to go.

The purple mist slowly engulfed her as she floated downward. Tentacles shot up, but Ilea blinked down instead, flying along the long limbs as more

of them appeared.

***'ding' You have been poisoned by Rupture Fetor – You resist the effects***

The beast was now visible in her sphere, half submerged in a thick liquid that glowed a little in her magic perception. It looked like a ball of flesh with a single vertical maw as wide as Ilea's whole form, ashen limbs and wings included.

Thousands of teeth lined the sides of its mouth as dozens of eyes covering parts of its malformed sphere-like body blinked and stared up at her approaching figure. The purple beam had stopped but reformed near one of the bigger eyes before once more slamming into her.

The magic slowed her down, dozens of tentacles now slashing through the air as the beast tried to grab or impale her, some of its limbs ending in sharp gnarled spikes.

Ash entangled the creature, cutting into it as Ilea rushed closer to its body. Heart of Cinder was charging up, but she was yanked to the side when the creature dragged several of her ashen limbs away, forcing her to abandon the ash and reform it.

Ilea landed on the creature's malformed skin, her armored boots sinking in a little as her ashen limbs sliced into it, digging deep to stabilize her on the massive beast.

A pulse of death magic washed over her as the Reaper thrashed, decaying a chunk of her armor and nearly throwing her off with the sheer power of its spell. A loud noise emanated from it, a high-pitched screech that nearly ruptured her eardrums.

***'ding' You have heard the Tangled Reaper's frenzy. You are paralyzed for one second.***

***'ding' Veteran reaches lvl 9***

*Fuck.* Ilea could only watch as the massive creature turned, dozens of tentacles slamming into her before the paralyzing effect was gone.

She released Heart of Cinder, but she was already submerged in the thick, roiling liquid. She closed her ashen armor completely, feeling it burn

away quickly as the acidic substance took its toll.

The Reaper let go of her for a moment, its tentacles burnt as it screeched once more, right after Ilea had blinked up and out of the poisonous swamp.

*Death soup*, she thought, a beam of purple energy slamming into her in the second she was paralyzed.

### **‘ding’ Veteran reaches lvl 10**

*Screech again, I dare you*, she thought with a vicious grin, blinking again and reappearing on top of the Reaper’s body. Her ashen limbs slashed into the creature as her fists slammed down.

The monster thrashed and began to sink into the purple muck, its spells and tentacles still slashing into Ilea. A couple of Ilea’s limbs slashed the approaching tentacles, her eyes covered by ash to prevent the purple liquid from getting into them.

*I can take this one.*

Now was the moment to either hang on tight or retreat. Destructive mana flowed into the beast, her ashen limbs digging deeper by the second. Her defenses held, making the decision rather simple.

Then the fluid covered her as the two of them were submerged. Death magic spells returned mana to her as she healed her armor and limbs, both slowly decaying within the liquid.

Punching was still possible, allowing her to use Absolute Destruction, now more and more charged because the liquid slowed her attacks down to a crawl.

All noise was muffled now. Ilea held on as the monster turned and turned, attacking with its tentacles that still moved at rather high speeds even within the liquid. The death magic came in waves, intensifying as its panic grew.

### **‘ding’ Death Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 5**

*Shouldn’t have fucked with me, you eldritch shit.*

Another wave finally broke through her armor, the liquid immediately seeping in and burning her bone armor as she held her breath.

**‘ding’ You have been poisoned by Concentrated Rupture Liquid – -100 Health per second for three minutes**

Ilea’s grin widened, knowing that her Poison Resistance could finally be leveled again. The damage was high too, reducing her healing by nearly half.

Death magic now slammed into her bone armor, soon breaking through, her skin sizzling as she continued her attacks.

The monster was moving aimlessly through the liquid, swimming quickly as Ilea held on to its increasingly mangled body. Many of the tentacles had been ripped out already or showed deep cuts from her ashen limbs.

Ilea wasn’t sure how much time had passed when the creature finally went limp, a noise echoing in her mind.

**‘ding’ Your group has defeated [Tangled Reaper – lvl 523]. For defeating an enemy two hundred or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted.**

*Nice that I’m considered a group now.*

Ilea rolled her eyes, blinking up when more tentacles reached out to her. She blinked several times, re-emerging in the purple haze above before she spread her wings and flew farther up.

She saw the others in the distance, their fire and light magic like beacons in the darkness. Her ashen armor was back around her body, the poison still in effect.

*I like this layer.*

## Newfound Beverages

---

Ilea could hear the creatures behind her, beams of death magic flashing past as they focused on her as she retreated. Powerful and expansive fire spells created shockwaves below her. Each impact burnt dozens of tentacles, but she had no idea how many of the creatures remained.

*Not as welcoming an opportunity as a group of Shredders.*

Ilea didn't think facing multiple death magic spells at once was particularly wise. *Wouldn't they damage each other too, though?* she wondered.

She nearly paused to find out when she realized that the spells had slowed down. Only two beams had been aimed at her in the past three seconds.

Ilea turned around and squinted to see through the purple haze, illuminated only by magic spells. A flash of fire exploded in the midst of the chaos, the split second of bright light revealing one of the creatures, corrupted and frenzied. Its brethren were ripping into it with magic and tentacles.

*Now's your chance.*

Ilea blinked down, joining the fray but trying to avoid the corrupted beast. There were dozens of them around her, a clusterfuck of limbs and spells.

Ilea smirked as an idea came to her, blinking closer to the frenzied abomination with an ashen limb extended.

She clung onto one of the beasts and used all her offensive spells while she healed the corrupted and overwhelmed Reaper. Catelyn and the others had moved closer too, their spells raining down from above.

The familiar feeling of Elfie's curse spread through her, and many of the creatures screeched and reeled back. Their magic began missing her, their tentacles sluggishly attacking the pool of poison below them.

The corrupted Reaper, however, didn't seem to mind, ripping into the others while still occasionally being healed by Ilea. One of them fell back a little later, its body pulsing with corruption as it turned on the others, the odds now less overwhelming.

The constant thrashing, fighting, and detonation of spells brought more beasts as the battle went on. Some of them were corrupted, others weren't. The mages flying high above were largely ignored, the origin of both explosions and curses hard to pinpoint, even for Ilea.

She was pretty sure the beasts were capable of dealing with the corrupted on their layer. *But why miss a fight with a bunch of death magic tentacle horrors when it's available?*

It got to the point where only the beast Ilea was currently engaging was focused on her. None of them were diving down into the poisonous broth, either because there was simply too much entanglement or because of the corrupted.

Untiring and relentless, she pushed on, fighting amidst the beasts as just another enemy.

Ilea certainly didn't mind it, killing the creatures left and right as time passed. Minutes and even hours went by. The only thing she could reasonably deduce about the duration of the battle was that Catelyn's spells had stopped six times already, though the fire always returned after a short break.

Thanks to her Sentinel Core, Ilea didn't have the same problem. Elfie too seemed to be fine with his mana requirements, as there had been no break in his curses.

The sluggish, disease-free monsters were eventually overwhelmed, so Ilea focused on the corrupted. Eventually, those fell too.

Ilea looked over the smoldering remains of the Tangled Reapers, both corrupted and not. Nothing moved, save for her near-black ashen wings. Dozens of them had come and been slaughtered by their own or Ilea's group.

**‘ding’ Your group has defeated [Tangled Reaper – lvl 542]. For defeating an enemy two hundred and twenty or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted.**

...

**‘ding’ Your group has defeated [Corrupted Tangled Reaper – lvl 532]. For defeating an enemy two hundred and ten or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted.**

Ilea extended her ashen limbs to her floating companions, healing them against the poison still in the air.

**‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 318 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ Azarinth Awakening reaches 3rd lvl 16**

**‘ding’ Sentinel Core reaches 3rd lvl 8**

**‘ding’ Azarinth Reversal reaches 3rd lvl 7**

**‘ding’ Azarinth Reversal reaches 3rd lvl 8**

**‘ding’ Aspect of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 13**

**‘ding’ Heart of Cinder reaches 3rd lvl 8**

**‘ding’ Storm of Cinders reaches 3rd lvl 7**

**‘ding’ Keeper of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 11**

**‘ding’ Harmony of the Drowned reaches lvl 2**

**‘ding’ Veteran reaches lvl 11**

**‘ding’ Veteran reaches lvl 12**

**‘ding’ Curse Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 6**

**‘ding’ Curse Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 7**

**‘ding’ Death Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 6**

...

**‘ding’ Death Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 8**

**‘ding’ Heat Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 19**

**‘ding’ Light Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 2**

**‘ding’ Poison Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 10**

**‘ding’ Poison Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 11**

**‘ding’ Wood Magic Resistance reaches lvl 18**

...

**‘ding’ Wood Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 1**

**Wood Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 1**

**A connection made between a mage and nature allowed this talent to take root. Facing the force of nature, you grow more accustomed to its effects, your body more resilient to the magic of the forest.**

**2nd stage: The magic of life and nature. It is concerning how much you have enraged the usually peaceful creatures and mages using this school. Through painfully learned understanding, your body can now absorb a fraction of the life used.**

*Hours spent productively.* Ilea smiled to herself as she read through all the level-ups.

Elfie had really pulled through with his curse magic. Ilea was sure the fight would have taken hours longer if his spells hadn’t given the edge to the corrupted early on.

She’d also benefitted from being caught in the crossfire of the spells flung by the rest of the party, her Wood Magic Resistance finally reaching tier two. It would be much harder to level now, though.

“I’m not sure if we should use them like that,” Catelyn said, as if reading Ilea’s mind.

“They attacked me. I didn’t just want to leave them at our backs,” Ilea retorted, putting her five stat points into Strength.

“I do believe it was wise to kill them. I meant the corrupted,” the fox clarified.

“As long as we can kill them afterward, I think the corruption actually helps,” Ilea said, cracking her neck. “Next layer?”

Catelyn clicked her tongue but said nothing.

*What was that for? I won, didn’t I? Am I the only one who appreciates a good challenge?*

“I can’t wait to get out of this poison swamp,” Maro said with a sigh.

“Any of you have empty bottles?” Ilea asked, ignoring the looks she got in return.

“You really want to collect this stuff?” Catelyn said as she dropped a couple of flasks down.

Ilea caught them all with her limbs. “Bigger ones too,” she said, smiling when she received containers that could hold several liters.

*What if I drink it?*

She did just that and found the poison had the same effect as it did upon touching her skin. It also hurt her throat, but all that did was make it hard to speak. She decided a bath was preferable while available.

The bottles were filled and stored away, concentrated rupture liquid for later use. For now, she could wade through the stuff – while the others floated above it – and get the desired effect.

Niivalyr floated down and touched the liquid, his face hidden behind his steel mask. “May I use my new health drain on you?”

“Did that come with the evolution?”

“It did.”

“Of course, use all you have,” Ilea replied and extended an ashen limb to him. “I’ll take care of the rest if it’s not enough.”

“How very considerate of you.”

*It’s hard to tell when he’s being sarcastic and when he isn’t.* Ilea realized she was rubbing her skin with the poison liquid. *This isn’t soap.*

Ilas was leading the others, flying over them.

“Let’s keep up with them,” she suggested to the elf, whose feet were now dipped in the liquid without boots on. Ilea smiled. *At least Elfie gets it.*

It took them nearly an hour to find the exit and the way down. Various cracks and tunnels led out of the poison-filled cavern, but most just led to even more poison.

They did confirm, though, that most of the place was cleared out, and Ilea even leveled her poison resistance once more.

*Need stronger poisons.* She put it on her imaginary list, right next to more powerful spells of literally all varieties. *Is it impossible to gain resistances when it deals no damage to me at all?*

She was pretty sure there were creatures out there that could rip her apart even if she reached level four or five hundred, so it didn’t exactly matter. She just had to find stronger opponents.

**‘ding’ Curse Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 8**

**‘ding’ Curse Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 9**

Elfie certainly didn’t disappoint with his new evolution.

“Let’s hope for a more welcoming environment,” Catelyn sighed as Ilea jumped down the hole leading to the ninth layer.

A thin trail of poison was running down the side of the crack, dripping on the bright crystal below with a sizzling noise.

*Finally, some fucking light.* Ilea's mood immediately lifted. She drank a sip of concentrated poison in celebration. "Disgusting," she remarked before she carefully stepped through the openings in the crystal.

What Ilea found beyond made her pause for a moment. Her wings moved behind her as she entered the vast cavern. Lush green plants and grass covered what looked like floating islands of rock in a sea of mist. She saw creatures in the distance, red wings moving quickly before their forms vanished into the mists.

"You can come. It's safe," she called back to the others, looking up as she floated a little further down.

Ilea suddenly turned her head to the side, squinting her eyes at movement right below the surface of the white sea of mist.

A roar resounded a moment later. Too far away to be of much concern. Still, she felt her body locking up.

**'ding' You have heard the sound of a powerful beast. You are paralyzed for five seconds.**

She felt herself drift down, caught a moment later by a barrier appearing below her feet.

"Thanks," she said, looking up when the effect had worn off. "You didn't get paralyzed?"

"Only for one second," Elfie said, who was swiftly joined by the others climbing out from the crystal that covered most of the cavern's expansive ceiling.

"What was that?" Catelyn asked, looking around.

"Saw something red, with wings," Ilea supplied. "Dragons?"

"Don't joke around," Catelyn said seriously. "You might summon one."

"Really?" Ilea asked, excited as she twirled in the air.

"No. I believe it was in jest," Elfie said. He locked eyes with her and was silent for a moment.

"Let's land on one of the visible areas. I think I can see some cave entrances already," Catelyn said, floating down.

Ilea followed, quickly moving ahead again. She landed on the stone and checked the surroundings with her skills. One smell immediately stood out,

and Ilea raised a hand to signal the others to be careful.

“Blood. And corruption,” she said.

She followed the trail after finding tracks suggesting talons the size of her own head. Chunks of rock lay ripped out from the ground, deep marks showing where something had clawed through. Scorch marks marred the nearby plants as well as the grass sprouting from sections of the island.

Ilea was led mostly by the smell, for while the tracks were so obvious that she’d immediately noted them thanks to her sphere, it seemed whatever had fought here had fallen off the side of the nearby cliff.

When she reached it, she looked over and saw a ledge below, jumping down a moment later. An open cavern led into a massive stone pillar sprouting up and through the mists.

Vegetation grew more freely inside the broad and partially hollow pillar, crystal light pouring in from various cracks and openings in the surroundings.

Ilea waited for a moment, seeing Elfie fly down the side of the stone island or pillar. She wasn’t sure yet if it was floating or not. Then she followed the smell and finally found what she was looking for.

The corpse of a mangled creature. Its red wings were torn to shreds, and its dragon-like head was missing most of the skin and both eyes. A long tongue, half oozing with corruption, hung uselessly from the creature’s exposed jaw, bits and pieces of muscle barely holding it together.

Elfie hissed when he saw the creature.

“We might have reached the end of our journey,” Maro said as he stepped up beside Ilea.

“Why, know what it is?” Ilea asked, looking at the tiny red scales covering parts of the once-corrupted monster.

“Wyvern,” Catelyn said, landing on a ledge overlooking them.

Ilas took a step back as soon as he saw the creature.

“Fascinating,” Lucas said as he slowly approached, closing his eyes as he touched the body. “Mhm... it’s been a while since I’ve seen one.”

“You fought them? Aren’t they basically just discount dragons?” Ilea asked, narrowing her eyes at the immediate reactions. “What is it with you lot and dragons?”

Maro laughed, the only one who hadn’t reacted at all. “Oh, the legends will never fade. Calamity and destruction, wrought on a whim. The dragons

of old, reshaping civilization with each step they took. Some things don't change, it seems."

"Has anybody here ever seen one? Or has anyone you know?"

Ilea's question was only met with shaking heads.

*Superstitious folk here.*

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## Remnant

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Ilea smiled as another roar rolled through, closer now. She noticed the others tensing up.

The paralyzing effect only lasted four seconds now.

### ***'ding' Veteran reaches lvl 13***

"I have never truly understood the fear of dragons myself," Lucas started, strolling up beside her. "However, tales about them have survived over the millennia, mmhmm. Unlike other beasts that have destroyed entire cities."

"It is bad luck. We should not engage a Wyvern – its presence is an omen of death," Ilas murmured from behind Catelyn.

"It's just a monster. One that died – and was even corrupted," Ilea said, touching its partially exposed skull. She tried removing it but found it a challenging endeavor. "Oh, hey... Maro, can you raise it?"

The necromancer raised his eyebrows as he approached. "An omen of death...? Oh, well, in that case..."

Maro lifted his hand, a pulse of magic rushing into the creature. He seemed to be struggling, more and more mana flowing into it.

Ilea was about to speak when she saw purple wisps come to life within the mangled skull. Muscles rippled as the beast stood up once more. Two

meters tall, its wings were each easily three meters wide.

Ilea took a step back. She had to raise her head up to stare at its skull. “Hmm. Any idea what they can do? I know I asked before, but has anyone fought one?”

“I have,” Lucas said, his hesitation apparent. “A long time ago. They... teleport. Quickly. Hmm... several times in a row. Their talons easily cut through my armor. Their fire was, however, the most dangerous part. More powerful, I think... than even you,” he added, glancing toward Catelyn.

“Sounds pretty straightforward,” Ilea said and cracked her knuckles. “Maybe I can get my Heat Resistance up to level twenty.”

“My fire will be of little help,” Catelyn mused. “We should move farther down, explore more of the islands. Perhaps we can find out if they remain without corruption. If you must fight them, though I consider it foolhardy, I won’t stand in your way.”

“I shall stay far away from them as well. Perhaps we can build a small camp here,” Lucas said as he looked around. “Mhm, yes. It is much friendlier than the previous layers. The vegetation too... speaks to me.”

Ilea leaned over, her eyes widening. “Do the plants literally speak?”

Lucas just winked at her with a smile.

Maro frowned. “They can fly... and if they’re really as quick and powerful as Lucas suggests... maybe I should wait this one out too? If those we find remain free of corruption, I see little point in facing them.”

Ilea spread her arms in a frustrated manner. “Oh, come on now, you’ve faced Soul Rippers before. These are just overgrown Drakes.”“

He waved her off. “Well, you have fun with them then.”

“I will,” Ilea said, looking at her last hope.

“I shall support you,” Elfie said. “But should you be able to fight them alone, I will leave you to it.”

*My hero.* Ilea smiled brightly.

“Should we check the top of these islands first or move farther down this one? I can see some cracks leading down,” Ilea asked, looking around the group.

“It should be safer... to move above the mists,” Ilas said.

“Agreed,” Catelyn confirmed, waiting a moment for any objections. “Let’s hope they’re not all corrupted.”

\* \* \*

The closest islands were smaller than the one they had landed on before, with little to no inner workings compared to the cave with the dead Wyvern.

Ilas and Catelyn checked the space between them and their next target and signaled to the group. All of them teleported through the gap quickly, reaching a much larger island. This one even had small palm tree-like fauna growing on it. Ferns and grass covered large sections of the nearly hundred-meter-wide plateau.

“Hide,” Maro whispered, vanishing farther into the ferns.

The rest followed him, but Ilea lay prone twenty meters farther back. A moment later, a whooshing sound reached her ears. Familiar red wings were barely visible as they moved past at the same height as the plateau.

### **[Cliff Wyvern – ???]**

A roar cut the air, the paralyzing effect passing once more.

Ilea waited a minute before she blinked closer to the ledge, but she saw only mist below. No sign of the creature remained. She found the others in her sphere and blinked to Catelyn.

“It left. Not corrupted,” she whispered.

“Good,” Catelyn said and sighed. “Do you see a way down?”

Ilea shook her head, her sphere not offering anything. “Let me check the whole area.”

One blink followed the next as she moved around the plateau, remaining prone. The least she could do was make sure the others were somewhat safe before she engaged one of those creatures.

*Should level Veteran until I can ignore their roars as well.*

She took a sip of poison and returned to Catelyn. “Found it. This way,” she said, pointing.

She led them all to a set of crude stairs that led down into the stone.

“Doesn’t look natural,” Ilea said. “Lucas. Before we get into a fight, did you manage to win against the Wyvern you fought?”

The wood creator shook his head. “I escaped with my life. Barely and not without help. Its level remained hidden.” He paused and gave her another look.

Ilea nodded and turned back toward the descending stairs. *Been a while since I last fought a Drake.* She had a broad grin on her face, hidden

beneath her helmet. The fights so far had been challenging, but she'd always had a team behind her.

Even with the Shredders, she'd been able to trust Elfie and the others to intervene if it became too dangerous. But it was clear they were now reaching depths where the others were no longer comfortable with engaging the monsters.

And for good reason. They didn't lack spellpower or mobility, just her durability and regeneration. And her willingness to lose a head or two. Or three.

"Another corpse down here," she said, smelling the stench of blood and corruption.

"Several dozen," Maro supplied from behind.

The stairs opened up into a cavern similar in shape to the one they had found on the smaller island. More hollowed-out space or natural caverns within the high-reaching pillars. The smell of blood and rot only got stronger as Ilea moved through it.

"There are runes here," Elfie said, running a finger over the wall of the cavern. "Deterrents – fear and pain."

"I don't feel any of that," Ilea said as she turned to look at him.

Elfie pointed to another one of the cavern walls. "I do not believe these enchantments are meant for creatures of higher intellect. Something is hidden."

Ilea shrugged. "Anyone able to break the spell? I'll smash it otherwise."

"I'll give it a shot," Maro replied, stepping up to the wall. "The smell here is different, by the way. To my Wyvern, that is."

Ilea gave the undead creature a nod when it approached her. She'd forgotten he had it trailing behind them.

A pulse of mana came from the wall before the illusion fizzled out. Instantly, the smell intensified tenfold. Catelyn gagged, and Ilas took several steps back. The rest remained unfazed.

Ilea walked onward, making for another stairwell leading down. Her spherical perception now showed another cavern below them.

She saw metal cages holding skeletons of different species. Some of the cages looked to have been ripped apart, either from within or externally. It was hard to tell at this point. The cages looked similar to those she'd seen on the fourth layer, but she wasn't sure.

One more exit led even farther down. This one was more cave-like – a tunnel burrowed into the stone. Given the size of the plateau above, Ilea was nearly certain the island expanded as it went farther down or connected to the cavern walls.

Magical lamps were inlaid into the ceiling, but none of them were on. They weren't of the same make as the technology they had found in the seventh layer. Simpler, it seemed.

A couple minutes of walking later, the path opened up into a vast cavern. Too expansive to reasonably be within the island or the pillar leading down, though the smell of blood never really left.

Vegetation was abundant here – somewhat controlled, it seemed – and there were also bushes growing some yellow fruit. Most notable, however, were the buildings made of crude stone, roughly made and barely holding together. A fireplace, a simple forge, and many other things were strewn about the area.

Ilea perked up when she heard a hiss coming from within one of the houses. The rectangular thing had an entrance but was missing a door.

A man appeared in the middle of the camp, glancing around frantically before his eyes met hers.

He wore tattered robes with fading white, red, and golden colors – surely an expensive garment once. His hair was a mess, and splatters of blood were visible both on his robe and any exposed skin.

*Member of the Red Church?*

### **[Carrier of Heroic Blood – lvl ???]**

“Hello!” Ilea said right before the man vanished into a mist of red smoke, reappearing right in front of her with a snarl.

The familiar sensations of powerful life drain and mind magic immediately hit her, but Ilea sidestepped the swipe of his hand. His nails had grown out to form claw-like protrusions on his otherwise human hands.

Ilea responded with a kick to his knee. There was a dull thud as her armored boot met his skin and bone, destructive mana flowing into him. Another swipe came, ripping into her ashen armor as she jumped back.

“Any help?” Ilea shouted as she danced backward, dodging his attacks by a hair’s length. Her ashen limbs spread behind her before they lashed out.

He dodged them with comparable speed to her own, and she twirled in the air as he continued to attack. Each swipe came a little faster as he cut through a few of her ashen limbs, avoiding the rest.

Ilea noted that Elfie, Catelyn, and Ilas were frozen in place. Lucas wasn't there anymore.

Maro was the only one moving, his hand stretched out to the undead Wyvern, the creature's purple eyes flashing with energy a moment later as it turned and focused on the enemy.

"Their minds can't take it," Maro shouted to her. "I will get them out and come back to help you!"

Claws slashed into her throat, barely stopped by her bone armor, as she slammed her fists into the man's head. It felt like she'd hit steel.

His eyes were unfocused, frenzied. Whoever he'd once been seemed to be long gone.

A powerful pulse of mind magic made Ilea pause for a moment, but she still dodged the claws that flashed out in that moment.

*He was slowed down, too. My second-tier resistance?*

The Wyvern rushed in from behind the man, attacking with its massive claws. Surprisingly, the thing could keep up with them.

Ilea kept him busy with her limbs, getting in a couple of punches while he focused on the undead Wyvern. Any attempt to talk to him was ignored.

His claws scraped over the bones of the Wyvern, occasional bursts of mind magic freezing the monster.

When he was about to slash through the creature's spine, Ilea blinked behind him and grabbed one of his arms, twisting her body before she slammed him into the stone floor.

Ilea landed on top of him, her ashen limbs cutting into his arms and keeping them down as her fists crashed into his skull. She felt the vibrations of her powerful attacks run back through her bones, neither of them showing much of a reaction to the physical force.

Destructive mana from all her offensive skills continuously flashed into the frenzied man. Then she heard a crack when one of her punches caved in the right side of his face, squashing one of his eyes.

A surge of mind magic made her pause for a fraction of a second, and the man grabbed onto her and turned before he jumped off the ground and sent her crashing into a nearby wall.

The stone shook as she was embedded in it, and he followed up with a flurry of strikes that slowly ripped away her ash and then her bone armor. Ilea finally caught his arms and sent an armored headbutt slamming into his skull.

A surge of mana rippled through him, and the hero-blooded struggled to pull his hands free as another attack followed. Ilea's ashen limbs were now cutting into his legs and shoulders, slowly tearing away at the skin and muscles below.

Ilea continued to slam her head against his, her mana recovering through meditation. She noted that his eye was reforming, so she used an ashen limb to crush it again, trying to get the other one as well. He moved his head to the side to avoid the strike, instead receiving a cut near his temple.

By then, the Wyvern had recovered and slashed the man's back with its claws, digging nearly as deep as Ilea had managed with her ash.

A wave of mind magic made both her and the Wyvern pause. The hero-blooded turned to deliver a powerful glowing swipe that ripped off the undead creature's head, the purple magic flickering once before it died.

Ilea blinked away as her foe turned back to her, reappearing behind the man before sending him staggering back with a kick. She saw the cut on his temple had healed already.

At that moment, Maro reappeared in the room, glancing at the unmoving Wyvern.

"He's got health drain. What's your resistance?" Ilea asked as she closed the distance, dodging the hero-blooded's claws by ducking and a follow-up sidestep. Her right hook slammed into his chin, sending mana into him.

"Level twelve of the first tier!"

"That's not enough! Leave, I'll call for help if I need it!"

Maro nodded and vanished.

Ilea used her ashen limbs to entangle the hero-blooded's right arm, a dozen sharp ends slashing into his shoulder as she continued her assault with her fists. She created ash and wrapped it around his head, cutting into his eyes and clogging his nose and mouth.

Connected to her, the ash was as strong as her limbs, making it hard for the man to shrug it off as he was held in place. As she felt her grip on the man loosen, she sent a charged Absolute Destruction crashing into his throat, five hundred mana used up in the strike that crushed his windpipe.

Her ashen limbs were ripped away as he slowly freed himself, unbothered by the injuries, his right arm hanging by a mere thread of muscle and flesh.

At the same time as the hero-blooded used a mind magic blast, Ilea released Heart of Cinder, both fighters unmoving as the magic washed over them.

His arm was ripped off by the surge, and his scarred form staggered back a couple of steps before he caught himself. His eyes burned with the same savage frenzy they'd had since the beginning, unhurt by the flames.

Ilea extended five of her limbs and wrapped them around his remaining arm, imitating the Shredders as she formed claws and started moving the ash like an array of miniature buzzsaws.

The hero-blooded stepped closer and tried to slash her, but the rest of her limbs wrapped around his forearm, catching the attack.

Ilea watched his missing arm slowly grow back, but she had a grin on her face. *Not quite fast enough.*

She jabbed at his eyes with three fingers extended. The result was a bloody mess. The man fast enough to nearly dodged her attacks, causing skin to be ripped off and one of his eyes to be partially squashed.

With his remaining arm in a bind, he focused on mind magic before finally resorting to biting. Ilea very much welcomed this approach, as it allowed her to land heavy hits on his head with both fists.

At that point, she felt like she was back in the gym, slamming her fists into a resilient punching bag. Her mana was slowly draining, but with each burst of mind magic, some of it returned.

The Shredder trick had worked, the ash finally biting through his skin and muscle before her limbs reformed into their usual shape. Not connected anymore, the remaining arm fell to the ground with a wet sound.

Her limbs swiped at his legs, causing him to fall before she landed on top of him once again. His arms were slowly reforming as she slammed his head into a pulp with heavy, wet strikes.

She couldn't stop smiling. *I love this dungeon.*

## Findings

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Ilea kept on punching, her mana recovering slowly with meditation. Some of her hits lacked mana intrusion abilities to let her recover a little more.

Her ashen limbs continued to slash and cut at the man's arms as they kept on regenerating. Nothing much remained of his head, but his heart was still beating, which meant mana was still active in his body. His magic was still draining health out of her.

There was a loud crack when Ilea finally broke his rib cage, the subsequent punches squashing his organs one by one.

She ripped out his mangled heart and squeezed it briefly, blood spattering over her ashen armor and the ground when it exploded. A ding finally resounded in her mind.

***'ding' Your group has defeated [Carrier of Heroic Blood – lvl 541]. For defeating an enemy two hundred and twenty or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted.***

*So much for my group.*

Ilea stood up and wiped the blood from her ash-covered cheek, looking at the remains of the frenzied man.

“He’s dead,” she called out.

Maro appeared in the room before the rest teleported down.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Ilea breathed out. “That was fun.”

**‘ding’ The Azarinh Sentinel has reached lvl 319 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ Sentinel Core reaches 3rd lvl 9**

**‘ding’ True Ash Creation reaches 3rd lvl 12**

**‘ding’ Ash and Ember Unity reaches 3rd lvl 11**

**‘ding’ Keeper of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 12**

**‘ding’ Blood Manipulation resistance reaches lvl 19**

**‘ding’ Blood Manipulation resistance reaches lvl 20**

**‘ding’ Mental Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 16**

\* \* \*

“A remnant of the Red Church? So far down?” Catelyn asked, glancing back at Ilea as she rummaged through the fireplace and some of the tools nearby.

“Found something,” Maro said as he emerged from one of the buildings, holding a small booklet. “It’s in a language I can’t read.”

“Let me see. There is a chance I have encountered it before,” Elfie said as he stepped forward.

“More experiments in here,” Lucas commented from within another building. “Tinctures, potions, and a lot – I mean, a *lot* – of long-dried blood.”

Ilea moved closer to Lucas so that the structure was within range of her sphere. *Hmm?*

Some of the glass containers were familiar, having the same design as the blood containers she’d found back on the fourth layer. One of the machines she had seen there was here as well. A freaky-looking chair with various needles and restraints, half-covered in blood.

“Horrific,” Lucas murmured when he saw her enter. “To think someone would warp the creations of magic...” He shook his head, smelling some of the herbs and potions and grimacing.

Ilea nearly gagged at the smell of old and rotten blood and other bodily fluids, leaving the building again without commenting on what Lucas had said.

“It is a language of old, one found within many a ruin in these parts. Closer to Standard than Rhyvor’s language,” Niivalyr was explaining, his gaze focused on the pages. “This one’s name, I believe, was Malbrunt Krad, a priest of the Red Church. He was part of a specialized group of scholars experimenting down here with what he describes as ‘the Blood of the Hero’.”

“Doesn’t look like it worked out,” Maro said.

“It seems to have been an arduous journey. And they’d been here for months. It seems like he was under a lot of pressure to reach some kind of breakthrough.”

Ilea glanced at the dead man.

“An exile of sorts, I imagine,” Maro said.

“Or this was just how they operated,” Ilea said, thinking back to the Bluemoon Grass and the Azarint Temple that didn’t have an exit other than the blink ability one would unlock upon gaining the Class.

“And humans call *us* savages,” Niivalyr murmured as he flipped through the pages. “It’s getting more unintelligible now. Ramblings of a madman.”

“I wonder if this was the breakthrough he was looking for,” Maro said.

“The latter entries become increasingly confused, it seems. Full of rage and self-loathing,” Elfie said, continuing on. “It appears the church came looking for him at one point. Several... inquisitors were slaughtered, their blood extracted.”

“Is there a mention of his power?” Catelyn asked. “A human at level five hundred seems... unlikely.”

“He appears to have avoided most of the monsters on his way down here, yet there is no mention of his actual level. He only captured Tusk bears, apparently a common beast on this layer. The Wyverns... he seems to have held them in high regard. Wait... there was a fight at one point. He was injured heavily and had to retreat. He also speaks with respect of the Shredders and the Reapers we have faced before.”

“Like the Kingsguard, then, which means he probably died or lost his mind at some point,” Ilea suggested.

Maro nodded absentmindedly, looking at the corpse.

“Is there a mention of what the Blood of the Hero is, exactly?” Catelyn asked.

Niivalyr flipped through the pages for a while before he stopped. “It seems to be a substance found within the Descent, left behind by what Malbrunt thought to be old gods of some kind.”

“Is there a more specific description or name for those old gods?”

“The old gods of blood and steel. That is all it says.”

“The facility we found?” Lucas asked.

“Possibly, but we don’t know for sure,” Catelyn said. “It could be related. If the Red Church experimented with this substance, then it’s possible that the corruption stems from it.”

“Could the expedition have found something else deeper down?” Ilas asked.

“There are maps as well,” Niivalyr said, showing them the pages.

Maro had a look and nodded to himself. “I wouldn’t trust this fully, but there are paths described that lead out of this layer, at least.”

“Avoiding the Wyverns?” Ilea asked.

“If we are to go deeper, then I would suggest a stealthier approach anyway. I can shroud you in shadow to avoid most beasts we should encounter,” Ilas said.

“And then what?” Ilea asked.

“Our goals haven’t changed,” Catelyn said. “We must find out more about the corruption and the fate of the expedition. If we encounter something that we cannot avoid, we will return to Hallowfort.”

Ilea crossed her arms.

Catelyn sighed. “You do not wish to continue?”

“I do. I just want to fight the monsters on the way.”

Catelyn narrowed her eyes and muttered something that sounded suspiciously like ‘Foolish child.’

Lucas sighed softly and glanced between them. “It seems we have reached a crossroads.”

“Even if we were willing to fight with you, we would lose a lot of time,” Catelyn pointed out. “Speed is of the essence unless we encounter corrupted that must be put down. If such a thing is even possible in these layers...”

“I don’t think you joining in is what she has in mind,” Maro said with an amused expression.

Catelyn's eyes widened. "You suggest we should split up?"

"Why not? I'll even level up faster if I fight alone. And you could fully focus on stealth," Ilea said.

Catelyn narrowed her eyes once more. "You could die."

Ilea winked at her. "I won't."

Catelyn narrowed her eyes till they were nearly closed and then sighed, a slight smile tugging at her snout. She looked at the others in turn. "If we continue, with or without Ilea, I doubt it will get any less dangerous. You have all helped us greatly already, and I will understand if you wish to return, given that we have still not found a source of the corruption, nor the expedition itself."

"We've come this far. Would be a real bummer to stop now," Maro said.

Niivalyr hissed. "I have agreed to help, so I will help. By Ilea's side or by yours."

Ilas gave her a nod.

Lucas smiled. "I wouldn't leave you without a healer."

"So I'll see you wherever all this started," Ilea said with a smile. She summoned the sphere that Catelyn had used to call her north. "If you need me to come and find you, just use this again."

"I will call for you if things get dire, but let's hope we can stay concealed. See you soon, friend," Catelyn said. "It is not the choice I would have advised, but I hope it proves fruitful."

"The longer you wait, the stronger I'll be," Ilea said.

"Don't take too long, and try not to die," Maro said, clasping her shoulder.

"That's way too much for me to remember, Maro," Ilea shot back.

He chuckled before he started to use his necromantic magic on the corpse of the Red Church member.

"I'll keep them safe," Niivalyr said. "Go now, and hunt."

Ilea smiled and hissed before she spread her wings and ascended up through the tunnels, grinning to herself as she heard the faint echoes of another hiss from her elven friend below.

\* \* \*

Ilea stood on one of the islands and breathed a long, deep breath. She had stopped herself from thoughtlessly rushing at the first Wyvern that she saw and instead watched them for a while.

The air tasted fresh despite her being deep underground, and now that she was alone again, she could feel her excitement spike.

*Just me and a bunch of overgrown Drakes. Perfect.*

Ilea noted that they occasionally flew over the mists, but their focus was mostly on the plateaus instead of the air. It seemed like they were each hunting alone.

She selected her target and dived, quickly reaching her full speed.

The Wyvern was flying casually, just beginning to turn its head upward when Ilea crashed into its back. It roared, tumbling down as ashen limbs entangled its wings and body.

This time, Ilea felt the paralyzing effect wane after a mere second.

### **[Cliff Wyvern – Lvl ???]**

The two tumbled down and crashed onto one of the plateaus, both recovering instantly. A low growl came from the creature as it stood up, easily pushing against the ashen limbs trying to hold it down. Its eyes glinted golden, its wild fury apparent.

“Nice to meet you,” Ilea said as she too got up, ashen spears forming around her as she crouched into a defensive stance, looking at the monster towering before her.

She felt the heat rise around her, sudden and instantaneous. Ilea waited to make her move, a wide grin on her face as she felt the hairs on her neck and back stand up. An instinctual reaction, not based on her Azarinh Fighting.

Yes, she thought, seeing the glow of fire within the Wyvern’s mouth.

Its maw opened wide, the massive teeth parting to reveal its throat.

Her ashen spears flew forward, aimed at the opening. They were pushed aside, a cone of fire enveloping all that stood before the creature.

Ilea moved her wings in front of her, creating a thin barrier of ash right behind them. Her precognition informed her about the massive damage she would sustain, but despite the alarm bells going off in her mind, she couldn’t be happier.

She spread her arms and smiled, seeing the flames wash through her ash wall as if it were mere sand standing against the tide. Her ashen armor was next, and, finally, her set of timeless bone armor.

The flames settled, and Ilea stood, the molten skin on her chest and legs reforming. Her face was burnt, sections of skin hanging loose and her eyes charred.

All of it was healing, and she felt no pain, waiting for the Wyvern's next move.

When her ashen armor was still only partially reformed, her bone armor reduced to uselessness, heat surged forth and enveloped her once more.

Ilea stored her armor and let the flames wash over her, burn her. She saw her insides getting cooked, only a charred mess remaining. Before her brain was gone, Ilea healed the damage with her third-tier Reconstruction.

The steam from the vaporized blood and water in her body settled as she stood, arms raised in a fighting pose. Ash moved around her as her armor reformed.

It seemed like the Wyvern was a little confused, its eyes blinking several times as it took in the sight in front of it.

"Don't worry, it's normal," Ilea said.

Then she released Heart of Cinder, happy to find that some of the heat from the creature's attacks had actually been added to her own reserve.

The cone of fire shot out and burned into the stone of the plateau before it petered out into thin air. Ilea had seen the Wyvern vanish, but the realization came too late to change the trajectory.

The beast reappeared right before her, its maw opening and rushing to slam down on her head.

She ducked out of the way only to find the Wyvern's extended claws waiting for her. A blink took her away, but the beast followed. This time, she couldn't dodge all the way, and teeth sank into her shoulder.

Ilea got in a punch to the Wyvern's head as well as several slashes of her limbs before it broke through her ashen armor, digging into her flesh. Its teeth bit deeper with each passing second as it took her hits in its stride.

She slammed her ashen limbs into the Wyvern's eyes, making it stagger back. A wild movement ripped her arm away at the shoulder, the ground sprayed with blood before a new arm took its place.

Ilea spat blood and stared at the creature, which crunched on her arm in its maw before swallowing the thing whole.

*Wish it would retain the bonus resilience from my skills, Ilea thought, imagining the creature choking on her bones. Come on, use your fire.*

The beast roared, the sound vibrating through her.

**‘ding’ You have heard the challenge of the Cliff Wyvern – You are paralyzed for one second.**

**‘ding’ Veteran reaches lvl 14**

Ilea watched as the creature charged its fire breath once more. This time, it took longer. A cone of flame shot out, more focused than before. Ilea used her instant recovery three times before the breath ended.

Ilea reformed her body again when she saw the beast reappear, a gaping maw staring back at her. She extended her arm and slammed her fist into the Wyvern’s approaching throat, its teeth cutting into her flesh as it bit down.

“Try dodging this one,” she said – then released her stored heat right into its mouth.

The Wyvern opened its eyes wide as it thrashed and shook her around, staggering back several steps as its insides were burnt.

The creature didn’t explode in a rain of guts and scales as Ilea had hoped, but it did let go of her and stagger back. It snarled and hissed at the air, perhaps confused by its damaged insides.

Ilea blinked on top of the Wyvern and grabbed its neck with both arms. Her ashen limbs extended and slashed at the strong scales protecting its wings. Two of them formed a Shredder-like collar on the base of its neck, scraping against it like a chainsaw.

In the meantime, destructive healing mana pulsed into the Wyvern, as did Storm of Cinders from all the limbs lashing into it.

The beast twirled and thrashed, slamming Ilea into the stone floor. It released cones of fire, the heat alone burning Ilea’s skin below her armor.

A sphere of fire suddenly exploded around the Wyvern, burning away Ilea’s ashen armor and a chunk of her skin. She nearly lost her grip due to her muscles getting melted but held on thanks to her third-tier recovery.

*Found your weak spot.*

Its eyes were already bloodshot, and more destructive mana slowly damaged its insides. The heat wave followed again, several times, as it attempted to shake her off.

Yet Ilea held on to the Wyvern's neck with an iron grip, some of her mana recovering with every blast of fire as she gritted her teeth. Her own heat wave blasted forth then, though it didn't leave a mark on its scales.

Still, she could feel the monster's movements growing more frantic. It could shrug off her ashen limbs and her fire, but mana intrusion was another beast entirely.

Suddenly, it staggered toward the cliff before jumping off, scraping Ilea against the rock.

They entered the mist together, Ilea holding on with everything she had. They were no longer flying. They were falling.

Ilea prepared herself for the impact.

Now.

She wrapped her wings around herself right before the weight of the creature slammed her into the stone.

All the air was forced out of her lungs, her grip on its neck loosening for just a fraction of a moment.

Ilea found herself grasping at thin air and saw the Wyvern reappear next to her. She blinked away from the claws as they slammed into the stone before the beast reappeared before her once more.

It snapped down, dodging her extended arm, but several ashen limbs slashed into its bloody jaw and tongue. Its teeth scraped against her ashen armor before Ilea blinked again.

She felt claws dig into her back, fast and deep. The ground came up quickly to her face as she was pushed down.

Her destructive mana was still flowing into the creature, making it release her a moment later.

Ilea stood up, the fatal wounds on her back closing quickly. Blood covered both the ground and the Wyvern's claws.

Ilea raised her arms, ready to continue the fight, when the beast collapsed.

## Solitary Gains

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**‘ding’ You have defeated [Cliff Wyvern – lvl 582]. For defeating an enemy two hundred and sixty or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted.**

**‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 320 – Five stat points awarded, one third-tier skill point awarded**

**‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 319 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ Azarinth Awakening reaches 3rd lvl 17**

**‘ding’ Sentinel Core reaches 3rd lvl 10**

**‘ding’ Azarinth Reversal reaches 3rd lvl 9**

**‘ding’ Heart of Cinder reaches 3rd lvl 9**

**‘ding’ Storm of Cinders reaches 3rd lvl 8**

**‘ding’ Heat Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 20**

**‘ding’ You have learned the General Skill: Monster Hunter – lvl 1**

**Monster Hunter – lvl 1**

**Many times have you faced creatures well beyond your level. You revel in it, seek them out, and you prevail. Your presence demands respect. Imbue**

***your voice to show your intent. Effects vary depending on your disposition as well as those affected and their levels in relation to yours.***

“Something new,” Ilea murmured with a smile. She walked over and stored the dead creature, spreading her wings and quickly ascending.

She didn’t want to be caught down in the mists, looking through messages and skills. If she was attacked by even two of these monsters at once, she’d be toast. Well, toasted.

It didn’t take her long to reach the same island the group had initially explored. She blinked into the cavern where Maro had gotten his undead Wyvern.

*Level twenty in the second tier and that thing still burned through my armor and skin easily.*

It upset her a little. As if all those defenses were merely a requirement to face more powerful monsters.

“Well, maybe they are...” she acknowledged. Catelyn was at level three twenty-nine now, Maro at three fifteen. Both were pretty old and had fought their share of battles, had done their share of adventures. More than Ilea would likely manage in the next decade.

And still, she was already at a higher level than the necromancer and was even close to reaching Catelyn’s level.

*Healing, resistances, and mana intrusion. We’ll have to get something similar for the Sentinels.*

Ilea checked her surroundings before sitting down on a nearby boulder, her bone armor appearing on her to regenerate. It had given her a split second more against the first hit.

*If only it could regenerate as fast as my ashen armor does.*

***3rd-tier skill points available [The Azarinh Sentinel]: 1***

***Skills available for 3rd-tier advancement in [The Azarinh Sentinel]:***

- ***Sentinel Sphere***
- ***Sentinel Huntress***
- ***Azarinh Perception***

Ilea mulled it over, but only for a moment. She decided on her sphere because while the other two were useful, she used her sphere all the time.

**‘ding’ Sentinel Sphere reaches 3rd lvl 1**

**Active: Sentinel Sphere – 3rd lvl 1**

***Perceive everything in a sphere around you while this skill is activated.***

***The higher the level, the farther the sphere reaches.***

***2nd stage: The Sentinel Sphere opens your senses to the arcane. A paramount skill both on and off the battlefield.***

***3rd stage: Redirect damage dealt by magic or the elements within the sphere toward yourself. Efficiency and control are influenced by related skills and your respective resistances.***

***Category: Aura – Perception Aura***

She read through the new addition and frowned. “Well. That would have been more helpful while fighting with the others. Or I would have just died even more quickly,” she added in a murmur.

*It’ll certainly be nice to have. Also for resistance training with groups.*

She didn’t get a defensive or damage buff through the new skill, though, which probably would have made more of a direct difference.

*Either way, being able to protect others will certainly come in handy.*

Ilea tried to use the new Monster Hunter skill, thinking on it for a moment before she settled on a low growl. Not quite as ridiculous as a roar, but she wanted to see what it did to her voice.

The sound that came out, however, made her jump back in shock. “Holy shit!”

It was deep, threatening. As if a dangerous creature was hiding in her mouth. Nothing like a human. And yet, somehow, it was clear that the sound had come from her.

*Fucking weird.*

*Is it, like... a paralyzing skill for people far below my level?*

She could think of many situations where the skill could be useful. Or funny.

Ilea tried using the skill again immediately but knew instinctively that it wasn’t possible yet.

*A cooldown of sorts? Well, anyway, I can growl now. Cool.*

Ilea stood up. She put the ten points into her secondary stats, following her current plan.

*One third-tier point for every ten levels. I wonder what happens when I get to level three-fifty.*

“I’ll worry about it when I get there,” she said, then blinked up again. “So, where’s my next target?”

\* \* \*

Ilea felt the heat wash over her, using the opportunity to test her third-tier sphere, forcing her will upon the flames as if she were a fire mage.

They swirled, and those already past her turned and slammed into her back. The cone-like attack turned into a focused maelstrom as soon as it entered her sphere.

She was melting from all sides now, a grin on her unrecognizable face.

*Nice.*

Ilea regenerated her body.

*Heat res at second twenty. Plus, I’m getting more mana out of it this way.*

The Wyvern roared.

Ilea crouched and imbued her voice. “Fuck your roar!” The challenge came out laced with magic, the air vibrating.

Ashen limbs spread behind her as the creature met her challenge. It charged her and teleported. She remained where she was, once more ramming her fist down the Wyvern’s throat.

Then she released her fire attack. This time, she added ash to the mix, pushing as much as she could down the creature’s throat.

Her fist smashed against its hard skull before the Wyvern reared back, letting go of her arm as its wounds healed quickly. Ilea blinked behind its head but found only air.

Claws dug into her back, but this time, she landed on her feet, pushing back against the attack as the creature stabilized itself with its wings.

Even as she funneled her reversed healing into the enemy, its claws dug deeper into her back.

And then it flew off, lifting Ilea.

After a short burst of flight, she was thrown into a stone wall on another island, the air driven out of her lungs as she coughed up blood into the ash protecting her head.

She ripped herself out of the rock, taking chunks with her that fell into the mists below, before she dodged to the side.

The Wyvern teleported three times in a row to sink its claws into her, this time hitting her stomach. The second set of claws wrapped around her head and started pressing down.

Ilea released Heart of Cinder with little impact, her mana still flowing into the injured creature as her ashen limbs tried to cut through the leg close to her head, using the Shredder trick once more.

The Wyvern didn't manage to crack her skull, for while its claws dug past her helmet, her healing pushed against the damage. The creature soon let go of her head and instead cut into her stomach and chest, but Ilea's wounds fully recovered nearly immediately.

She answered in kind now that she was more familiar with how the Wyvern fought, slicing deep with her ash saws. Ilea smiled when she felt her ash find purchase, ripping through the Wyvern's leg.

She caught the claws that were digging through her stomach, stopping her delivery of Destruction. They cut into her hands and arms, but she held tight.

The Wyvern moved its head toward her and released its fire breath. Immediately, Ilea's ash was melted away, her skin and muscle following. And in the blink of an eye, her skin was back, her organs reformed.

The beast thrashed, biting at her rapidly with fire attacks in between, yet Ilea regenerated through it all, the lack of movement, as well as the abundance of fire attacks, only helping her to keep her mana up.

The movements of the Wyvern grew increasingly frantic with each passing second. When it missed with a bite, Ilea grabbed its still-open jaws and held them apart.

Ashen limbs cut into the muscles inside the creature's mouth, burned away a second later by the fire breath coming from within its throat.

Ilea's skin melted, the bone visible on her face before she regenerated her entire body once more.

With another massive heave, she ripped the monster's jaw apart.

She breathed out heavily and watched the monster collapse as her wounds healed and her ashen armor reformed.

*Another one down.*

\* \* \*

**‘ding’ You have defeated [Cliff Wyvern – lvl 621]. For defeating an enemy three hundred or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted.**

“Holy shit!” she exclaimed before immediately blinking, just in case anything had heard her.

*Is this the first time I’ve solo killed something three hundred levels above my own? Another thing to add to my next evolution bonuses.*

She grinned and cackled to herself for a moment before she shook her arms. “Holy adrenaline.”

**‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 321 – Five stat points awarded.**

**‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 320 – Five stat points awarded. One third-tier skill point awarded.**

*And they say leveling after three hundred is hard. She snorted at the thought. I didn’t even come close to dying.*

**‘ding’ Absolute Destruction reaches 3rd lvl 18**

**‘ding’ Azarinth Fighting reaches 3rd lvl 16**

**‘ding’ Armor of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 19**

**‘ding’ Aspect of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 14**

**‘ding’ Storm of Cinders reaches 3rd lvl 9**

Sadly, there were no more levels in Heat Resistance.

*Can’t be the limit, though. I won’t believe it. Not when a Wyvern’s fire breath can melt me with my current resistance.*

Now to upgrades.

**3rd-tier skill points available [Kin of Ash]: 1**

**Skills available for 3rd-tier advancement in [Kin of Ash]:**

**- Ashen Wings**

**- Eyes of Ash**

**- Avatar of Ash**

*This one is harder.*

Ilea loved her wings, she really did. And yet she couldn't really see anything major a third tier in them could provide.

Then again, the Sentinel Sphere, while being a perception skill, had given her something she hadn't anticipated at all. Perhaps the same would be true for her ashen wings.

*What if it's just more speed?*

She rolled to her side and pondered the thought. There had been many a time she'd needed to be fast. When she'd been teleported away by Arthur, when the elves had engaged the Praetorians, when she'd rushed to Virilya to find Eve...

*Would it have changed anything? Would I have been able to save her?*

Ilea shook her head, focusing on the now.

Her wings added speed and mobility, but she assumed the other skills had a more direct impact on her ability to fight and survive against high-level monsters.

She decided on Avatar of Ash.

### **‘ding’ Avatar of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 1**

#### **Passive: Avatar of Ash – 3rd lvl 1:**

***Increases your reflexes and speed by 50.5% [404%]. Your ability to avoid damage to your vitals when dodging increases.***

***2nd stage: Your muscles grow more dense. For each Resistance skill, your body becomes tougher. First-tier resistances equal a static 5% increase; second-tier resistances equal a static 10% increase [255%].***

***3rd stage: You can choose to allow magic damage to bypass your related resistance skills. Effect is canceled automatically upon reaching 50% of your health. Each Resistance skill in the second tier increases the potential density of your created ash by a static 5% [90%].***

#### **Category: Body Enhancement – Ashen Magic**

Ilea felt the change immediately. Her ashen armor made an almost grinding noise as it seemed to become more focused. Harder.

The wisps were still present, and in looks alone, her armor had barely changed. However, the way it felt to her Ash and Ember Unity and Ash Creation skills was like night and day.

Her limbs extended behind her, the tips now thin and sharp, less jagged and brutal. She tried forming ashen spears and found the same result. More focused, more dense. Little remained of the mist-like quality they'd previously had.

Experimenting a little, she formed the shredder-like circle that she'd used against the Wyverns. The ring looked much more terrifying, as if forged with dull black steel.

She used her limbs against her own armor and found it held up against the attack.

*Good. At least my defenses are still better than my offense.*

That was something she wanted to keep up. Ilea only had one life, after all.

*Also, I need to get more resistances.*

She smiled and tapped her cheek, realizing the strongest benefit she'd just received wasn't about her ash at all.

## Math Resistance

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Ilea wasn't about to test the magic-bypassing bonus of her new third-tier ability against a Wyvern. They could melt her skin even with a Heat Resistance at the end of the second tier.

*Wait... does that count?*

She summoned one of the glass vials holding the poison from the eighth layer. "Are you magic damage?"

The vial, of course, did not reply, as vials shouldn't.

**'ding' You have been poisoned by Concentrated Rupture Liquid --100 Health per second for three minutes.**

*Alright, now, can I deactivate the resistance?*

Ilea tried to feel for the skill, and something instantly clicked in her mind.

The notification changed.

**'ding' You have been poisoned by Concentrated Rupture Liquid --208 Health per second for two minutes fifty-eight seconds.**

"What?" she exclaimed, checking her Poison Resistance. Something felt off. "That's fucking twice the damage!"

*I should have asked the others how damaging the poison was.*

“Ah, they wouldn’t even want to drink it,” she sighed.

*But this is massive. I can’t wait to find the next creature to test this with.*

*Sucks that the Wyverns use fire.*

\* \* \*

Ilea managed to kill two more Wyverns in the span of the next few hours. The newfound bonus to her ash let her tank more hits without major damage and noticeably reduced the time she needed to penetrate their defenses.

**‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 322 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 321 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ Sentinel Sphere reaches 3rd lvl 2**

**‘ding’ Azarinth Reversal reaches 3rd lvl 10**

**‘ding’ True Ash Creation reaches 3rd lvl 13**

**‘ding’ Avatar of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 2**

Finding the monsters within the mists proved to be quite difficult due to their lack of corruption. Both of the creatures she’d killed had been below level six hundred. Still, that had been enough for a single level in each Class.

She found that the layer expanded downward for several kilometers. Ilea had yet to find the actual ground level. Only the tiniest percentile of rock formations extended up above the mists, most of them ending within the sea of white.

Ilea could only follow the roars she heard from time to time, but all she found were Tusk Bears and Wisp Ravens, the former ranging in the lower three hundreds and the latter even lower, usually below two hundred. None were worth killing for the experience, nor did they show any signs of corruption.

Not amongst the living ones, that was.

Ilea did find dozens of once-corrupted corpses, most of them burnt to a crisp. Only one of them had been a Wyvern. She even found a few tentacles from corrupted Tangled Reapers that must have made their way down here after being frenzied.

She considered the chance that the corruption had sprung up in a higher layer and their group had simply missed it. It seemed unlikely, however, considering the lack of any trail left by the expedition.

Soon, the mists enveloped her once more, her near-black wings moving behind her as she circled around the area.

A couple of minutes passed before Ilea saw one of the creatures move up behind her, silent in the air.

*Let's go.*

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## Benevolent Sentinel

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The kill didn't award her any Class levels, and Ilea was wondering if she was already getting diminished returns due to her growing familiarity with the Wyverns.

**'ding' Azarinth Reversal reaches 3rd lvl 11**

**'ding' True Ash Creation reaches 3rd lvl 14**

**'ding' Avatar of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 3**

When she was about to look for her next fight, Ilea noticed movement in her sphere, spotting another Tusk Bear. This one was thinner than some of the others, its two tusks jutting out from its mouth. It was hiding behind a tree, looking straight at her.

She checked the surroundings and slowly went up to it.

**[Tusk Bear – lvl 303]**

*Shouldn't be too dangerous for me,* Ilea thought, having dealt with similarly high-level creatures back in the first layer.

The bear looked at her but didn't move at first. Then it took a step toward her, showing its teeth before it roared.

Not exactly an intimidating sound.

She was about to leave when she saw a small cut on its leg, orange ooze dripping out.

“Shit,” she murmured.

The bear approached, once more baring its teeth. It prepared to charge or leap. Desperate.

*Nobody is ever going to come down here. Might as well help out.*

It charged.

Ilea let the bear bite into her ash, its weight coming down on her as she braced against it. Her ashen limbs moved to immobilize its arms and legs, its mouth biting uselessly into her powerful armor.

She summoned a chunk of meat she still had from her own kitchen, slamming the thing into its mouth.

“Calm down, I’m not food.” She patted its fur and checked the cut on its leg. “Pretty nasty.”

Ilea healed the creature before two of her ashen limbs closed around its left thigh. A quick jab sliced the whole leg off, eliciting a pained roar from the dying bear.

“It’s alright,” she said reassuringly as she healed the leg back, this time without corruption.

Ilea summoned another piece of meat and threw it into the nearby bushes. “Now fuck off.”

She released it and pushed the creature aside. The bear was already looking healthier than before, and she gave a sigh as she leaned against a nearby tree.

Ilea watched as it reached the meal, a smile on her face as she spread her wings once more.

Then she turned and glimpsed another Wyvern swooping down. Its talons slammed into the Tusk Bear before flinging it off the island, limp and bloody.

“Fuck,” she murmured, taking to the air and following the Wyvern.

It caught the bear mid-flight before landing on another island, gulping down a third of the monster before it even noticed Ilea.

“I just healed it,” she hissed, her voice imbued with power.

The Wyvern turned toward her and roared.

**‘ding’ You have heard the challenge of the Cliff Wyvern – You resist its effects.**

*Fucking right I do.*

**‘ding’ Veteran reaches lvl 15**

“I’ll rip its remains out of your stomach,” she said as she advanced, stepping into the flames that enveloped her.

\* \* \*

Ilea ripped off the Wyvern’s head after it had been killed. She looked at the thing, its tongue hanging out in a grotesque manner.

She thought about keeping it but decided against it, instead throwing it near the remains of the dead bear.

*May you both feed something else.*

**‘ding’ You have defeated [Cliff Wyvern – lvl 581]. For defeating an enemy two hundred and fifty or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted.**

**‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 323 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 322 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ Sentinel Reconstruction reaches 3rd lvl 19**

**‘ding’ Sentinel Core reaches 3rd lvl 11**

**‘ding’ Azarinth Fighting reaches 3rd lvl 17**

**‘ding’ Heart of Cinder reaches 3rd lvl 10**

**‘ding’ Monster Hunter reaches lvl 2**

She glanced at the corpses once more before she jumped off the island, continuing her flight through the layer.

*At least it didn't die of corruption.*

Ilea encountered two more bears in the next hour, both in a healthier state than the previous one. They avoided her, one even running into a cave to get away.

No other monsters showed up, and Ilea soon landed on what she assumed to be the bottom of the ninth layer. Rock formations jutted out, devoid of the greenery that grew on top of the plateaus. Pillars of stone grew up from the bottom and vanished into the mists above.

Ilea noticed the smell first – familiar, now, but still just as heavy. Corpses littered the ground. Bears, Wyverns, as well as a bunch of Wisp Ravens. They all had one thing in common.

*Corruption.*

She lifted some of the corpses and saw the orange ooze dripping from them. Many were charred, having been taken out by the Wyverns that remained untainted.

*They dealt with it themselves, Ilea mused.*

She crouched down and narrowed her eyes. Removing her armor, she punctured the tip of her finger and felt a warm sensation as soon as the corruption touched the wound, followed by a sharp pain. She disabled her resistance and felt its effects get stronger.

*No wonder so few creatures remained.*

There were dozens of creatures within range of her sphere alone. Ilea was sure this layer had looked quite different before the corruption came. More beasts to fight and levels to be gained. Then again, Ilea wasn't sure she could take out two Wyverns at a time, let alone three or four.

She flew a couple of meters above the ground, avoiding the corpses. Most of the Wyverns had been quite literally ripped apart, most of their scales charred and unusable.

Still, she found five corpses that looked to be in passable shape. Burning hot ash removed the remaining corruption before she stored them in her necklace. She ignored the other creatures, their corpses easily coming apart with a few strikes from her ashen limbs.

Sometime later, she found a cave entrance leading down. Pieces of charred clothes were scattered near the entrance, and a small message had been carved into the stone.

*Expedition came through – Be wary of lightning*

Ilea wasn't sure if it had been carved by her group or by the expedition.

## **'ding' Blood Manipulation Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 1**

### **Blood Manipulation Resistance – 2nd lvl 1**

**Your blood was tampered with through magic, but you have survived, making it harder for the next attempt by your enemy.**

**2nd stage: Stop putting weird substances you find into open wounds.**

**Perhaps your parents told you that playing in the dirt was good for your immune system, but there are limits. Your body can now actively fight blood manipulation.**

*We both know I won't stop,* Ilea said to herself and whatever god, system, supervisor, virus, or delirious fever dream was talking to her.

Her resistance had remained off to level the skill faster, but she quickly checked what it would look like with its second tier being active. She saw the corruption slowly recede as if it had been taken over, or broken down, by her own blood.

*Hmm, seems like a good thing to have. Maybe some of the creatures developed this as well? Let's hope so.*

If they had, no matter how often they got injured, they wouldn't get corrupted. Were they to survive in the first place, of course.

Ilea looked at the remaining corruption in her finger before it was taken care of by her resistance.

She walked over to one of the corpses and filled some of the empty flasks she'd used in her poison training with the corrupted blood, just in case she didn't come across more of it. As unlikely as that may be.

One last time, she looked up to see if any more Wyverns wanted to try their luck. But none of them showed up. She brushed off her ashen armor and moved her attention to the tunnel ahead. Summoning Catelyn's sphere, she found that it wasn't active.

*Layer ten, then. Let's see...*

Ilea walked down the tunnel, cautious of any beasts or traps that might still lie hidden. It soon narrowed, the initial steep decline not present anymore, and she felt a cold breeze emanating from the far end.

She saw a vertical crack – an exit, it seemed. Another powerful gust of wind flowed past her, the air barely slowing her due to her second-stage resistance. She soon reached a ledge and stepped out, spreading her wings as she had a look at the tenth layer.

Below her, she saw a vast open space, light shining down from various crystal formations clinging to the ceiling as well as some of the stone formations below. Instead of islands of stone within a mist, there were extensive cliffs and jagged ravines with huge canyons and long drops.

Ilea spread her wings and floated to the nearest surface, a small ledge on the side of a rocky cliff. The winds howled, pushing against her a little but not enough to destabilize her flight.

She landed and noticed ice crystals had formed on her armor.

Ilea couldn't hear anything other than the wind, nor did she notice any smells or tracks. She explored a bit more, jumping down as her wings moved through the sometimes narrow paths.

A little while later, she found a corpse, teeming with corruption. A Wyvern, dead and burnt.

There wasn't much remaining on it. The scales were too damaged to be of any use – not that she knew how useful the scales were in the first place. They looked nice when fresh, at the very least.

Ilea looked up, noticing a new light source in the distance. Something blueish, moving quickly.

She lay prone and covered herself in ash, leaving a small opening for her right eye as her sphere barely reached the cliffside.

A ball of lightning shot up and landed nearby – a small bird that looked a little like a sparrow. Its eyes were a bright and nearly white blue. Ilea assumed she could see it due to her newly upgraded second-tier Light Magic Resistance.

*A cute lightning bird.*

It tapped along the ground, looking at the corpse of the Wyvern as well as the rest of the cave before its eyes came to rest on her pile of ash.

### **[Elemental Fragment – lvl ???]**

A bolt of lightning flashed through her, Ilea's precognition informing her about the damage. Nothing major, but undoubtedly as powerful as Trian, if not more so.

Thanks to her resistance, a chunk of the spell was transformed into mana and stamina, her Sentinel Core adding even more.

"You're not exactly what I expected," she murmured as she watched the bird take flight, zapping her with a quick succession of powerful bolts of

arcing lightning.

The bright blue light moved through the cave, licking the walls and ripping out chunks of stone in the process before it slammed into her ashen armor. Ilea staggered back a little with each hit, but her defenses held.

*Let's help you a little, birdie.*

She deactivated her resistance, and the next hit burned through her ash and into her bone armor, stopping only at her skin as her muscles tensed up.

"That's more like it," she said, smiling upon seeing the bird charge up more attacks. "I think I'll stay here with you for a while."

She looked carefully at her healing, her health, and the area around her before she blinked to the corrupted Wyvern, taking a handful of the orange ooze and slathering it into one of the newly formed wounds on her arm.

*If that's just a fragment, there might be a bigger one down here. Something where I'll be happy to have a few more levels in my resistance.*

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## Lethal Voltage

Ilea staggered back once more, watching the fragment's movements. She could distinguish them now – the minute pauses between attacks, the rhythmic pulsing of its magic, its very life.

*Here it comes*, she thought, another spell released and arcing toward her. It felt like a part of the creature's body came and attacked her, vanishing as soon as it burned through her ash.

The past hours had been more effective at training her Lightning Resistance than weeks with Trian. She could always deactivate her Ashen Armor to receive a significant amount more damage than before, but her body was tough even without it. The difference that Avatar of Ash brought was massive.

Ilea tried catching the creature after a while but found herself outmatched in both teleportation ability and sheer speed.

**‘ding’ Blood Manipulation Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 2**

...

**‘ding’ Blood Manipulation Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 4**

**‘ding’ Lightning Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 9**

**‘ding’ Lightning Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 10**

Ilea felt that adding poison to the mix, especially the full damage without resistance, would be too dangerous. Her wounds would need to be healed with her third-tier recovery, using up quite a bit more mana than otherwise.

The training did get a little boring, however, tempting her to try again to catch or damage the beast that had burnt up her skin and muscles for the past hours.

It proved difficult. The creature seemed to have some sort of spherical perception as well, avoiding all her ashen limbs with ease and keeping itself at a distance even from the ashen mist that Ilea tried to move around it.

A combination of spears, mist, and limbs finally grazed the creature, and mana intrusion sent a bit of Ilea's destructive energy into the thing. She watched as the fragment tumbled a little, its body sizzling where it had been hit. One second later, it dissipated entirely.

"What?" Ilea asked into the empty space. There had been no kill notification or anything else.

She heard a loud crackling noise in the distance, followed by a low rumble.

Time suddenly seemed to stand still as Ilea blinked out of the cavern and activated all her resistances once more. The corruption started to be removed from her body as she turned and watched.

Even with her second-tier Light Resistance, she had to squint her eyes as a bolt of pure lightning cut through the stone from the other side of the cavern. The bolt of volatile energy thrummed with power, reaching where she had been a moment earlier before it turned and rushed at her.

*Shit.*

The spell closed the distance as if her perception wasn't slowed at all, burning through her wings, the small wall of ash, and her armor in an instant.

A crack formed on her bone armor before the energy spread through her body, briefly locking her in place as her insides burned up.

She blinked her eyes, her sight blurry as she fell. Her body had restored itself with her third-tier Reconstruction, but she was pretty sure her brain had been fried for a fraction of a second.

**'ding' Lightning Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 11**

*A single spell*, she thought, realizing she'd lost around three thousand points of health in the attack.

She squinted her eyes once more, ashen armor reforming as her wings spread again and stabilized her fall.

The creature reappeared, a ball of energy extending outward, wisps of lightning cracking at the air around it. Its wingspan was now around six meters, bright blue feathers adorning its entire form. Its body was about two meters in height, a little taller than Ilea herself. Its eyes were wisps of white light that left a trail of energy behind as it moved. A long blue tail-like protrusion moved through the air behind it.

It spread its wings and looked at Ilea.

### **[Young Lightning Elemental – Lvl ???]**

Ilea saw the next attack coming, her precognition just fast enough to recognize it. She blinked and sped up, the lightning arcing in the air before flying past her and crashing into stone, a ripple of blue light shredding into the cliffside.

She dived and twirled, trying to get as much solid matter and distance between herself and the elemental as possible. Ilea curled up, her wings moving position as she changed directions. Lightning streaked past again, burning halfway through her armor.

*It's keeping up...*

She glanced back to see the fast-moving blue bird around fifty meters behind. Part of her armor was freezing up, the cold winds whipping past her as she descended. She dodged two more streaks of lightning, one of them clipping a wing.

Ilea barely dodged the next attack, blinking out of the way at the last possible moment. She felt when they were coming, saw them advance in her sphere, but the difference in projectile speed and her own maneuverability was too high. The distance between them didn't matter much either – the lightning homed in on her in the last several meters, even partially following after she blinked.

She used the huge cliffsides for cover, causing broad lightning strikes to crack into the stone, chunks of rock splintering outward and falling into the abyss.

Ilea maneuvered through the tight passages with all the speed she could muster. She used her ashen limbs to round corners without losing momentum, something the increased density made much easier.

She created ashen mist and spears and aimed them at the elemental, both to obstruct its view and to damage it outright. But the monster dodged her attacks and teleported through the sections filled with ashen mist, either cautious or suggesting its vulnerability.

Ilea dodged two more strikes before getting hit by a third. This time, though, she wasn't completely burnt up.

Her wings were reforming as she fell, a trail of smoke from her burnt skin marking her descent. She clipped a cliffside and tumbled before she regained her bearings, turning before she released Heart of Cinder at the creature.

She grinned when she saw the bird teleport to the side, slamming into the cliff wall, before it screeched in pain and began glowing... charging up.

*Ah, that's bad,* Ilea thought as she fell.

**‘ding’ You have heard the enraged screech of a Young Lightning Elemental. You are paralyzed for five seconds.**

**‘ding’ Veteran reaches lvl 16**

She couldn't do anything but watch as a five-meter-wide cone of white energy spiraled down and hit her a split second later.

Focusing fully on her healing, her body reformed three times during the effect of the spell, her skull and ribs exposed during the first cycle. She was glad that she could absorb a large chunk of the mana.

**‘ding’ Lightning Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 12**

The spell continued, Ilea remaining within it as she regenerated, tumbling farther down to give the elemental the impression that she was being overwhelmed. In reality, she was simply using the attack to get some distance between them.

*This is actually—the thought paused as her brain popped—some good training.*

Ilea dodged most of the rock formations extending from the cliff walls but nonetheless clipped some of them, though the damage was negligible with all her shock absorption and general resilience.

She blinked away when the spell ended, seeing as the elemental had fallen behind. She liked the resistance gains, but this creature was far too dangerous to face, even for her.

Ilea hadn't tested her new abilities, but she was pretty sure the arcane storms raging in the north weren't as powerful as what this creature was putting out. A force of raw magic, an elemental of lightning – and a young one at that – rendering all her layered defenses useless.

She was sure her healing and regeneration would be overwhelmed if they faced each other in a more open space. She was glad the monster wasn't corrupted and had apparently killed one of the tainted Wyverns that had come down into this layer.

She still felt the itch, of course. She wanted to face the creature, to actually go in close and slam her fist into its magical skull.

But she wasn't ready. Not yet. Even the fragment had managed to dodge nearly all her attacks. And she had a feeling that this being had yet to go all out.

She started to see the ground approaching as she flew farther down, now having to dodge the elemental's normal bolts again, grazed and hit from time to time. She saw cave openings now, dozens if not hundreds of burnt and scattered corpses littering the ground. Corruption gleamed orange in the crystal light.

She landed hard, her body having just regenerated. The smell of burnt skin and corruption entered her nose as she blinked away, lightning slamming into the ground and ripping out the stone, further scattering whatever creature's remains had occupied the space.

Ilea saw several tunnels, cracks in the stone that led somewhere else. *I've proven that I can take hits from it*, she thought, turning and moving close enough to one of the tunnels to be able to blink inside.

She formed walls of ash as more blasts flew down, tumbling back and hitting the stone wall of the cavern from the impact of the first bolt. The second one landed at the same time as she did. Her body burnt up, her muscles convulsing as her eyes and organs popped.

A deep breath had just filled her newly formed lungs when another strike rolled over her. She regenerated again and lay sizzling inside the

crater that had formed in the cavern wall, her eyes focused forward as her ashen armor reformed.

She saw the creature land, a pulse of blue energy sweeping the scattered corpses away.

Then the elemental stopped its attacks, its white eyes focused on her as it waited.

*It's not charging an attack.*

Ilea was pretty sure of that – nothing about the creature was suggesting an attack.

She moved out of the wall and cracked her neck, spreading her ashen limbs behind her. “What is it? Tired of attacking? Out of mana?” she asked, slowly stepping closer to the cave entrance.

The bird remained quiet, its head fixed on her.

Ilea checked her messages quickly, keeping an eye on her surroundings.

**‘ding’ Lightning Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 13**

**‘ding’ Lightning Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 14**

*I really need to find more elementals to fight.*

Then she looked up and saw a dozen blue spots closing in quickly.

*Ah, I see...*

They crashed into the creature, making it stagger forward a little, with each small bird merging into the larger one.

Ilea watched for a couple of seconds longer, seeing the creature’s feathers start brimming with energy, its form remaining the same size physically but now commanding a different presence than before.

The moment it opened its beak, she vanished into an open space seen via her sphere, hearing the screech from behind twenty meters of solid stone.

**‘ding’ You have heard the screech of a Young Lightning Elemental. You are paralyzed for four seconds.**

She heard three impacts in the stone, the ground shaking as tiny pebbles fell on her. A louder crash made the wall crack, white-blue light enveloping her.

Ilea blinked as soon as she could, moving down through the caverns. The last hit was more powerful, lightning still sizzling through her. But it was the last hit. The creature didn't pursue her any farther.

Ilea breathed out and smiled to herself.

*It's remaining in its lair and layer. Guess I'm just a pesky invader that needed to be shooed out.*

Ilea released her charged Heart of Cinder, the stone around her reduced to ash by the powerful spell. She sighed and looked up to where the tunnel entrance lay.

*Might come back and annoy you – when I'm ready. Or annoy one of the fragments. Only six levels to the end of the second tier for lightning...*

She blinked twice and came up on the stone separation leading to the eleventh layer and, with it, a drilled hole that allowed a person to get through.

Below, a long cold, burnt-out fireplace remained in a carved-out section of stone, empty wooden boxes and scraps of reddish cloth as well as marks of corruption and blood on the ground around it. She sniffed at it all, finding a smell that hadn't been present until now.

"The expedition?" she asked herself.

There was enough space here for them, and the elemental and its fragments didn't seem to move down the tunnels. Furthermore, the entrance to the eleventh layer was drilled, suggesting that not all who passed through it had a teleportation ability – or they simply chose to err on the side of caution.

Drilling wasn't something her group would have done here. It could have been someone else, of course, but Ilea felt the ash in the fire was recent. A month ago, perhaps two.

*Interesting... since when can I gauge the age of ash?*

Ilea decided to trust the feeling. Her intuition told her it was reliable.

She looked back once more before jumping through the hole and down to the next layer, landing thirty meters down in a pile of snow.

Immediately, she forgot about the bonfire and the elemental she had just left behind, instead taking in the expansive snowed-in valley before her.

She saw trees in the distance, as well as some moving figures. Everything was cast in white, a thick blanket of snow covering the whole layer. Her breath came out as a mist, something she couldn't suppress with her Heart of Cinder.

She sat up in the snow and smiled. The scene reminded her of Ravenhall and its surrounding mountains.

*Alright, now I've nearly been burnt up by lightning, let's see what this layer has in store.*

She spread her wings, flying down the slope and toward the first moving thing she could recognize.

### **[Spirit of Winter – lvl 243]**

Ilea slowed down and stopped, watching the creature turn as it noticed her. *Free of corruption. And not exactly a threat.* She let its magic pass her resistances, using her sphere to move all the cold air toward her.

Spikes of ice formed as the creature attacked, a whirlwind of ice and snow that cut into her exposed skin. Most of it was ineffective, despite her Ice Resistance being suppressed.

*I need to fight more of them if I want to level my Ice Resistance,* she noted, so she slowly flew through the valley, spirit in tow.

She wasn't sure why the creature had attacked her, given it was a much lower level and hadn't been attacked in the first place. Perhaps it saw heat or life itself as an enemy, something to be destroyed or, well, cooled down?

About ten minutes later, she spotted an owl flying above her, diving down when it saw a rabbit. Soon after, she reached a hilltop, ice still swirling around her.

Massive stone creatures moved around a mountain in the distance, a frozen river at its foot. She also spotted a group of winter spirits occupying a field of ice and snow.

*My first destination.*

"Come on, let's meet your brothers and sisters," she said, looking at the spirit behind her, its face lacking any features or emotions. A specter of ice and winter.

She moved her wings, soon landing amidst the group of spirits.

"Welcome. It's nice of you to help me with my training today," she said.

## Fear

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Ilea only spent a little over an hour with her newfound friends, exploring the eleventh layer in the process.

A surprising number of creatures were around, none of which were corrupted. Maybe the cold temperature was an issue for the blood virus or whatever it really was, or the monsters had taken care of those that had fallen to it, their corpses now resting under a thick layer of snow.

She had crossed a long distance on foot, taking in the environment and watching the massive stone creatures move on the other side of the river. They were one-eyed and armed with crude weapons made of rock.

Some were literally just carrying chunks of stone, which they threw at other creatures from time to time, but otherwise, they kept to themselves.

*Do they not need to eat? Hunt? Are they having conversations?*

Ilea lacked answers to all those questions.

Another sound in her mind took her out of her musings, informing her that her Ice Resistance had leveled once again.

*Avatar really is a bloody miracle.*

**‘ding’ Ice Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 8**

**‘ding’ Ice Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 9**

Suddenly, the spirits left, moving away with the winds and dispersing in the process. Ilea watched them go, not interfering as killing them wouldn't exactly provide her with anything. They weren't even corrupted.

Ilea wondered why they'd left before she spread her wings, only to find her feet were stuck to the ground. Her ash had frozen over, the rest of her body quickly following before she reactivated her resistance. Even then, it only slowed down.

*What?*

Her sphere was crisper than ever, yet nothing around her was moving in the slightest.

*Is this just natural?*

She couldn't detect a monster nearby and forced herself to move, the ice on her ash cracking but quickly reforming. She remembered her second-tier Ice Resistance had mentioned that her body wasn't affected by freezing temperatures anymore.

*Maybe I wouldn't even be able to move, let alone think and see, without that bonus.*

Her resistance didn't level as she moved toward the river, nor did she see any of the creatures again.

*They have some way to tell. Whatever this phenomenon is, even a Spirit of Winter decided to avoid it.*

She pressed on through the snow. Her wings instantly froze over whenever she summoned them, pulling her up before freezing and breaking from the movement, causing her to fall once more. Her blink still worked, but she decided to wait with that in case something was about to attack.

Then, as quickly as it had appeared, the phenomenon was gone again. Ilea released Heart of Cinder, which she'd charged for a couple seconds before she moved her body, the last of the remaining ice falling to the ground.

*That could pose a problem during a fight. If whatever I'm fighting is immune to it, at least.*

She saw one of the massive rock creatures sticking their heads out from a small cave entrance, spotting her in the process. It roared in anger, rushing out with a chunk of stone in hand.

The humanoid creature was at least five meters tall, maybe closer to six, and half as broad. Its skin resembled rock, both in color and likely texture. One eye was visible in the middle of its head, and it was staring right at her.

## [Stone Cyclops – lvl ???]

Ilea spread her ashen limbs and smiled, watching the monster approach.

**‘ding’ You have met the gaze of the Stone Cyclops. You are paralyzed in fear for three seconds.**

*I’m not exactly scared, though,* she thought, but she noted her mistake of looking into its eye. An obvious trap, really. *Wait, do I even have to look into it?*

Her thought was interrupted by a chunk of rock crashing down on her. She felt her legs nearly give out, her spine aching as her feet dug into the snow and hit stone, digging into that too.

Another strike came down on her. This time, her legs snapped to the side, the joints unable to take the stress. She fell onto the snow on her back and blinked away right before the crude weapon could smash into her again.

She healed her legs, helped along by her ashen armor snapping them back into place as she willed them to straighten. She landed with her fists raised and her eyes closed.

“Alright, big guy,” she murmured, vanishing and reappearing behind the massive monster. Her limbs fanned out and slashed into his back, a fist colliding with his right knee and pushing her destructive mana into him.

He turned and tried to hit her with the rock, proving surprisingly quick for his size but a long way from herself or the Lightning Elemental.

She charged Heart of Cinder while she continued to dodge and punch the creature until, finally, it staggered forward, held its knee, and roared. Her eyes remained closed, but she still felt her body tense up.

**‘ding’ You have heard the terrifying roar of the Stone Cyclops. You are paralyzed in fear for three seconds.**

**‘ding’ Veteran reaches lvl 17**

*You’re shitting me, right?*

Ilea watched as the Cyclops discarded its crude weapon and turned, grabbing her in its massive hand before it squeezed hard, moving her toward and into its mouth.

Its teeth ground into her ashen armor, pushing her throat shut and squeezing everything within her body but her spine to paste. She pushed destructive mana into the creature, but it just bit down harder.

She let the beast try and rip off her head as she started charging Absolute Destruction, adding a hundred mana with each second. All the while, Heart of Cinder was burning in her chest.

Then Ilea felt one of the bones in her neck shift, her body going limp in the process.

*Fuck*, she thought, calm but a little annoyed to be inside this monster's mouth. It didn't actually smell as bad as a bunch of half-burnt rotting corpses riddled with corruption, but it wasn't exactly pleasant either.

She waited another three seconds, then unleashed her stored heat. A sphere of fire and energy burst forth, burning the inside of the Cyclops' mouth and throat as well as the palm of its hand.

The monster howled and released her head from its jaws, staggering back but keeping a hold of her body. Healing instantly spread through her, the bone in her neck popping back into place.

She moved her ashen limbs in from above, and after failing to cut the thick, rock-like skin of the creature, she pushed them into her own armor, wedging its hand open by a small amount and allowing her to get her right arm out of its hold.

An ashen spear formed above her, smooth and sharp. "Over here," she said, watching the angry monster turn its head back to her with a furious expression on its stone face.

The spear flew true, slamming into its eye from close range and piercing a couple of centimeters deep. Her limbs rushed out and moved around the back of its head before she yanked herself closer to it as it howled in pain.

She made the spear vanish, revealing the thin cut on its eye, before she slammed her fist into it – together with nearly three thousand points of destructive mana.

The magic ripped out of her, spreading into the Cyclops' eye before it searched for a place to go. To continue its destructive path. That was rather difficult, and Ilea watched as the eye swelled up before it burst with a resounding *pop*.

Blood and eye matter splattered onto her, the creature dead the instant its distinctive feature was destroyed. Its grip, however, was still somewhat strong, the two falling together before they hit the icy ground.

Pushing against the hand that still clung to her, Ilea was glad she had her ashen armor to protect her from the gore. “Come on,” she murmured as she heaved, her limbs helping out.

She quieted down when she heard heavy steps coming closer – four thunderous legs, at least.

*Come on...*

She finally slipped out, blinking away just as she saw two creatures get close. More Cyclopes.

*Be there in a second.*

She spread her wings, flying low and fast before crash-landing in a heap of snow, rolling several times until she slid to a stop on her back. Her mana wasn’t where she wanted it to be.

**‘ding’ You have heard the terrifying roar of the Stone Cyclops. You are paralyzed in fear for two seconds.**

“Yes, I get it,” she muttered, waiting for meditation to bring her mana up again.

When her mana was restored, she stood up and patted off the snow. Then she heard another roar and felt herself freeze up again.

**‘ding’ You have heard the terrifying roar of the Stone Cyclops. You are paralyzed in fear for two seconds.**

**‘ding’ Veteran reaches lvl 18**

*This is getting annoying. I bet ninety percent of high-level people die to this crap.*

She heard the first of the two creatures approach and saw it move into her sphere a moment later. Its long stride brought it to her in three steps.

The paralyzing effect passed, and she blinked backward, her eyes closed as she formed several ashen spears and started charging her fire spell again.

She waited for the Cyclops to move into her sphere before she released her spears, one by one, all aimed at its eye from various angles.

It swatted two of them away with a quick move of its massive hand. Too quick as far as Ilea was concerned.

She had felt magic from the creature but hadn't been able to discern it. Nor did it matter as the third spear cut into its eye from above, eliciting an angry roar from the Cyclops as it tried to get it out.

Ilea focused on the second creature and continued with the same tactic, watching as it hunkered down and protected its eye with both hands.

*Suits me*, she thought as she waited, her mana slowly recovering as she moved backward and away from the first angry monster, the scratch on its eye really bringing its mood to a boil.

Ilea released Heart of Cinder, charged for around fifteen seconds by now, in a cone in front of her. The energy burned into the creature, coalescing near its eye before it seemed to vanish. The Cyclops froze for a second before its one eye opened wide, a glint of fire showing.

*Ah.*

Ilea was struck by the realization of what was coming just before a beam of flame and energy enveloped her. Her ashen armor melted entirely before it started to reform. A chunk of mana had returned to her, back from what she assumed to be her own redirected spell.

*Does that mean I could damage myself? Or is it amplified by this monster's level?*

With their recent roars, she decided to get close again, blinking behind the first one she had engaged and slashing at its back, delivering Storm of Cinders with each strike.

She kept an eye on the second one, but it was still protecting its eye, apparently more scared of having it hurt than it was willing to attack her.

Ilea kept her assault going, chipping away at the rock as the monster was slowly filled with the destructive energy she was punching into it. She could tell that its natural resistance to mana intrusion was high thanks to its skin, but with each hit, Storm of Cinders weakened its defenses a little more.

Its eye didn't share its skin's defensive capabilities, but the Cyclops was careful now, constantly keeping its left hand close to its eye, watching her through the gaps between its fingers. The monster still held its club-like chunk of rock in its right hand, slamming it at her repeatedly.

Ilea felt herself get into a rhythm before its hand suddenly sped up mid-swing, magic wisps glowing lightly in her sphere, and she blinked away. She smiled, figuring out where she had seen this before.

*Time magic.*

She also noted that the second creature was now copying the first one's strategy, covering its eye partially instead of fully. The additions made the fight more interesting – both facing two of them at the same time and having the occasional burst of speed. She just had to finish them before they had another chance to freeze her.

Ilea jumped and blinked through the next club strike, her ashen limbs moving around the injured monster's other hand and maneuvering her over it. Her fist slammed down, right into its eye. Magic pulsed as her spells rippled through the cornea and into whatever magical ass mucus resided below.

The Cyclops roared and let go of its weapon, lashing out with its hands with quick jabs. Ilea, however, was already gone.

She focused on the second creature, which had a hard time getting close while the first was frenzied. Ilea even managed to maneuver them in such a way that one hit the other. Just once, but it made her feel proud, as if she could pay back the fact that she had nearly been eaten.

Her wings moved behind her as she ascended a little over them, a mist of ash forming and spreading over the two confused monsters. Spikes formed within the mist and slashed into their eyes as she poured reversed healing into their battered bodies.

Behind her, Ilea formed two massive ashen spikes, flying as tall as she stood, their design similar to the screw-like projectiles she'd tested when she'd been training her ash manipulation. Their sheer size would usually be difficult to control and keep together, even without the added torque she planned to integrate.

And yet her Ash and Ember Unity proved itself once again, the surface of her weapons smooth and without cracks. She started spinning them as the monsters below lashed out at the ash while simultaneously protecting their respective eyes.

Ilea waited until the projectiles nearly slipped from her control before she made the ash around the creatures vanish. She grinned when both of them looked up, eyes wide open and ready to receive what she had cooked up for them.

The screw-like spears slammed down. One of them bored into an eye with a sickening wet sound before it came to a stop. The first creature was finally down.

The other one slammed into the Cyclops' open palm, raised fast enough to get between its eye and the projectile. It didn't manage to penetrate its stone skin, slipping to the side and spinning on the ground before it rolled to a stop.

But Ilea was already forming new spears – of normal size this time, and without added spinning.

*And now there's only one eye left.*

It didn't take long for the second creature to fall as well.

**‘ding’ You have defeated [Stone Cyclops – lvl 622]**

**‘ding’ You have defeated [Stone Cyclops – lvl 602]**

**‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 324 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 323 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ Absolute Destruction reaches 3rd lvl 19**

**‘ding’ Azarinth Fighting reaches 3rd lvl 18**

**‘ding’ Azarinth Reversal reaches 3rd lvl 12**

**‘ding’ True Ash Creation reaches 3rd lvl 15**

**‘ding’ Storm of Cinders reaches 3rd lvl 10**

**‘ding’ Ash and Ember Unity reaches 3rd lvl 12**

Her surroundings were clear now. More Cyclopes were moving in the distance, but none of them were close enough to notice her – for now.

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## Ice Valley

Ilea watched the Cyclops move, flying high above as she thought about her next steps. She could progress to the next layer, but she decided to stay and fight these monsters for a little while longer.

She formed a massive spear, flying close to a Cyclops that moved alone. It was running after a rabbit, slamming its stone weapon down with fury.

Ilea didn't make a noise as she approached from behind, her drill-like spear hovering next to her as it started to spin. A second spear formed, this one small and smooth.

The Cyclops closed in on the fast-moving rabbit when a small impact on its back made it stop and turn, an angry growl leaving its mouth. When it didn't see anything, the creature looked up.

The last thing it saw was a spinning lance of ash.

Ilea watched as it collapsed, killed with a single hit to its weak spot. This one hadn't been quick enough to protect itself, hadn't realized how potent the attack would be. She saw the rabbit stop and watch as the Cyclops fell into the snow with a heavy thud.

**‘ding’ You have defeated [Stone Cyclops – lvl 607]**

After fighting the Wyverns, Ilea wondered how they would do against these Cyclopes.

“I won’t hurt you, little rabbit,” she said, hovering next to the dead Cyclops. Storing them in her necklace had proved impossible, their bodies either too large or too heavy.

Ilea thought about ripping off an arm or something, but even their defenses didn’t seem as impressive as the Wyverns’. *All brawn, no finesse or speed with these.*

She watched the rabbit creep closer, jumping onto the monster’s head before it started ripping at the exposed skin near its destroyed eye, revealing sharp teeth.

### **[Sharptooth Hare – lvl 31]**

“Circle of life and all that,” Ilea murmured before ascending once more.

She spent the next few hours hunting Stone Cyclops, always leading with an ashen lance. Most of them deflected or stopped the missile with relative ease, forcing her to get in close.

Ilea killed twelve of them all in all, getting bashed from time to time, grabbed again only once when she fought two at the same time. The worst damage was a nearly completely squashed torso, including broken bones. So, not much of a problem.

Their roars and time magic made the fights a lot more interesting, but while it forced her to fight more methodically, she preferred the upfront and grounded brutality of her fights with the Wyverns. Nor was her Time Magic Resistance getting anything out of it as the creatures only used their magic to enhance themselves.

**‘ding’ You have defeated [Stone Cyclops – lvl 621]**

...

**‘ding’ You have defeated [Stone Cyclops – lvl 613]**

**‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 325 – Five stat points awarded**

...

**‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 327 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 324 – Five stat points awarded**

...

**‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 326 – Five stat points awarded**

She was standing next to the latest pair she had killed, which had eaten up nearly all her mana before going down.

*Every single beast down here could dismantle a whole village or town back in the south. Even the rabbits are level thirty.*

With every battle, she was more and more impressed that humanity was still around, glad that these creatures remained in the deep and didn’t desire the death of all life. None of the Cyclopes had been corrupted, nor had she found corpses of any being affected by the blood manipulation in this valley.

*Thirty more stat points...*

She looked through the rest of her gains.

**‘ding’ Absolute Destruction reaches 3rd lvl 20**

**‘ding’ Sentinel Reconstruction reaches 3rd lvl 20**

**‘ding’ Sentinel Core reaches 3rd lvl 12**

**‘ding’ Azarinth Reversal reaches 3rd lvl 13**

**‘ding’ Armor of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 20**

**‘ding’ Aspect of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 15**

**‘ding’ True Ash Creation reaches 3rd lvl 16**

**‘ding’ Storm of Cinders reaches 3rd lvl 11**

**‘ding’ Storm of Cinders reaches 3rd lvl 12**

**‘ding’ Ash and Ember Unity reaches 3rd lvl 13**

**‘ding’ Avatar of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 4**

**‘ding’ Keeper of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 13**

**‘ding’ Veteran reaches lvl 19**

**‘ding’ Veteran reaches lvl 20**

Compared to the Wyvern battles, her skills weren’t leveling quite as fast. She assumed the routine she’d quickly developed in battling the creatures was responsible.

In general, it seemed the only skills that really benefited from a prolonged battle were her resistance skills. Even a quick fight against a

high-level creature rewarded similar skill levels as a longer fight did, especially if the enemy was unknown.

If she fought only Cyclopes for another year, she doubted any of her skills would rise significantly. Of course, her Classes would – to an extent, at least. Simply because she was killing creatures above level six hundred.

Veteran had also stopped leveling after twenty, preventing their roars from having an effect against her.

She looked around but couldn't see any more Cyclopes, so her wings carried her away from the corpses and towards the frozen river. She saw a couple of white trees some few hundred meters away and flew towards them.

Ilea felt something change in the air as she got close. The hairs on her neck stood up as she suddenly blinked, her wings carrying her up and away.

Ice started to form on her wings, making her unable to ascend any further. She tumbled down and landed in the branches of one of the white trees, her ashen limbs moving her closer to the trunk.

Something was visible in her sphere, moving below the snow and the ground. It was blurry, lacking a form, and wreathed in a confusing illusion.

Ilea waited, her heart beating quickly as her instincts screamed at her to get away as fast as possible. Everything was frozen, there was a layer of ice on top of her ashen armor, and she could feel the cold pushing deeper. And yet she saw that the magic had failed to reach her core, likely because of her resistance.

She held her breath, watching whatever she had perceived move past below. It moved around the roots of the tree but didn't seem to detect her.

Terribly long seconds passed before the air was suddenly back to normal and Ilea found herself breathing once more.

### ***'ding' Ice Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 10***

She waited a little while longer before finally blinking up and spreading her wings, a wave of heat spreading out from her that instantly splintered the ice.

*Definitely not something that I want to fight. For now, at least.*

She had learned to trust her instincts, and that thing had made her danger sense tingle about as much as the Lightning Elemental – with the added bonus of being shrouded and underground.

Her Ice Resistance needed to be higher. If it could nearly immobilize her just by moving nearby, she wasn't ready to face it.

She continued farther down the valley, ready to face the next challenge that was waiting for her. Ready to leech every bit of power out of this hostile place and quell the corruption that arose from it.

\* \* \*

Ilea found no more Cyclopes in her descent, nor did she encounter the powerful ice magic... thing again. Nothing remained in the eleventh layer other than the cave entrance that led farther down.

Entering it, she found a long-frozen tunnel with a steep decline that she traversed in flight before she came upon a blown open stone floor.

*Number twelve*, she thought, once again checking for any messages or scraps left behind. There was nothing.

She jumped down into the next level and immediately smiled at the sight of a shimmering crystal that reflected her approaching figure. A *mirror*. She looked at her ashen form, the small horns jutting forward from behind her temples, thin limbs of ash moving behind her.

*And I arrived here in pajamas. I doubt any of those poor Drakes expected me to come this far.*

The walls were covered in shards of ice, dark stone jutting out here and there. Reflections of her form were visible all over the chamber, thousands of them spreading out in each direction, illuminated by the thin lines of crystal embedded in the floor and ceiling.

Ilea walked around for a while, the tunnels forking in various directions from time to time. She missed the sure guidance of Ilas. With time, however, she would find the way.

She heard a sound behind her. A giggle. And it was familiar. Her breath caught in her throat. She kept her eyes peeled, her senses focused.

*There it is again.*

She sped up and followed the noise into another tunnel with a slight decline.

A figure shrouded in shadow glanced her way and vanished. A woman with blonde hair, two daggers in her hands, a familiar posture.

“Eve...” Ilea whispered.

She followed her, rushing after her friend until she came to a dead end. *She's dead... she's dead.* The words repeated in her head, and her pulse began to quicken.

Then her eyes opened wide as she blinked back.

*Aaaaand I just entered whatever trap this is.*

The ground below her blurred in her sphere, a dozen eyes turning to focus on her. It looked like a flesh-eating plant that had grown into the rock. Two dozen rope-like protrusions lashed out to catch her as a vibration shuddered through her.

**‘ding’ You have felt the magic of the Halian. You are paralyzed for two seconds.**

Ilea watched the huge mouth open, revealing teeth as far as she could see. All the beast’s eyes were on her as she was caught and brought down toward the creature, which seemed to have grown into the icy rock.

**‘ding’ Veteran reaches 2nd lvl 1**

**Veteran – 2nd lvl 1**

**You have experienced the shouts and spells of beings completely out of your range of imagination. You will not survive, but at least you won’t be entirely immobilized while you get eaten. Good luck, warrior.**

**2nd stage: You are immune to the fear of facing that which you do not understand. Be wary – some might sense your arrogance in the face of power, but others might fear it.**

She breathed out and focused, her limbs slashing into the creature’s flesh as she watched the teeth close around her. She charged Heart of Cinder.

*You don’t get to use her like that.*

The fire lashed out, singeing the skin of the creature as it snapped its mouth shut. Teeth dug into Ilea from all sides as her ash spread through the gaps. Destructive mana flowed into the beast, and her limbs scratched and cut into the inside of its mouth.

The Halian thrashed in pain, making the stone around it rumble as it pushed harder to sink its teeth into Ilea’s ash.

Ilea pressed her hands against the walls of flesh and teeth as soon as she could move again, her muscles aching as she strained against the powerful creature.

Her ash lashed out behind her, ripping out chunks of the Halian's flesh. She felt the teeth penetrate her bone armor, digging into her skin, and blood started to run down her palms.

Then her ashen drills started spinning before digging into the monster, her own blades forming Shredder-like layers before they spun around in the creature's insides.

Tentacles came at her from all around, trying to pull her out once more, but they too were ripped through.

"You don't get it," she murmured before infusing her voice. "You're the one being hunted."

## Getting Lost

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The Halian finally managed to spit her out, a combination of tentacles, gag reflex, and acidic stomach juices doing the job.

Ilea tumbled to the ground, unable to stand up due to the slippery juices burning into her skin. Her ash was reforming, and the deep cuts on her body were healing under it. She blinked into the air, avoiding any further battle with the ground, and her ashen limbs reformed. A thorned tentacle had pierced one of her eyes, but it refocused as it sprang back to life.

She let out a breath and spat out a mix of blood and acid, looking at the creature. It was writhing in the ground, screeching in anguish and fury from the thousands of cuts to its insides. Most of its eyes had been scraped or punctured, some outright ripped out.

Another screech left it, acid spewing from its massive maw, slathering Ilea in brown muck. She felt the substance burn into her ash, disintegrating it quickly. It stopped at her skin, her healing and resistances pushing against it.

“Alright, that’s it.”

She rushed forward, watching the mouth shut before she slammed into an invisible wall.

“A barrier... really?”

Placing her hand against the magical force field, she tried to gauge it, comparing it to Claire’s, Elfie’s, and other barriers she’d come across. She

started pouring destructive healing mana into it, using the downtime to let her mana regenerate.

“That’s not gonna stop me.”

Ilea watched her mana pour into the increasingly visible barrier, eating through it like the acid still clinging to her skin. She tried blinking beyond it but reappeared in the same place she’d started. Whatever prevented her teleportation was still there.

She started charging her Heart of Cinder.

Slowly, her destructive mana burned through the barrier. When she could feel the charging heat start damaging her own body, she forced her hand through the barrier and released the spell in a beam of energy, heat, and fire.

The Halian shrieked and thrashed in its hideout within the walls of the twelfth layer, enveloped by fire as its hard skin was scorched, its insides cooked. Yet still it remained alive.

Finally, Ilea broke through the barrier fully, the defense wavering due to her attack. She blinked close to it and rammed ash into its eyes and some into its maw to try and open it again. Her fists punched into the hard skin of the creature, ignoring the tentacles lashing out at her as waves of destructive mana pulsed into her foe.

With a final wail, it slumped to the ground.

**‘ding’ You have defeated [Halian – lvl 610]**

**‘ding’ Azarinth Reversal reaches 3rd lvl 14**

**‘ding’ Storm of Cinders reaches 3rd lvl 13**

Ilea blinked back up into the tunnel, her wings taking her the rest of the way. The creature below had been huge. As she flew, her bone armor reappeared, slowly restoring itself.

A moment later, she sat down on the edge of the crack leading down into the beast’s little alcove. “Shit day, huh?” she said as she summoned a meal.

*Random creatures are already above six hundred down here,* she thought, enjoying each bite of Keyla’s cooking as her mana regenerated.

Ilea hoped the expedition hadn't gone much deeper, or she suspected that there was little hope for their survival.

She finished her meal and got up.

"Alright. Let's see if I can find more of those fucks. Trap disarming service back in action. Hope I can at least get some more resistance levels out of this."

Ilea wandered through the tunnels for a while, but she didn't find a single thing other than her own reflection in the hundreds of glass-like ice shards covering the stone walls.

She tried finding the trail of either the expedition or her group, who must have passed through here half a day prior. Nothing revealed itself, however, neither to her sphere nor to her Huntress skill.

She started to hum the theme song for one of her favorite superheroines. Partly, it was to stave off the boredom that was slowly growing, but the main reason was to attract any nearby monsters. So far, nothing had shown itself.

Ilea had her precognition, her sphere, her Azarinth Perception, as well as her insane defenses in case something did jump her.

Ten minutes and a lot of corridors later, something did show. A creature that appeared in her sphere and immediately vanished.

Ilea felt the space next to her side distort and turned, bringing her arms up just in time to catch the dozen blades that cut into her. They penetrated halfway through her ash before the creature vanished once more, but not before Ilea caught a glimpse with Identify.

### **[Blade Lurker – lvl ???]**

It was a four-legged dog-sized beast with a ball-like head adorned with too many eyes and no mouth. Twelve long protrusions with bladed ends rose out of its back. The whole thing was a sickly purple color.

It reappeared behind her, and her ashen limbs lashed out to counter the attack. Blades clanged against each other before it vanished again.

Ilea was fast enough to respond each time it came back, but it reappeared in an awkward spot every time, as if it knew where she could reach easily and where she couldn't. Her ashen limbs were the only thing keeping it at bay for now.

After almost being eaten by several creatures, she'd had some time to think about possible ways to use the new power-up to her ash effectively.

She added barbed thorns to her ashen armor, forming them quickly before adding the same to her limbs, moving them from her back to her limbs and torso. They started spinning around her with rapidly increasing velocity, around her arms, legs, chest, and stomach. One even swirled around her head.

Everything was still connected to her body, giving it the benefits of her active skills as well. Anything that attacked her in this state would have a damn annoying time.

*Ash Shredder, baby.*

She smiled and watched the creature reappear, its blades cutting into her defenses. Several bits of ash ripped open its purple skin, both close to the protrusions on its back as well as its side.

The ash chipped but quickly reformed, injuring the monster with each teleport.

Ilea noticed that the Blade Lurker moved with increased velocity after every blink, its weapons cutting deeper every time. And every time, its body was further ripped apart by her thorns.

When it finally cut to her bone armor, the beast whipped around, getting stuck in her ash. Ilea snatched it with her arms, holding it as it was shredded by a thousand thorns.

Blood sprayed the walls and her armor, and she only let go when the kill notification resounded in her mind. The sad lump of mangled flesh landed with a wet noise.

**‘ding’ You have defeated [Blade Lurker – lvl 517]**

**‘ding’ Ash and Ember Unity reaches 3rd lvl 14**

“Barely any levels. This layer isn’t very promising, now is it?” She reformed her defenses and got rid of the gore. “I should move on to the thirteenth as soon as possible.”

Ilea’s plans didn’t exactly pan out. She soon encountered a corridor with ten Blade Lurkers, each stabbing into her defenses for a chunk of damage before she took them out. The numbers nearly overwhelmed her at one

point, their blades chipping too much of her ash to make it effective. A charged blast of fire took three of them out of the action, allowing her to refocus on the rest.

It didn't seem like the monsters had an upper limit to their speed, their bodies nearly breaking under the stress their abilities put them under. Yet their strength and speed also worked against them when they impaled themselves with such force that they couldn't help but take damage. Ilea quickly moved on, finding the Lurkers to be unsatisfying prey.

And now she was looking at a hazy illusion moving into and out of the walls.

The person looked like a hazy nightmare version of Claire, calling for help in a voice much too deep and distorted to be real.

She followed, of course, hoping for another Halian. Perhaps this one was worse at the illusion part of the job.

What she found was a little different.

### **[Corrupted Halian – lvl ???]**

The monster screeched, its tentacles thrashing out of its open mouth as it ripped at the walls to get out.

Ilea formed her Shredder-like protrusions, adding several layers of ashen padding to her defenses. *Full mana, Heart charging, Shredder mode on.*

“Here’s dinner,” she said and jumped in.

What followed was a grinding mush of thorns, teeth, fire, and blood. The Halian’s added aggression and unrelenting frenzy actually made it more dangerous, contrary to Ilea’s expectations.

The Halian’s mouth smashed down several times in quick succession, its teeth grinding into her ash without any concern for its own safety. It didn’t stop or slow down its attacks; acid spewed and tentacles struck no matter how many wounds it had or how much of its body got burnt.

Ilea had to resort to her instant recovery several times but decided to remain within its mouth, stopping the walls with her arms as her ashen limbs and her reversed reconstruction slowly whittled away at the creature’s health. After a while, she had to refrain from using more offensive skills to preserve her mana.

She tried blinking out, but this time, the monster used its barrier to keep her in instead of out. Not the wisest move on its part. Ilea twisted and spun in its mouth, digging her ashen thorns as deep as possible. The Halian died in a gory soup of blood, guts, and orange ooze.

Ilea finally blinked out, falling to one knee as her lungs reformed. Not instantly, though, to preserve some mana. She was still fine, but the sudden appearance of ten more Blade Lurkers would pose a significant problem.

Meditation had been active during most of the fight and was still flowing through her now, giving her an additional bit of mana every passing second. The acid had returned some mana as well, as it was considered a magic attack.

She sat back and looked through her notifications.

**‘ding’ You have defeated [Blade Lurker – lvl 505]**

...

**‘ding’ You have defeated [Blade Lurker – lvl 523]**

**‘ding’ You have defeated [Corrupted Halian – lvl 605]**

**‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 328 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 327 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ Azarinth Awakening reaches 3rd lvl 18**

**‘ding’ Sentinel Core reaches 3rd lvl 13**

**‘ding’ Aspect of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 16**

**‘ding’ Keeper of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 14**

**‘ding’ Corrosion Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 10**

The ten stat points went into Strength as she waited and listened. Nothing showed up. She checked Catelyn’s sphere, then jumped down and stored her bone armor, reducing her ashen armor to its customary position on her back in the process.

With maximum skin exposed, she eyed her prize. There was still plenty of acid and corruption remaining inside the corpse... so, of course, she slathered it onto her in perhaps the deadliest bath a human had ever taken.

*What better way to deter other creatures than a corrupted and acid-ritten corpse,* she thought as she sat down, her skin slowly burning as her mana regenerated.

When she deactivated her resistance, both the corruption and the acid instantly increased in potency. Not tenfold, as she'd hoped, but at least twice or thrice as powerful.

She sighed and turned her perception of pain on, instantly wincing and clenching her teeth. The corruption was most certainly worse than the acid, sickening and like a bright, all-consuming sensation in her mind.

She turned it off again, having glimpsed enough of it to understand the danger. She felt it was important to remind herself of the pain and danger from time to time so as not to get complacent. Pain had a function, after all.

For her current activities, though, it just got in the way.

## Layers

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Ilea spent a while inside the Halian corpse until little of the acid remained. She checked her progress and activated her ashen armor again. By this point, her bone set had also fully regenerated.

**‘ding’ Blood Manipulation Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 5**

...

**‘ding’ Blood Manipulation Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 7**

**‘ding’ Corrosion Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 11**

**‘ding’ Corrosion Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 12**

She continued walking around in the ice mirror-covered corridors, but other than two Blade Lurkers, she didn’t encounter anything else. Neither had been corrupted. Ilea assumed that those that were had been killed in the layer above by the Cyclopes or gone farther below.

*There it is,* she thought, spotting the stone separating this layer from the next. *I hope the next one is better.*

She used her ash to form a drill before she dug down into the ground. Ilea wasn’t about to lose another hour on finding an exit when she could just make her own.

The lines of glowing crystals continued down through the stone into the thirteenth floor of the Descent. Even Ilea’s little tunnel was illuminated by

them. The sound of rushing streams of water met her ears as she broke through into the next level.

Coming out below, she spread her wings and took in the sight of a dozen rivers, creeks, and still ponds spreading through the area. Rocks jutted out from the waters, and a slight decline let her know where the next layer would likely be found.

*Water layer...* Ilea shuddered at the thought as well as the sight before her. At least it wasn't an unending ocean like in the demon realm. *I'm so glad Trian came with me.*

Ilea clapped her hands together to motivate herself and moved down, flying low over the water. She found herself enjoying the sound, at least. Most of the layers before had been devoid of much audible ambience.

A sudden tug pulled her down, powerful enough to counter her wings nearly fully, and her blink only got her a few centimeters away. Ilea used her ashen limbs to grab onto anything solid she could find as soon as she reached the water, but the stone she grabbed groaned before it cracked.

*Shit!*

With her wings wet and submerged, there was nothing else that kept her from going down.

Sharp stones jutted out from the bottom of the water, as did pillars and rock formations that lined the whole area below. Ilea was pulled down and wedged between two walls, their sharp edges digging into her armor as she thrashed and tried to find purchase or something to hit.

She activated meditation and calmed down a little. She realized that she knew this sensation.

*Gravity magic. Something is trying to drown me. I need to get out or kill whatever's causing this.*

Ilea started smashing at the stone around her, but her arms felt sluggish, pulled down and heavy. She was sure it wasn't just the water.

*You can survive underwater for a while. Your Gravity Magic Resistance is pretty fucking low, and you can't fight it right now. Might as well go all out.*

She deactivated her resistance and waited, trying to locate whatever was causing the magic through her various abilities.

**‘ding’ Gravity Magic Resistance reaches lvl 3**

Her ash crashed through the stone around her, but Ilea was now free to move around, though the pressure still pulled her down. The level-up had no other effect, as the skill's bonus was still deactivated.

Ilea moved slowly, pushing hard against the magic as she scanned her sphere, trying to find something out of the norm. The flowing water made it hard to find anything that stood out.

Slow minutes passed, her search fruitless. *At least I'll have some more resistance levels before I die.*

**‘ding’ Gravity Magic Resistance reaches lvl 4**

**‘ding’ Gravity Magic Resistance reaches lvl 5**

She finally spotted a small section on a rock where the water flowed slightly differently.

*There you are!*

Ilea formed an ashen lance, which shot out. The sudden movement revealed a gray octopus the size of a house cat, the creature scurrying around the rock and vanishing again.

*Fuck.*

No interruption in the magic had been noticeable.

*I’ll find you, you fucker.*

Ilea used her ashen limbs to force herself against the powerful gravity magic, the water around her pushing down on her. Finding the octopus behind the rock once again, she smiled.

*Now, let’s not be stupid...*

She slowly moved closer, extending a single ashen limb around and behind the creature before she lassoed it and pulled it closer. Her hand shot out as fast as she could manage, closing around several of its arms. The creature was squishy.

**[Vile Varass Drowner – lvl ???]**

She squeezed and slammed her ashen limbs down into the monster’s small form. It slithered out of the way, dodging most of her blows before something spread out from its body. A murky substance that sizzled as soon as it touched her ash.

*Good, even more resistance training you can provide, she thought, feeling the gravity around her increasing once more.*

She held tight, pushing destructive mana into the octopus. Within the cloud of acid, or whatever substance it was, its eyes were frantically looking for an escape.

Ilea's ashen limbs slowly pushed toward the creature, fighting against the increased weight as they wrapped around it, small blades forming before they shredded the beast's body. It struggled hard, making the wounds even worse, before it finally went limp.

*Was that it? Ilea asked herself, the magic around her gone. Not very tough for something of your level.*

She stored the body in her necklace and checked the messages.

**'ding' You have defeated [Vile Varass Drowner – lvl 539]**

**'ding' Blink reaches 3rd lvl 14**

**'ding' Gravity Magic Resistance reaches lvl 6**

**'ding' Gravity Magic Resistance reaches lvl 7**

**'ding' Corrosion Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 13**

*Damn, a level in corrosion too? Despite only being affected for a couple seconds?*

Ilea blinked up twice, the distance no longer a problem without the gravity magic, before coming to the surface and landing on a nearby stone. She breathed in and sighed, glad to be out of the water.

*Might as well deactivate my armor as well, now that I know what they can do.*

"Come on, good progress – levels and resistances," she said, trying to psych herself up.

When she had calmed down, Ilea looked at the flowing currents and held her breath.

\* \* \*

Catelyn held her breath, waiting for the elf to signal the passing of a corrupted beast. Her sight was blurred by the veil of shadows hiding their group.

Ilas' presence had been invaluable for both his ability to conceal and his pathfinding. They'd been able to outright avoid most of the creatures, seeing only glimpses of them, if even that.

They had refrained from engaging most of the Descent's denizens, powerful magic emanating from them. The drowning creatures especially had nearly taken them by surprise.

The elf's barriers hadn't been affected much by the gravity magic, saving them from falling into the waters. Luckily, the layer right after had a way to completely circumvent the deep waters lying within. The complete stillness had unnerved her. She hoped Ilea would see the message – not that she would necessarily listen if she did.

Now they had another problem.

The pale blue light shining from above was further reduced by the veil of shadows, but Catelyn could still see them – the corrupted creatures prowling this layer. They wouldn't find a way up, but their numbers were worrying. If the expedition really had passed through here, she had a hard time seeing them make their way back up.

*We will have to dig another way.*

"It has passed," the elf finally said. "We may not be able to avoid them all."

Catelyn gritted her teeth. She knew the others had agreed to join, but she hoped she wasn't leading them all to their doom.

*I hope she's still alive.*

"Another one," Maro said, touching the cavern wall.

He pulled out a simple cylinder that had been built into the wall, the metal contraption still showing some of the orange ooze within. It was the third such container that they had found.

"Seems like they're in every layer," Niivalyr said.

"It's good that not all the creatures are susceptible to it," Maro said. "Someone must have added these as some kind of trap. Maybe the expedition triggered something."

"A corrupting substance as a trap?" the elf asked and hissed with disgust.

"The way down lies ahead," Ilas said. "Let us press forward."

\* \* \*

Hana carefully set down the injured warrior, finally in relative safety. It was a wonder that he was still alive – his wounds would have killed even her five times over.

“You found someone,” Jonna whispered, approaching quickly.

Hana turned and closed the steel gate, checking one last time that nothing was following behind. “He was part of the expedition. I saw him before, but never like this,” she said. “Can you heal him?”

Jonna’s magic activated with its familiar warmth. “What are those scales? They’re blue.”

His armor was damaged, exposing most of his chest as well as half of his head and left arm. What had previously been full plate armor had been ripped through. Some of the cuts went to his very bones.

“He’s still alive,” Jonna murmured as she started healing.

“A dead scorpion was next to him, its flesh cooked from within,” Hana said quietly.

“Corruption?” Jonna asked in a worried tone.

“I checked. He took care of it.”

Jonna gave her a quiet nod.

The warrior slowly opened his eyes and audibly breathed out. “That is enough...” he said in a soft voice, quiet and alert. “Reserve your mana for now, healer.”

“We should be safe – I can finish the job,” Jonna replied, continuing her spell.

The man relaxed slightly. “Tell me, warrior, did I slay the beast?”

Hana smiled and clasped his shoulder. “You did.”

He grabbed the heavy steel chains around his arms and tightened them before removing the loose remains of his chest plate. “Tell me, how much of this facility have you searched already?”

## Still Waters

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Ilea sat down on one of the rocks, watching the waters flow by.

*Maybe this isn't as bad as I thought*, she mused, looking at the almost serene patterns before she formed a small ashen pebble in her hand and threw it in.

She'd realized that the Varass Drowners were attracted by small disturbances like that. Most of the time, only one attacked, leading her to assume they had their own territory.

She had killed another eight already, spending at least half an hour with each as they used their magic on her. They'd thrashed and spewed their acid while pressing down hundreds of liters of water on top of her, increasing the weight ten or even a hundredfold.

Ilea checked through her progress and wondered how much longer she was willing to drown.

**‘ding’ You have defeated [Vile Varass Drowner – lvl 519]**

...

**‘ding’ You have defeated [Vile Varass Drowner – lvl 562]**

**‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 329 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 328 – Five stat points awarded**

*Getting close to another third-tier point again, she thought with a smile.*

**‘ding’ Sentinel Sphere reaches 3rd lvl 3**

**‘ding’ Sentinel Sphere reaches 3rd lvl 4**

The third tier of the skill had helped tremendously, pulling in the acid to more efficiently level her Corrosion Resistance.

**‘ding’ Azarinth Reversal reaches 3rd lvl 15**

**‘ding’ Aspect of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 17**

**‘ding’ Ash and Ember Unity reaches 3rd lvl 15**

**‘ding’ Avatar of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 5**

**‘ding’ Avatar of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 6**

**‘ding’ Harmony of the Drowned reaches lvl 3**

...

**‘ding’ Harmony of the Drowned reaches lvl 5**

**‘ding’ Identify reaches lvl 10**

Her slowest leveling skill had finally reached double digits. Ilea had to admit that she’d been slacking with it, considering most everything could be identified. It didn’t involve fighting or eating, however, resulting in the somewhat slow progress.

Still, she was pretty sure that identifying a level five hundred monster was more beneficial than identifying a thousand trees – at least, that was what she told herself. She wondered what the second stage would bring.

**‘ding’ Monster Hunter reaches lvl 3**

She had used the skill whenever possible, trying to intimidate the creatures with her gargled voice underwater. It wasn’t exactly beneficial to her air supply or the fights themselves, but levels were levels.

**‘ding’ Blood Manipulation Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 8**

...

**‘ding’ Blood Manipulation Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 10**

**‘ding’ Gravity Magic Resistance reaches lvl 8**

...

**‘ding’ Gravity Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 3**

**Gravity Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 3**

**A force of nature, bound and warped by magic itself. Perhaps not noticing the damage dealt to your body, you have developed a way to resist this magic.**

**2nd stage: You remain firmly planted and understand a little of the intricacies of gravity. You have a more practical sense that allows you to move in various states of gravity with less difficulty, be it magical or otherwise.**

**‘ding’ Corrosion Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 14**

**‘ding’ Corrosion Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 15**

When this whole thing was over, Ilea planned to take a couple of months off and get all her resistances to the end of the second tier. To help with her next evolution, whenever that would be.

*Will I get three question marks when I get to five hundred? Everyone would freak out when they saw me.*

She grinned at the thought. Though, she could also see some issues with it. The attention, mostly.

Ilea cracked her neck and spread her wings, slowly flying down toward a lower point in the thirteenth layer. She’d got another resistance to the second tier and a level out of it, but all in all, these last two layers seemed lackluster.

*I hope the next one is more of a challenge.*

She reached the entrance to the next layer beyond a lake that formed at the bottom of the rivers and streams. Ilea didn’t spot anything within other than a bunch of level ten fish. Impressive power, really, for something so terribly non-threatening.

The entrance to number fourteen was a two-by-two-meter hole bored into the stone ground. Whoever had built this place or added these separations didn’t exactly want the monsters to mingle, it seemed.

*Makes me wonder about the purpose of the corruption.*

She climbed down, and as she emerged into a dim layer, she wondered what kind of horrific monsters and hostile terrains were waiting for her.

Five or six magical lights shone onto a flat surface below, barely reflected. Water, she realized. One of the lights was flickering.

*How very ominous.*

Ilea checked her sphere and found carvings left behind at the bottom of the entrance.

*'Fly to the right-hand wall, a way will be revealed.'*

*Who writes like that?* Ilea wondered as she shook her head.

She formed an ashen pebble and dropped it, hearing a plop resound below. A tiny wave moved over the still water, disturbing the perfectly even surface.

Ilea started moving to the right, a little more tense as she watched the rippling effects on the water's dark surface.

### ***'ding' Fear Resistance reaches lvl 10***

*Should level that one too. Maybe...*

Ilea debated if she should just go ahead and dive into the unknown. But then she hesitated, instead moving toward the broken-in entrance she now saw within her sphere.

A thought suddenly entered her mind, not intruding but questioning and with barely recognizable form.

Ilea staggered back, unsure if she was under attack. *What?* She sent the equivalent of the question back.

Nothing happened for a minute, but then she heard an ethereal voice reverberate in her mind.

*"Serass... sal utuun?"*

*Telepathy.* Ilea sighed and slowly moved her wings, staring down into the waters. *Something's in there.*

She could run and avoid possible confrontation, but more than anything, she was intrigued.

*"Hello? I speak Elos and English. Emotions, too, if you prefer that,"* she replied in her mind before sending the thought equivalent of a wave.

She remained floating above the waters, ready to blink away at an instant. It was quiet for a while.

*“Thy purpose, I must know.”* It spoke in a deep voice now, revealing nothing of its intentions.

“Are you speaking English?” she asked with a smile. Elos Standard and English felt and sounded very similar to her, but Ilea had a suspicion that it was because she had acquired the language through whatever magic had brought her here.

When no response came, she added, “I’m here to find a lost expedition and destroy the corruption that was unleashed.”

A long pause followed. Ilea wasn’t sure if she had lost the being’s interest.

“Thou art of flesh. Yet uncertain remains thy truth,” the being said.

*My truth is uncertain? I guess I’m also here to fight whatever monsters I can. Maybe not the best thing to share with a strange voice coming from a dark, underground pond.*

“Are you from another realm?” she asked.

“Thou art... not a captor, tormentor, a thief of life. Yet thy mind remains closed, hostile,” the being said, ignoring her question.

“You’re not very forthcoming either. I won’t lower my Mental Resistance before I can trust you.”

A long pause came and went.

“A language long ago, found in a... vessel. English. It is... the first time I have spoken... it. It is unknown to me, should this realm be another. Thou speakest of corruption. What dost thou... mean?”

“A vessel... interesting. I’m pretty sure you’re from another realm, then. We share that. I don’t suppose you know how you got here?” Ilea asked. “As for the corruption... do you know where you are at all? I’m not sure how much I have to explain.”

“Perhaps there is another name for it. Not all the words were written within the books I have found. Many letters were lost to the deep. We had considered the possibility of another plane... separate from that we called... harbor?”

“Home is the word... harbor is a facility where ships are stationed, close to water. I assume the vessel you found was a ship, then,” Ilea suggested.

“Home, then. If thou canst prove the existence of another realm, the chance is high that thine assumption about me is correct. I was brought here by spells I do not understand. These waters are not endless, confined

*by steel and stone. And yet, the magic is powerful here, comforting and... serene. We are within a place of power. What is the corruption thou seekest to destroy?"*

*"We call it a dungeon, what you call a place of power. Where powerful creatures dwell. This one may have been constructed by someone. Maybe by the same people who brought you here,"* Ilea explained.

It doesn't seem particularly hostile. What she was about to do may be risky, Ilea considered, but why not take a shot?

She summoned a flask filled with corruption.

*"This liquid is a form of blood manipulation that eats into whatever living thing it touches, killing it and making it frenzied. Afflicted creatures attack everything they see, corrupting it in turn. It was released a month or two ago and has since taken over much of the dungeon. Many powerful beings resisted it, however, and now fight those taken."*

The being was silent for a while. "May I... see?" the voice asked.

"It's pretty strong – make sure not to touch it," Ilea said as she moved the bottle down toward the water with one of her ashen limbs.

"A drop will suffice... if thou wilt," the being said.

Ilea was unsure, but right now, she was pretty intrigued about what the being was and, more importantly, what it knew. Maybe she could even get some resistance levels out of it.

She opened the bottle with a second limb and tilted it slightly until a drop of the ooze plopped into the water. A little more came out due to the slimy texture.

Several minutes passed before the creature talked to her once more.

"So this was done with it. This... corruption stems from me," the being said.

"From you?" Ilea asked, confused.

"Made from the blood, the very life that flows through me," the creature said. "Disappointing."

"So they captured you, put you in this tank, and weaponized your blood?"

"A simple retelling. But seeing what they used it for, perhaps that was really all there was to it."

"You're not angry about that?"

"Angry? No. I am confused. A lot of effort must have been expended to facilitate all of this. A weapon of corruption is the last thing I would have

*expected, but then again, I do not know much about my former captors.”*

*The way it talks has changed. I feel like it’s adjusting to my use of English. On the fly.*

“Former?” she asked.

*“I have not felt their presence in centuries. And the magic that once prevented my escape has long since faded.”*

Ilea felt herself tense up slightly.

“Do not be frightened. I merely wish to converse.”

“I’m not scared of you,” Ilea said.

“Of course not.”

Ilea crossed her arms. “I’m scared of the water.”

“Of course,” the being replied, its slight amusement obvious.

“It’s creepy. With the flickering lights and all that.”

“Yes, I suppose light can be scary.”

*“That’s not what I meant,” Ilea murmured. She smiled, then breathed out. “I’m interested in finding out more about your captors, as well as the corruption. Is there a way to cure it?”*

*“My captor, it is not of flesh, its mind near impenetrable. I had felt... an ambition... and unwavering precision. The cure is death or physical removal. Only the body itself can fight it, but without removal, it would be difficult to not be overwhelmed.”*

*“I have Blood Manipulation Resistance in the second tier. And I’m a healer. Maybe I can somehow fight it with all that?”*

*“Blood is life itself. You cannot heal that which needs no mending. You may stop it but not destroy it. A curse, perhaps, or fire – both are incredibly rare and near impossible to find.”*

*“Not in this realm it isn’t. Fire magic is one of the most common skills here,” Ilea smiled.*

**‘ding’ You have demonstrated knowledge of a General skill: English Language – lvl 15**

**English Language – lvl 15**

**You can speak the English language.**

It felt like a slap, it really did.

*Are you fucking kidding me?? Ilea thought. I just got a skill for speaking my own language.*

*“Peculiar,”* the being said.

*“The fire magic?”*

*“No. I understand what I am familiar with does not have to be the norm. What is peculiar is that I feel a mark on you... something familiar and yet... it is uncertain.”*

*“You’re speaking in riddles,”* Ilea replied.

*“Then I shall be plain.”*

With that, the being sent thoughts to Ilea’s mind – memories, feelings, and a figure. A black form with two white eyes. A Fae.

*“What about it?”* Ilea asked, unable to discern what the creature meant with all the thoughts and emotions. *“Are you a Fae?”*

*“You know of their kind, then?”* the being asked.

*“Yeah,”* Ilea replied, sending back some of her own memories. The process reminded her of selecting a bunch of pictures and emotions from her mind library.

The being remained quiet for a whole minute. *“It has not been in vain... to alert you of my presence. I am of a kind much unlike yourself or the Fae. And yet here, in this unknown place, I have found company. Would you help it?”*

*“Help it?”*

*“Yes. It has found itself in a bit of a conundrum.”*

*“There’s a Fae here?”* Ilea asked.

*“Yes, and I believe it has been corrupted,”* it said.

Ilea nodded lightly. *“Let me guess, it’s on the hundredth layer?”*

*“It is here, merely twice the distance between me and you. I have yet to alert anyone else of myself or them. But it seems you have helped them before.”*

*This thing knows I’ve helped them?*

*“Sure, I’ll check it out. What may I call you, by the way?”* Ilea asked.

*“Thank you. I am... of the Veiled Enavurin, young child. What are you?”*

*“I’m Ilea, a human. Two-legged monkey with a bigger brain, basically, though sometimes I’m not sure about that. Nice to meet you. Names aren’t a concept to you?”*

*“They hold no meaning to me. You may call me what you wish, should it help your monkey brain,”* the Enavurin said without a hint of mockery.

*“Then you are the Kraken of the Deep, ancient Enavurin of the Descent,”* Ilea said with a broad grin. *“Now tell me, where do I go?”*

Ilea didn't have a reason to doubt the creature, other than the fact it was a monster deep within one of the most dangerous dungeons she'd been in so far. It probably wanted to eat the Fae, if there even was one, but if there was a chance the thing was speaking the truth, Ilea wanted to give it the benefit of the doubt.

And being in its good graces could lead to some mind-blowing resistance training – quite literally.

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## Ancient Mind

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*“I should still be able to communicate with you until you reach the place. The layout of this... area is unfamiliar to me, yet I can guide you through it nonetheless,” the Enuvarian said.*

Ilea moved around, touching some of the walls. “Right direction?”

“Now, yes. It was at your current height. You should push farther,” the Enavurin said.

Ilea blinked through the wall and found a corridor of steel. A prominent stairwell led down, but she ignored it for now.

“You mentioned a mark – what did you mean by that?” Ilea asked, soon reaching a dead end.

“Ancient magic. Even to me, it was new. I found it on my own essence after several... talks with the excitable creature,” it replied. “Stop. Continue to starboard.”

“Starboard? You mean right?”

Ilea tapped the wall and tried blinking past it, but she couldn’t see anything with her sphere. *Doesn’t work*, she thought.

Instead, she ripped into the steel with her ash. It still resisted – in fact, it was the same material they had encountered in the seventh layer. Her ash, however, had gotten significantly more durable, and she also had some new tricks.

Her limbs’ assault stopped, and she formed a massive drill. It would take a while, but she immediately got better results from the steady pressure

and torque than from her limbs alone.

*I should just use drills on all my limbs*, she thought. She tried forming one, but after finding it difficult to keep the moving bit steady and compact, she decided to keep her normal spikes for now.

*“So my... essence is... marked?” Ilea asked. “I don’t like the sound of that. Didn’t even notice it.”*

*“You said... that you can heal. I have found it similar to healing, for it is a non-threatening form of mana intrusion. The marking changes nothing and is only visible to creatures able to see. It took me a long while to discern the change in even myself. An interesting puzzle.”*

*“What exactly is a long while for you?” Ilea asked, already a couple centimeters deep into the wall. “Is this the right spot, by the way? I don’t want to lose hours because I started in the wrong place.”*

*“It should be a good point to start. But I do not know how far you will have to go. Is the steel blocking your way?”*

“It is,” Ilea said.

*“As for your question, time holds little meaning to me, young Ilea. How do you calculate it? There are many forms of doing so,”* the Enavurin said.

Ilea focused on her drill and gave the Enavurin a quick rundown of how she thought of time.

The Enavurin was quiet for a moment. *“A peculiar method. What is the logic behind it? A deity you worship? Or an old system that was never replaced?”*

“Kind of a deity... the sun,” she said, continuing when a questioning emotion came her way. *“It’s a star, providing light, warmth, and energy. It’s usually a long fucking way from planets but visible in the sky.”* Ilea added a memory of an animated science video she once saw.

*“Interesting... does this realm have a sun as well?”* the Enavurin asked.

“Two, actually,” Ilea said, taking that to mean the Enavurin didn’t need any light.

*“I have only been here for three of your centuries. Even for you, that should be trivial.”*

Ilea nearly slipped with her drill.

*“Three centuries... are you kidding me? Humans usually live less than one,”* Ilea replied, smiling a moment later when a comforting emotion came her way. *“It’s fine, plenty of time to have a fun life.”*

“Fun?”

Ilea sent some memories its way of fighting, eating, sex, and whatever else she could think of that was fun.

*“How very interesting...”* the Enavurin said.

*“You don’t seem convinced.”*

*“Well, those would not be the kind of activities I would consider to be ‘fun’.”*

*“What do you do then? In all this time you have? I’d get bored sitting in a tank of water all day.”*

*“I would share memories, concepts, and emotions with you, but I do not believe your mind would be able to take it,”* the Enavurin replied.

*“I’d welcome some Mental Resistance training, actually. Though be warned, there will be an automatic reflection of some of the damage.”*

*“The second tier, I am aware. Yet I believe some of the concepts I may show you will be reflected. No harm will come my way.”*

“Go for it,” Ilea said, sending a reassuring emotion to the creature.

Pictures and feelings suddenly appeared in her mind, making her reel back. The drill spun to the side, dissipating as Ilea counter-healed the damage to her mind.

Insanity. The word was the only thing she could think of.

*“Yeah... well, I don’t think I could understand any of that even if I had a thousand years to study it,”* Ilea said, reforming her drill.

The mental equivalent of a chuckle reached her. *“Different beings have differing strengths and weaknesses. Not all possess the vast understanding our species has evolved, nor do they need to. Perhaps it was a way for us to live... without fun, the warmth of a star, or the thrill of hunting.”*

*“You don’t hunt? What do you eat, then?”* Ilea asked. *“No offense, but I’m picturing you as some sort of massive ancient octopus. The ones in the last layer tried to drown and eat me.”*

*“Sustenance is not necessary as long as there is... what do you call it? The energy that permeates us all, flows through all life, and gives us the power to think, to create.”*

A form appeared in Ilea’s mind, pretty much confirming her suspicion. Kraken, she thought.

*“I think you’re talking about mana,”* Ilea said. *“And I was serious about the Mental Resistance training. Can you just crudely attack me? Or with finesse. I’m trying to get more resistances to a higher level.”*

*“Mana... yes. It is all I truly need. As well as concepts, thoughts. Should I find all answers to all questions, I will cease to be.”* It paused for a moment. *“To what end, may I ask, do you wish to raise your levels? It is pain, suffering, and hardship, is it not?”*

*“It is... maybe it’s a weird drive we humans have. To strive for more. A deep hunger or desire. Maybe it’s because we normally don’t live very long. We need sustenance, desire things, food, and, well, fun. Though I can see that there would be little purpose to strive for change if you are perfectly satisfied with your own thoughts and mana,”* Ilea tried to reason. She continued drilling.

*“It is certainly... interesting. To communicate with one such as you,”* the creature said.

Then it started pushing against her mind.

Ilea healed against it, feeling the power even with her high resistance.

*“That’s... good... holy... shit,”* she stammered.

The creature had the finesse of Eve and the punch of a Mind Weaver – and then both of those tripled.

The attack ceased a moment later. *“Is it too powerful?”* the creature asked.

*“It’s fine, actually. Keep attacking, I can take it,”* Ilea said. *“If you can handle the reflected damage.”*

*“Attacking the Enavurin with mind magic is a foolish endeavor. Anything that does not reflect at all is not even considered a threat.”*

*“And I am?”* Ilea asked with a smile, feeling the magic weigh on her again.

*It can even attack me through rooms. Well, maybe it’s just the connection.*

*“I would have not considered you as such... yet you seem to have faced many that have reveled in their own superiority. I shall not end as one of them merely to satiate your unending hunger. A human, hmm.”*

### **‘ding’ Mental Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 17**

*Already, without reduction. The Kraken is nuts.*

*“Can... you... read... minds? Thoughts... memories?”* Ilea asked.

*“It would be difficult to explain this, seeing as you have little knowledge of this magic. Some surface thoughts can be grasped – ideas, mostly –*

*influenced by your desire to share them. Something you deem... secret or private is instinctively protected, even without a resistance to it. Complete domination would be required... with a potential rupture of the mind."*

*Yeah, let's not try that, Ilea thought.*

*"Stop," she said after a while, having broken through whatever enchantment had prevented her sphere from seeing past the wall.*

*The mental pressure vanished immediately. "Have you found it?"*

*"I found... something," Ilea said, her sphere revealing another hallway that extended beyond this part of the facility. She blinked inside, succeeding this time. "I'm in," she whispered as she dropped into a crouch.*

*"You are closer now, yes."*

*"How are you seeing me, by the way? Did you know I was there from the very beginning?" Ilea asked.*

*"You dropped something into the waters, disturbing my slumber. A pulse of mana alerted me to your presence, and when you responded to me, I could locate you. I can see your mind now."*

*"How very comforting," Ilea said with a grin.*

*"There is no need to fear me, not unless you wish me harm."*

*"I don't. But in case something comes up, just know that human minds sometimes jump to things we don't actually want to do or think."*

*"A lack of control of your mind can mean death. I suggest you remedy that."*

Several open doors lined the walls of the hallway, light coming from the magical lamps set into the ceiling above.

Ilea could already hear the snarls of a variety of beasts, subdued and dulled. Her sphere supplied her with the reason a moment later.

*Tubes?* she noted, walking into the closest hallway.

*"You are close. What do you see?"* the Enavurin asked.

*"Test tubes... a bunch of corrupted beasts, corpses, and some frothing and angry creatures,"* she replied, checking all the tubes. She killed the corrupted, all below level two hundred.

The majority of creatures, however, were already dead, restrained by the same type of metal that made up most of the facility.

A sudden emotion reached her mind when she killed the last of the thrashing creatures, a bug-like monster from the second layer.

*Fear?*

She blinked toward the origin of the telepathic message, somehow sensing the location.

“*You are there,*” the Enavurin said.

Ilea looked at the tank and saw a Fae floating within it, the whole right side of its body covered in corruption.

### **[Fae – lvl 103]**

*It's not yet overtaken,* she thought, cutting through the glass of the tank. She made sure the liquid stayed inside in case it had some sort of restraining effect on the corruption.

“Calm down,” she said, her ash reaching the creature and pushing healing mana into it. The corruption was now being kept at bay, but she couldn’t exactly rip the Fae in half to get rid of the growing ooze.

She tore the glass away, letting the water flow out now that her healing was keeping the corruption contained. But she had no idea what she was looking at within the body of the black-horned Fae.

The creature was about the size of her head, though much thinner. One white eye was staring at her, while the other was overgrown by pulsing orange and red veins.

Ilea noted that the creature wasn’t in distress anymore, and the sentiment she picked up within her sphere changed from fear to calm.

“You trust easily,” she commented.

The Fae didn’t respond in any way, just looking at her with the one large white abyss-like eye.

Ilea tried grasping its anatomy with her healing magic but only found herself growing more confused as time went on.

She looked down at the little creature in her hands. “Hmm... so, how do we go about this?” she murmured.

“*It's still alive but half taken over by corruption,*” she said to the Enavurin. “*I'd cut small parts of it away and just let the healing do the trick. Any other ideas?*”

“*Incredible... I am... reassured, now that I know it has not died,*” the being said.

“*You're not exactly helping,*” Ilea commented, now holding the Fae in her hands.

*“I do not know how to treat the corruption. Cutting away the infected tissue should be the best option.”*

“Fuck.” Ilea looked down. “Any way you can knock it unconscious with your mind magic? I don’t want to hurt the little guy.”

“Perhaps...” the Enavurin said.

Ilea tried to think of reasons not to trust the ancient being, but so far, it had done nothing to make her doubt its sincerity. Other than the fact that it was some weird-ass mind magic monster, but Ilea knew appearances could be deceiving.

“Do I have to get closer to you?” she asked, hoping the answer wouldn’t be a yes.

*“The enchantments have been broken... I can barely sense its mind next to yours. It is weak. Move away from it, five or six of your human steps. Can you still keep the corruption at bay from there?”*

“Sure,” Ilea said. She stepped away, using her ash to keep the Fae afloat next to the destroyed tank.

“It is done,” the Enavurin said after a moment.

Ilea noted the differences in the Fae through her healing skill. It didn’t breathe air, but the magic flow around it had calmed. “Can you keep it unconscious?”

“Yes, do what must be done,” the being said.

Ilea nodded and stayed where she was, using her sphere and ash to cut the corruption away while her healing continuously flowed into the creature. The Fae showed no reaction, but its white eye looked as if it had closed halfway.

*He’s fucking out. Glad I have a resistance to that,* she thought as she cut small pieces out of the Fae and healed them instantly, finding her own magic worked faster than the corruption could spread.

“We’ll get there, little guy, just be patient,” she murmured, focusing on the task.

## Strange Acquaintances

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It took nearly half an hour to restore the little Fae to a completely corruption-free state. Ilea worked fast and efficiently to make sure she was done before it woke up once more.

The Enavurin reassured her that it could keep the Fae unconscious for as long as she needed, but Ilea didn't know how the little creature perceived things around it. Or if mind magic had adverse effects if she was exposed to it for a long time.

She finished up and waited for a couple of minutes to see if she had missed any of the corruption.

Nothing spread.

*“Hey, Kraken. You can release the Fae now. I think I took care of it all.”*

*“As you wish, Ilea,”* it said, the magic vanishing.

Ilea moved the Fae closer to herself and carefully placed it in her hands. It seemed alright – its vitals were fine according to her healing skill.

“You there?” she asked, holding it up to her face.

Its hand lashed out and... booped her nose before it vanished, reappearing on the same spot but standing now.

Ilea had seen the devastating attack coming with her precognition but let it happen nonetheless.

*“How is it doing?”* the Enavurin asked.

“How you doing?” Ilea asked, locking eyes with the Fae.

It jumped up and did a little pirouette before it landed and bowed to her.

*“He, or she, or whatever gender it has, is fine,”* Ilea said.

The Fae shook its head.

“I don’t know what you mean,” Ilea said.

*“I believe the Fae do not possess the concept of gender,”* the Kraken suggested. *“I am glad you are well, my friend.”*

A joyous emotion reached her.

*Is this a group chat now?*

Ilea rolled her eyes. *“Let me quickly check to see if there are more survivors,”* she said to the Enavurin, then looked at the Fae. “You can float, right?”

It turned its head to the side.

She spread her own wings and saw the creature nod in understanding.

Ilea let go of it and smiled before quickly checking the rest of the rooms. She hadn’t heard any noise coming from them, and her search only confirmed everything was dead.

*“You said a couple hundred years, right? Since whoever brought you here was here,”* Ilea said to the Enavurin after finding the Fae waiting for her in the main corridor.

It pointed at her.

“What is it?” Ilea asked.

Dulled thoughts reached her mind. Joy and want.

“You want something?” she asked, watching the thing float up to her face.

It pointed at her shoulder and vanished. When it reappeared, it was standing on it and looking at her.

“You can stay there, sure,” Ilea said. She watched it sit down, moving its legs as it tapped the ash with its little hands. *No fingers,* Ilea noted. *No mouth, either.*

*“A short time after I found myself here... so three hundred years. I do not have a perfect recollection of the time that has passed since – my slumbers have lasted for many years. Do you seek the creature? The source of this... corruption?”*

“We’ve lost quite a few people to the corruption already. Yeah, you could say that I seek the creature. What can you tell me about it?”

*“It felt cold to me. Unlike you or the Fae. Yet there was intent in its actions. Not a being of blood and flesh but one of steel and magic. Unlike anything I had perceived before.”*

*“How powerful was it? Compared to me and compared to you.”*

*“Its magic felt overwhelming, if that is sufficient information. I could go into details, but I doubt your mind would understand.”*

Ilea swore she heard a giggle coming from her right shoulder, but then again, no noise had been made. “Don’t fuck with me, little guy,” she whispered, and a feeling of innocence reached her mind. “You know what you did, Fae.”

*“I still don’t understand why a being of such power would take my blood and use it in such a crude manner.”*

*“I don’t know what being this was, but there are plenty of people who simply seek more power,”* Ilea said.

*“A desire to control. A fear of vulnerability. A fear of death. I understand, but this is different. A being wielding such magical prowess would have no difficulty creating something far more dangerous or simply exerting their will directly, should they wish to do so.”*

Ilea looked at the little Fae and sighed. “What have I gotten myself into?”

She felt like her understanding of magic and its possibilities were too limited to even guess at the purpose of the corruption or what this being was looking for in the Descent.

So she asked the Enavurin, sharing what she knew about the dungeon.

*“I have far too little information to come to a conclusion. It seems likely to me that this expedition you mentioned has either tampered with something or actively released this corruption, perhaps a work in progress or meant for something even I cannot discern.”*

Ilea thought about it as the being continued.

*“I have a favor to ask. Now that you have offered me this information, I worry that it correlates with the recent silence of a friend, if even the Fae could not resist this corruption.”*

*“Another corrupted being stuck somewhere in a tube?”*

Amusement reached her mind. “No. This being is very much unlike you or the Fae. It is of magic itself, pure and powerful.”

Ilea immediately thought of the lightning bird and suggested as much.

*“I know of the creature you speak of, but it is young and proud. Too proud to engage with one such as I. The friend I seek lies deeper still, where heat rises from the depths. A being of the sands.”*

*"I'll be delving deeper anyway, so I'll let you know if I meet your friend. I hope they've not fallen to the corruption."*

*"I hope so too, young human. And I bid you good fortune on this journey of yours."*

*"Good to meet you, Enavurin,"* Ilea said, then hesitated. *"What about you?"*

*"Me?"*

*"Do you not want to get out? Back to your home world? Or find out who trapped you here at least and get back at them?"*

*"I have pondered these questions for a long while. It is comfortable here, warm, and the pulse of life is strong. Hostile creatures will be waiting outside, terribly dull and territorial. I think I shall stay."*

*"You don't worry about the being that trapped you here at all? What if it returns?"* Ilea asked.

*"Then so it will be,"* the being replied. *"I'm growing tired. I think I will soon rest again."*

Ilea was about to retort when a thought came to her mind.

*No point.* She glanced at the Fae and gave it a slight nod. *I suppose you've tried already.*

The Fae was climbing her head in the meantime, using the ashen horns of her armor as supports.

*"So, if I understand correctly, you just want to hang out here, sleep, and think for the next... thousand years,"* Ilea said.

She got the mental version of an affirming grunt back.

A smile spread on her lips before she chuckled and then started laughing. The movement of her head made the Fae jiggle around as it tried to hold on. *"Very well. If that's what you want to do, then that's what you want to do."*

She calmed down again and sighed. *"And what do you want to do, little guy?"* she asked, talking to the Fae currently standing on her head.

It sat down and hugged her head from above.

*"You want to stay with me?"* she asked.

The creature nodded.

*"I know you guys are pretty tough, but don't do anything stupid, okay? I'll have to fight a lot of beasts."*

She got a feeling of joy from the Fae.

“Really? Your friend didn’t seem to think the same way. Did you know them? I found it in this dungeon, just a bunch of layers higher.”

The Fae didn’t seem to understand the question, tilting its head to the side.

“It’s fine,” Ilea said, then focused on the Enavurin again. “*Do you mind if I come and wake you up to have a chat sometime in the future?*”

“A little. But I understand that you are impatient, given your short lifespan. Thank you for your help with the Fae and for this conversation.”

“Good meeting you, ancient realm-traveling Kraken,” Ilea said, giving it a mental wave.

The Fae was rolling away now, moving along the steel floor toward the stairs leading down.

“*You’ll get dirty,*” Ilea said to it in her mind.

“*You’re dirty.*”

“Little fucker,” Ilea murmured with a smile. She followed the Fae down the stairs and found it lying at the bottom, sprawled out and waiting for her.

“Do you call yourselves Fae?” she asked the creature as it once again appeared on her shoulder. “Or do you have individual names, like Roger or Stephanie?”

It tilted its head again but didn’t reply in any meaningful way.

“I’ll call you ‘little guy’ – is that alright?”

The Fae nodded, accepting the status she’d placed upon him.

“Alright, little guy, do you have anything to share about whoever captured you and kept you here?” she asked, following the steps leading yet farther down.

Her Huntress skill picked up faint traces of magic now. While it was mostly gone, she was pretty sure her companions had come through here.

The Fae sent a flash of annoyance into her mind.

“You don’t think very fondly of them, I see,” Ilea said.

She headed down several flights of steel stairs toward the fifteenth layer of the Descent, some new things learned and a new companion by her side. She hoped the next one had a good fight waiting for her.

As the thought crossed her mind, Ilea could have sworn she’d heard a faint giggling sound coming from the Fae.

## Air Pressure

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“How did you get into the Descent? Were you taken from your home?” Ilea asked.

The Fae shook its head slightly.

“Why come here then?”

It seemed to think for an answer.

*Joy.*

The thought reached her mind, and she understood.

“You like to explore, find new things, feel new magic?” Ilea asked with a smile.

The Fae nodded.

“Me too. I also like to train my resistances. To get stronger, get a higher level, and all that.”

*Understand.*

“Do you mind if we teleport down? There seem to be a ton of stairs here,” she said, looking down into the darkness. The dim lights from higher in the facility did not reach far.

The Fae nodded.

Ilea blinked several times until she reached the bottom of the long decline. Any sight of the fourteenth layer in her sphere was gone.

*Finally, she thought, seeing a small door that exited into an open space.*

The Fae appeared a moment later, sitting on her shoulder once more.

“Number fifteen, any thoughts or detection?” she asked.

The area right in front of the entrance was mostly barren earth, partially frozen over. No trees or any vegetation was visible, nor any creatures or corpses.

*Careful.*

“I mean, everything down here is hundreds of levels higher than me. Of course we should be careful,” Ilea grinned, stepping out.

Crystal light shone down from the layer’s ceiling hundreds of meters above. It was quiet. There was no noise except for the wind as it moved over the frozen, dead ground.

Ilea walked up the incline of a small hill before the whole layer spread out in front of her.

Kilometers of barren land appeared before her, only the occasional shrub or stone disturbing the overwhelmingly boring landscape. No trees, bodies of water, mountains, or creatures.

She felt herself tense up slightly. *Open space, hmm? This might spell trouble. Nowhere to hide.*

As Ilea continued to observe, she found her assumption wasn’t entirely correct. There were broad gashes in the ground strewn around at random. She assumed they could provide cover to hide from monsters and attacks alike.

*Danger.*

The thought reached her mind just as a loud shriek made her look up. She didn’t freeze this time, but Ilea could feel the power in the challenge.

A bird flew closer as she waited, stopping a kilometer away. She had a hard time seeing it, but the magic emanating from the creature was noticeable even at that distance.

*A single monster.*

“I’ll charge it. Do what you want, but I suggest you try to get to the other side. If things go to shit, I’ll be fleeing to the next layer as well,” Ilea said.

The Fae nodded and vanished, similarly unaffected by the screech. Ilea smiled and spread her wings, her precognition not necessary for her to see the incoming blade of wind.

The spell cleaved through the air, reaching her in mere seconds. She jumped and moved her wings, the sound of the impact as the crescent blade slashed into the frozen earth arriving at the same time as the passing of the magic itself.

*From that distance, that's insane,* she thought, a broad grin tugging on her lips as she sped up, her eyes focused on the winged dot.

More spells came her way, much harder to dodge now due to her own speed working against her.

She had to resort to her blink when she was halfway to the creature, both the intensity and frequency of its attacks increasing, flashes of impacts echoing behind her.

As Ilea got closer, her eyes glimpsed more details as she weaved and blinked through the multitude of attacks. The thing looked like a four-legged bird with broad and powerful feathered wings and the head of a golden eagle.

She dodged downward, only to be caught by one of the blades. It cleaved through her ashen and bone armor alike, cutting deep into her flesh before it was finally stopped. Her second-tier Wind Resistance didn't seem to have helped much – both her speed and the incoming spells were too fast for a reasonable change in trajectory.

The hit unbalanced her, but the deep cut was already healing as her ash covered her once more. She spread ash before her and moved her wings ahead when a barrage of tiny needles sliced into her.

Like an unending storm of tiny cuts, the beast overwhelmed her defenses and ash regeneration. It didn't cease for several seconds, and Ilea was shredded. The thin and shallow cuts healed quickly, but a hundred more formed in turn.

She refrained from using her near-instant recovery quite yet in case it got worse. The mana she was absorbing from the attack easily paid for her healing.

*So much training in resilience, defense, resistances, healing. And what do these creatures do? Just get right through it all.*

The attack stopped, and Ilea spread her wings once more. Blood dripped to the ground as she wiped her face, new eyes forming before she blinked and focused.

Ilea sped up again, using her blink sporadically now. She let the attacks hit when necessary, moving her body in the slightest ways to let them cut into non-vital parts as she circled the creature.

She wasn't about to accept that some flying bird-dog could reduce her to nothing from such a distance.

It didn't even move from where it hovered, simply keeping its head locked on her as she moved.

Another set of spells cut through her, three blades, each slamming through her skin. One of them cut down to her bone, slicing it halfway through.

*As long as you can't mince me, I'll keep coming,* she thought, healing her body with her third tier. *Sentinel Core, my darling dear. If only you could absorb physical power...*

Ilea closed the distance repeatedly, only to be cut apart each time. The closer she got, the harder the magic hit and the more she wanted to slap the creature's beaked face.

Five times already she had tried to approach, though she'd got a little closer with each try. After another barrage of blades ripped through her body, Ilea was near enough to identify the creature.

### **[Storm Griffin – lvl ???]**

*Ah shit.*

Its eyes glinted with intelligence, looking at her with interest and apprehension.

She felt her bones crack before her left arm was ripped off and flung away.

*I've got more where that came from, little bird.*

Ilea blinked away and formed three ashen spears. Two were immediately slashed apart, but she launched the last one. She watched with anticipation as the spear rushed at the Griffin's head, perfectly aimed and timed between its attacks.

The Griffin looked on with annoyance before it moved its head to the side, the lance grazing its right wing without leaving a wound.

Her own body was hit then by a barrage of wind that sent her spiraling through the air, a hundred meters away from her target.

Yet she smiled, having finally got a hit in after nearly half an hour of trying, maybe longer.

*We could just keep going forever,* she mused, watching the creature move for the second time today. It rushed at her far faster than anything Ilea could muster herself, the air visibly displaced by the sudden explosive movement.

*Ah shit*, she thought, feeling the magical power that had manifested suddenly.

A spiraling wall of air moved toward her, Ilea blinking out of the way before she was sucked into the turmoil. Her body tumbled downward as her wings tried to stabilize her fall.

The Griffin was close, entering her sphere with its wings resting on its back. A wall of air slammed down on her, a single spike piercing her chest.

She was pushed down to the ground with immense speed before the impact slammed the invisible spike through her chest, ripping through flesh and bone alike.

The wall of wind pushed her further down into the earth, the very floor around her compressed under the weight and power of the magic.

Her heart lay splattered and useless below her, joined by whatever other organs had been squashed.

She watched as another gust of air moved toward her, the light from above now distorted and blurry. The Griffin hovered a hundred meters above.

The hole had encompassed nearly her entire torso, but her chest reformed. Yet even with the third tier, it didn't heal fast enough for the next attack.

The ground shook once more, and her body was compressed down into the frozen earth and stone. Blood flowed from every orifice before her instant regeneration restored her.

She blinked and reformed her armor, now moving away from the air blades coming in from above. The waves of magic rushed past her with much higher frequency now, the attacks that hit cutting deep into her body.

*Pissed it off...*

Ilea felt another gust coming from above. She blinked again and braced for the impact, several of her bones snapping before they were healed.

At least mana wasn't a problem, but she was definitely starting to worry a little. *Don't let it trap you*, she thought as she continued toward the other end of the vast open layer.

Ilea kept moving on foot, her wings only providing a bigger target for the wind magic that rained down regardless.

*Maybe I should have taken those four marks a little more seriously.*

She blinked again, but when she reappeared, her back was slashed apart by a dozen spikes, some penetrating as far as her organs.

Blood and air erupted out of her mouth, splattering against the inside of her helmet before she healed herself again.

She could see the wall of the layer now.

Ilea noted that the Griffin wasn't moving after her anymore, still hovering where it had been initially. Yet the attacks still came in with the same frequency.

She gritted her teeth, her legs carrying her over the terrain as the magic slashed into the ground around her, ashen limbs moving her to the side whenever possible. She jumped and leaped, ducked and rolled just to reduce the impacts.

When she finally reached the other side, Ilea breathed out. A damaged steel gate rested in the middle of the massive expansive wall, and Ilea blinked inside and rolled to a stop.

The steel was suddenly turned to shrapnel, blasted open and flying her way before she blinked once more, down this time.

Steel splinters clanged as they fell to the floor, pushed out of her ashen armor, and Ilea collapsed to one knee, breathing hard as the rest of her wounds healed quickly.

The Fae appeared in front of her with a questioning look.

*Safe?*

"Yeah," she said, leaning back against the wall behind her. "I think so." She looked up and didn't see any more attacks coming their way. "That was fucking awesome."

SEVENTY

## The Winds of Time

---

A giggling sound came from the Fae, or from somewhere close to it.

*Strong*, the Fae communicated, pointing at her.

“Yeah, I was so close to winning that,” Ilea said as she calmed down, meditation flowing through her.

*Fight again?* The Fae pointed back the way they had come from.

“Funny.”

She’d had to use her instant recovery so often that her mana was close to depleted. Even with the energy returned from the wind magic, the instant healing had drained her.

“That thing hit like a fucking truck, huh?” she said.

The Fae sat down on the floor and looked at her, not sending anything her way.

“I suppose I should look at the silver lining. I just survived a rampaging quadruple-mark beast. Even scratched it once,” she said with a smile. “Damn hard for anything to kill me at this point.”

A giggle came and went inside her mind. The Fae nodded before it bowed to her. *Protect*.

“You want to be protected?” Ilea asked, looking through the notifications she had gotten.

**‘ding’ Sentinel Reconstruction reaches 3rd lvl 21**

**‘ding’ Azarinth Awakening reaches 3rd lvl 19**

**‘ding’ Blink reaches 3rd lvl 15**

**‘ding’ Sentinel Core reaches 3rd lvl 14**

**‘ding’ Azarinth Fighting reaches 3rd lvl 19**

**‘ding’ Armor of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 21**

**‘ding’ Aspect of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 18**

**‘ding’ Keeper of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 15**

**‘ding’ Veteran reaches 2nd lvl 2**

**‘ding’ Veteran reaches 2nd lvl 3**

*Oh, so third-tier skills can go past level twenty? That’s good to know.*

She also wondered why her Veteran skill was leveling now, without any paralyzing effects remaining.

*Might just be a matter of facing insanely powerful beings. Or I offended it by not freezing. Holy shit...*

She suddenly stopped mid-thought.

*If I’d been frozen for a couple seconds when it went all out... Fuck, good thing I have the second tier now.*

**‘ding’ Wind Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 13**

**‘ding’ Wind Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 14**

*That ridiculous battle and damage was necessary for two levels against a creature with four question marks.*

*Thank fuck I have Avatar of Ash now, otherwise I’d have to spend decades getting everything up. Literally hundreds of centuries. Or I’d have to fight monsters of that power for each resistance. Time and time again.*

Not the worst fate, she surmised. But with Avatar of Ash, she could likely prepare for these kinds of fights or make them feasible in the first place.

“If that expedition even looks at this creature, they’re mush. Do you think we went too far?” Ilea said, looking at the little creature.

It crossed its tiny arms and looked down, tapping one of its feet that looked just as simple as its hands. No toes or claws, just a black stump.

*Thankful Protect.*

“Ah, now I get it. Sure, I guess you didn’t expect a Storm Griffin to show up either,” she said with a smile.

*Hiding Helpful.*

“Yeah, hiding would have probably helped. I just wanted to see if I can take it.”

*Joy.*

“Ready for the sixteenth?”

The Fae jumped up and twirled like a windmill.

“I like you,” she chuckled, watching the little windmill start to spin vertically as well.

*Pretty good control and balance,* she noted to herself before getting up.

The next layer came after another set of stairs, this time leading into an open space with pale blue light shining from crystal-like stone set in the ceiling.

It was a vast and expansive area with hills and rocks dotting the environment. A little less high-reaching than the previous layer.

The entrance was a broken steel gate about fifty meters above the ground. A stairway led down, but most of it was missing. What remained of the metal was lying down on the ground, torn apart.

*Monsters flexing their power by shredding through the steel.*

Looking around, she could see some moving creatures, even with the bad light and from this distance. Four-legged creatures about the size and shape of a panther. Not that she’d seen a panther, but she assumed them to be a little below her height.

She noticed they were prowling frantically or outright sprinting around.

“Ready?” she asked her tiny companion.

*Conquer!*

“Okay, calm down there, emperor,” she said with a smile and jumped down, spreading her wings to move her away from the steel wreckage.

A noise to her right made her turn, her eyes finding one of the creatures poised atop a boulder.

It growled and bared its sharp teeth. Orange pus seeped from various wounds on its large body, reaching Ilea’s chest in height and twice that in length. It had four reddish gray eyes and a maw that looked just a little too broad, its jaw unhinged to show several rows of teeth. Its body was covered in thick, near-black hide, with powerful muscles visible below. Short black hair showed on parts of the creature, especially atop and behind its head.

## [Corrupted Zanedin Hunter – lvl ???]

*Alright, here we go.*

Ilea watched the monster rush at her, but when the thing came within range of her limbs, it vanished without a trace.

Ilea felt the impact as teeth dug into her leg before the familiar sensation of a powerful curse flowed through her.

“Motherfucker!” she exclaimed, her limbs lashing down at it before it vanished once more.

There was no distortion in space, no precognition warning her of the attack either. *Or maybe it did*, she thought as she moved her ashen limbs closer to her, short-bladed tips forming before they started to spin around her body.

The creature’s teeth had penetrated her ash and bone armor, but the wound was shallow, healed quickly. She mostly ignored the curse eating away at her health and dulling her senses. Her powerful healing countered both effects.

She spread ash around herself, forming little flakes that she threw up with her manipulation.

The beast charged once more and vanished. This time, it appeared again ten meters away from her, several cuts showing on its body as it snarled. The flakes she had thrown up looked to have been teleported closer to the ground.

*Not teleported. It's not teleporting at all. It's using time magic.* Ilea smiled. *I was wondering why such a weak creature resided this deep in the dungeon.*

“Come, you’re frenzied. Get shredded.”

The beast, of course, wasn’t itself anymore, neither recognizing the taunt nor caring for its own wellbeing. It reappeared several times, its teeth slamming through her defenses each time and spreading the powerful curse through her body.

Ilea smiled when she found the beast impaled on her ash, her hands reaching out before she slammed her fist into it. A couple of punches, and it was over. The noise in her mind informed her about the kill, but then her precognition picked up on something.

*Interesting.*

She held the corpse up and watched with curious eyes as the body expanded, exploding in a flash of blood and bones.

The blast was powerful, washing away her ash and a chunk of her bone armor but not quite managing to get past her skin. She healed the damage quickly and reformed her ashen armor on top of it.

**‘ding’ You have defeated [Corrupted Zanedin Hunter – lvl 582]**

**‘ding’ Blood Magic Resistance reaches lvl 18**

**‘ding’ Time Magic Resistance reaches lvl 5**

**‘ding’ Time Magic Resistance reaches lvl 6**

*There we go,* she thought, spreading her wings and flying up to check the surroundings.

A susurration seemed to go through the creatures she had seen in the distance, groups turning their heads and growling before they rushed her way.

“Yes, come to me, my darlings... blood magic, explosions, curses, and time...”

She could hardly contain her joy as a grin spread across her face. All the resistance levels she would gain out of this! There were dozens of them – even Class levels weren’t out of the question.

And with the corruption flowing through them, she could just stand there and have her ash shred them. Either the element was unaffected, or it was only her mind that was being targeted by the time freeze. Either way, the frenzied creatures would embed themselves on her spikes.

*Who’s the shredder now?*

She flew away snickering, blinking several times before finding an isolated corrupted Zanedin Hunter. It wasn’t easy to win against her excitement, but more testing was required before she would face the larger groups.

The beast immediately turned her way and used its magic.

The next moment, Ilea felt a curse spread lightly from the new wound on her leg, which healed over immediately. The monster was injured already, sporting several deep gashes on its side, and one of its eyes was pierced.

*So my magic keeps working? Even healing? Is it just using time magic on my mind or... my perception? Or just my head? Or maybe they just can't freeze magic?*

She was pretty sure one of those things was the case.

Ilea turned her head and listened, hearing dozens of hasted paws pounding the dry earth. The creatures were fast – of course they were. Everything down here was.

“Come on, come on. I need the data,” Ilea said, smirking and watching the injured beast rush at her without a single care for its wounds. The corruption on her arm was pushed out of her body by her second-tier resistance.

She blanked out again momentarily, after which the beast was limping, though still growling. No wounds showed on her body. The curse, too, had little effect.

*Am I getting used to its attacks? I'm still subject to its time magic.*

Ilea was sure the hyena-like beast retained some of its instincts. Why would it even retreat after attacking? The corruption, however, made it continue.

*Let's see if I can take it*, she thought and deactivated her resistances.

When she came to again, her wounds were healing but more numerous. The curse had spread further through her, and corruption pulsed in each of the small wounds ripped open by the enemy's maw.

*Okay, maybe don't do that against the group*, she thought, reactivating all her resistances once more.

A splatter of blood and energy followed, as if it had teleported right in front of her. The blast shredded through her ash but this time stopped at the set of bone armor.

*Alright.*

She knew that the time magic was pretty powerful, taking her out of the fight for a split second – enough time for the monster to get a hit in. The beast could repeat the attack too, giving her little pause between bites.

Their defense, though, was poor, as they shredded themselves on her ash alone. The only thing she had to maintain was her healing, meaning she could theoretically do this until she grew tired or hungry.

Which was a long fucking time.

**‘ding’ You have defeated [Corrupted Zanedin Hunter – lvl 603]**

**‘ding’ Blast Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 12**  
**‘ding’ Blood Magic Resistance reaches lvl 19**  
**‘ding’ Blood Manipulation Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 11**  
**‘ding’ Curse Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 10**  
**‘ding’ Time Magic Resistance reaches lvl 7**  
**‘ding’ Time Magic Resistance reaches lvl 8**

“This is amazing, honestly,” she murmured to herself.

The beast exploded in a blast of blood magic, but the kill was still attributed to her. Thanks to her Avatar of Ash, her ash armor had gotten much stronger, and the Griffin had shown her that it was pretty difficult to kill her at this point.

*Each of the attacks gives me mana too, she mused. Now, can they essentially freeze me in time when more of them are around?*

That was the crucial piece of info she was missing right now. The difference between an insanely fine-tuned and effective training method for her and her abilities and, well, her death.

*Could also try flying,* she thought, jumping up when the first monsters closed the distance. She formed ashen spears and shot them down, only to find that the monsters simply reappeared next to them.

The noise of the additional explosion had increased the size of the group trying to keep up with her. *Not yet,* she thought, slamming down onto the ground amidst three of the creatures with a grin on her face, ashen blades placed on her limbs, and her armor spinning at high speed, ready to cut through anything that approached.

She saw the beasts before her, then they were injured, crippled, and then, finally, they exploded in showers of blood. Three explosions ripped through her armor and flesh, not reaching much deeper because of their placement.

*So they can’t freeze me completely. The intervals seemed a little smaller, but I could blink out if I had to.*

Ilea made for another group, and soon, five creatures were running at her from a different direction than she’d come from, their monstrous teeth bared and an insanity in their eyes wrought by the corruption of their blood.

The intervals were the same this time, despite the two additional creatures, confirming that there was some limit to their magic or how it could influence someone.

*No time mumbo jumbo – at least, not to ridiculous extents.* Ilea smiled, realizing with joy that the blood explosions hurt the creatures as well. Kills were still attributed to her, but perhaps with a lower experience ratio.

She didn't care and faced the next group with a broad grin. This time, she deactivated her resistances to see if she could take it.

Five of the creatures moved in at once. Her healing was running through her, and though her ashen armor was in place, her bone set was mostly destroyed. She didn't store it, taking the little reduced damage it would provide where the remaining pieces still protected her.

Wounds suddenly appeared on her, ripe with corruption and curses. She coughed up blood, finding her condition the same a moment later.

The beasts showed a dozen more cuts with every use of their magic, blood coloring her surroundings and the ashen spikes moving on her body.

Her chin was wet with blood, much of it flowing down and onto her chest. And yet her vitals remained fine, the bite wounds being somewhat shallow and the magic unable to compete against her resilience and healing, even without resistances at play.

Ilea couldn't tell if the spikes actually made the beasts bite less deep, but she imagined they weren't exactly easy to get past. To even injure her at all was an impressive feat in itself, really.

Once more, she saw them explode, the energy ripping through her and the creatures around. Two survived and used the opportune moment to get some nasty bites in while Ilea remained partially uncovered by ash, many of her blades and spikes washed away by the blasts.

She laughed, the noise interrupted by time magic before she activated Heart of Cinder. Two final blood explosions rattled through her, shredding her body down to the bone in parts as she tried to move the energy toward her with the help of her sphere. The remaining corruption was purged by the flames.

*Now this, this is what I'm looking for,* Ilea thought, watching the muscle and skin on her right arm reform, covered by ash again a moment later. The deep wounds on her body were healed, and all the magic was purged when her resistances reactivated. She looked through the levels from the last encounters and smiled.

**‘ding’ You have defeated [Corrupted Zanedin Hunter – lvl 512]**

...

**‘ding’ You have defeated [Corrupted Zanedin Hunter – lvl 623]**

**‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 330 – Five stat points awarded – One third-tier skill point awarded**

**‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 329 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ Azarinth Awakening reaches 3rd lvl 20**

**‘ding’ Sentinel Sphere reaches 3rd lvl 5**

**‘ding’ Sentinel Core reaches 3rd lvl 15**

**‘ding’ Azarinth Fighting reaches 3rd lvl 20**

**‘ding’ Aspect of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 19**

**‘ding’ True Ash Creation reaches 3rd lvl 17**

**‘ding’ True Ash Creation reaches 3rd lvl 18**

**‘ding’ Ash and Ember Unity reaches 3rd lvl 16**

**‘ding’ Ash and Ember Unity reaches 3rd lvl 17**

**‘ding’ Avatar of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 7**

**‘ding’ Avatar of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 8**

**‘ding’ Blast Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 13**

**‘ding’ Blast Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 14**

**‘ding’ Blood Magic Resistance reaches lvl 20**

**‘ding’ Blood Manipulation Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 12**

**‘ding’ Curse Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 11**

**‘ding’ Curse Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 12**

**‘ding’ Time Magic Resistance reaches lvl 9**

**...**

**‘ding’ Time Magic Resistance reaches lvl 13**

*Yeah, I think I’ll clear this one.*

## Hunting Grounds

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Ilea put her new stat points into Endurance and then she spread her wings once more, flying up to avoid the oncoming horde.

The growls and roars made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up, despite the fact that she'd just shredded over ten of them. The level difference and sheer power the beasts emanated still had an effect on her body and mind, or perhaps it was another ability she hadn't recognized yet. The lack of resistance or Veteran levels didn't support that theory, though.

She hoped that the others had made it through here without issue. Her sphere was still inactive, so she was hoping for the best.

She flew silently through the cavern, the blue light barely enough to illuminate the moving creatures on the ground. Ilea was somewhat confident that they would lose her quickly in the vast space.

*Another third-tier point.*

**3rd-tier skill points available [The Azarinth Sentinel]: 1**

**Skills available for 3rd-tier advancement in [The Azarinth Sentinel]:**

- **Sentinel Huntress**
- **Azarinth Perception**

*The latter probably saved my life earlier this week, she thought.* Sentinel Huntress was her only tracking skill, and while it was certainly

useful, it fell behind in sheer power compared to most of her other skills. It was more a utility skill and less one to help her punch through an opponent's head. So, for now, she picked the more immediately useful ability.

**'ding' Azarinth Perception reaches 3rd lvl 1**

**Passive: Azarinth Perception – 3rd lvl 1:**

*Increases your perception and reflexes while fighting. To keep up with your faster-moving body, a healer of Azarinth has to control it.*

*2nd stage: Your perception spikes for two seconds, should you be about to receive a blow that would take 75% or more of your life. This can happen only once per hour.*

*3rd stage: Your resilience and speed are doubled during the spike in perception. You can now use it twice per hour.*

**Category: Body Enhancement**

Ilea read through the new enhancements and smiled. *Now I can take even more risks. Onward, then.*

She moved her wings, excited for the coming slaughter. Frenzied monsters that could hurt her but weren't exactly a danger to her life were basically just sacks of corrupted experience. Plus, rooting out corruption was one of the main reasons she was even here.

Her ability to fly allowed her to find groups rather easily too, seeing as the monsters made no effort to hide or organize due to their corrupted state.

*It's like this was left here as a gift for me,* she thought as she landed with her arms spread and a hundred blades moving on her armor.

Ilea completely ripped the hyena panther hybrids apart. Or, well, they ripped themselves apart. Her body was shredded by teeth and claws in turn, though the latter had a hard time penetrating her armor.

Corruption, curses, and blood magic devastated her body, but nothing quite reached the destructive force of the Lightning Elemental or the Griffin she had faced before. At this point, she was pretty sure a Praetorian wouldn't pose much of a challenge to her anymore. With all the skill levels and third-tier upgrades she had gotten in the meantime, Ilea was pretty confident.

*Even two might not pose a challenge,* she thought with a smile. Many of the Zenadin Hunters were higher in level than Praetorians, but she hardly

considered them equals. *Can't wait to try.*

The last of the group's monsters exploded in a gory firework display of guts, blood, and bone. She turned her head to the side as the visceral goop splattered onto her, infecting more of her cut-open and exposed body with corruption.

Ilea activated her resistances again, pushing back the orange veins forming on and within her.

Hundreds of the beasts still remained, prowling along the frozen tundra, bathed in the dull blue light shining down on them. She went on to slaughter four more groups in what felt like around twenty minutes, give or take, considering the time magic.

Finally, Ilea found a ledge jutting out of the cavern wall and summoned herself a well-deserved meal, be it breakfast, lunch, or dinner. Time had no meaning below the surface. Not to her, at least.

**‘ding’ You have defeated [Corrupted Zanedin Hunter – lvl 630]**

...

**‘ding’ You have defeated [Corrupted Zanedin Hunter – lvl 598]**

**‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 331 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 330 – Five stat points awarded – One third-tier skill point awarded**

**‘ding’ Sentinel Reconstruction reaches 3rd lvl 22**

**‘ding’ Sentinel Core reaches 3rd lvl 16**

**‘ding’ True Ash Creation reaches 3rd lvl 19**

**‘ding’ Ash and Ember Unity reaches 3rd lvl 18**

**‘ding’ Avatar of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 9**

**‘ding’ Keeper of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 16**

**‘ding’ Blast Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 15**

**‘ding’ Blast Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 16**

**‘ding’ Blood Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 1**

**Blood Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 1**

*The arts of blood manipulation can be deceptive and dangerous to both ally and foe. You have stood against the old magic and lived. Next time, your chance of survival will be even higher.*

*2nd stage: Masters of this ancient art have found ways to use the very essence of your life against you. With sheer ferocity, you have shown that not every creature born of blood is prey alone. They will find it a challenge to invade and use what belongs to you alone.*

**‘ding’ Blood Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 2**

**‘ding’ Blood Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 3**

**‘ding’ Blood Manipulation Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 13**

**‘ding’ Blood Manipulation Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 14**

**‘ding’ Curse Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 13**

...

**‘ding’ Curse Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 15**

**‘ding’ Time Magic Resistance reaches lvl 14**

...

**‘ding’ Time Magic Resistance reaches lvl 19**

*Fewer Class skill levels than before, despite more kills. Maybe I should use Monster Hunter more. Should be easy to level it here against these ridiculous beasts.*

The new addition to her Blood Magic Resistance likely meant a defense against its intrusive nature, the way Edwin had used it against her in their training.

Overall, it seemed her resistance level gains were slowing down. Those in the second stage, at least.

*Show me the third-tier points, my dear,* she said in her mind as she took another bite.

**3rd-tier skill points available [Kin of Ash]: 1**

**Skills available for 3rd-tier advancement in [Kin of Ash]:**

**- Ashen Wings**

**- Eyes of Ash**

*Not much left, hmm?*

Ilea was intrigued by what the bonus to her ashen eyes would be, but having faced the elemental and the Griffin, she realized she could do with an upgrade to her wings.

***'ding' Ashen Wings reaches 3rd lvl 1***

**Passive: Ashen Wings – 3rd lvl 1**

**Your understanding of ash allows you to form wings from ash and ember. Strike your enemies from above and close the distance to deliver your wrath.**

**2nd stage: Your wings become more dense and tangible, able to help you defend and attack.**

**3rd stage: Ash Creation and Unity prove you are above the rest. Shape and form your wings to your liking and control them directly. An added tail shall make you one with the skies above, no longer a mere human imitating flight but one who revels in it. You may charge your wings with mana and stamina to dramatically increase your flight velocity at the cost of heavily reduced control.**

**Category: Body Enhancement – Ashen Magic**

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## Taking Flight

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*Nice.*

She hurriedly formed her wings and started experimenting, finding her ability to change and shape them just as proficient as her normal control of ash.

There were limits, of course. Her wings couldn't be two massive hands or enlarged copies of her head. They had to stay wings.

Otherwise, though, she could apparently go nuts. She made one with a feathery form and then another with a more leathery design. One angelic, one demonic, though, due to being formed by ash, they lacked some of the iconic textures and colors they would normally possess.

Ilea found she could even change the size, though not by very much.

She admired the new addition to her back: a tail of ash growing out where her spine ended. This, too, she could form and change a little.

*I'll have to think of a theme. Draconic, maybe? Hmm... a little too conventional, isn't it? Yet I've killed Wyverns and Drakes already. I do like feathers, and the ashen ones do look pretty cool,* she mused, looking at the changing forms.

They seemed to flow and grow seamlessly into her armor. By now, she looked more like a being of ash than a human.

*An ash fiend, or, well, Kin of Ash, I suppose.*

She chuckled at her own joke and tried out some other forms, one quite akin to a fighter jet from Earth. It felt very much out of place in the setting

as well as unwieldy.

She jumped up and did a somersault, using her new tail to guide her movement.

*What?*

She jumped again – higher, this time, moving her wings twice before rushing down to the small ledge. The difference wasn't just noticeable – it felt like day and night.

*The flavor text didn't lie, hmm? she thought. Did I really think I could fly? Well, why would I have doubted myself? I could keep up with flying creatures, could hunt and kill them. But this...*

The movement had changed. Her usual speed and precision, as if she was fighting something hand to hand, now applied to her flight. Her wings had already been superior in some ways, but now, she doubted there would ever be a reason to remain on the ground if there was enough space.

*Well.* Ilea landed and changed the shape of her wings again to a more aggressive design. Spikes and straight lines gave it a pseudo-futuristic feel while still somewhat fitting the magic creatures all around. *Hmm, not perfect, but I like it.*

A decision would be difficult, but Ilea didn't have to make one. The change was near instant, just as if she were forming and moving an ashen limb. Force of habit, and some level of comfort, would keep her moving on the ground – that much she knew. Yet she knew just as much that flying didn't feel like a novelty anymore, like something she shouldn't be able to do, only achieved through the magic of this world.

But now, she felt in control. As if she'd always had wings to traverse the skies, to move through and feel the air around her.

*It's not just the tail, is it?* she wondered.

Ilea found it rather easy to move her new appendage. Easier even than her ashen limbs, which felt pretty natural to her by now. Her control remained even after twirling her tail up near her lower back. Mostly, at least. It also added a noticeable increase to her dexterity, but her wings themselves felt different too.

*Oh wait, I also have a speed-up thing.*

It took a couple of seconds for the aspect to activate. She felt how energy permeated the powerful wings on her back, heavier now than a moment before, brimming with light in the sight of her sphere.

She shot off when they were ready, her enhanced body, coupled with her second-tier Wind Resistance, easily ignoring the forces pushing against her as she sped through the layer, flying several hundred meters above the creatures prowling below.

Ilea reached the other end in less than a minute, unsure exactly how fast she had flown. Trying to stop the skill caused a bit of a problem when she realized it had a wind-down too. She spread her wings to slow down, but the momentum was simply too much, sending her crashing into the rock on the other side of the layer. Her form cracked the stone and dug deep, but she found little damage was done to either her armor or the body within.

*I could use this to attack, just fucking slam into things.* She laughed as she ripped herself free of the stone prison around her. *Just have to make sure I'm harder than anything I hit.*

If she were being honest, even that wouldn't matter much with her regeneration. She chuckled at the thought of a powerful being, hit suddenly by a fast-moving human that splattered all over them.

*I could become an ashen drill or just form a spike before I fling myself at targets.*

Moving her limbs around her like Shredders with the added initial torque and power of a massive drill could seriously damage any oversized beasts. The Veramath wouldn't have stood a chance like that, Ilea immediately punching into its brain like a human-sized bullet.

She could see it now. Ilea, the regenerating human cannonball.

Perhaps she was a little too ambitious, but she felt the idea at least had merit. With her steadily increasing ash control and density, she could do whatever she wanted with it. The drill spears had already proved more than just usable, taking out level six hundred monsters in single strikes, albeit hitting their weak spots. The Shredder imitation, now more akin to bladed armor, had taken out creatures capable of using time magic to freeze her perception.

*Aiming it is going to be hard, though.* She frowned. There really was a sharp decline in control as soon as the speed boost activated – barely any correction was possible.

*I guess I'll have enough opportunities to test it. The charge time alone would make it unsuitable against most enemies I've already engaged.*

She invested her new stat points into Wisdom as her secondary stats were nearly where she wanted them. She marveled at her wings again,

moving her tail as she twirled in the air.

*If only I had a more thorough ranged arsenal and a focus on such skills. Beautiful!*

The thought reached her mind and reminded her that the Fae had been watching everything from a safe distance, both the fighting and now her flight evolution.

“You think so?” Ilea asked with a smile. “I think so too.”

She spread her dark wings with their futuristic pseudo-feather design before rushing downward, eyes peeled, to find another unsuspecting group of monsters.

\* \* \*

Hana held her breath as they came upon the destroyed camp. She could smell the corruption and venom. This was where things had gone wrong.

Relly, the warrior’d had rescued, had bent a somewhat intact piece of armor to his liking. One they had found on a dead sorcerer an hour prior. It now covered a large part of his chest, protecting some vitals.

*A useless effort.* If one of the creatures struck him there, it would make little difference. And still, he had donned it, had smirked with a glint of pride. *Ridiculous. Such confidence in the face of certain death. I can only follow suit.* Hana’s reptilian face gave a broad grin at the thought.

Carul, the mage they had found on the way was less enthusiastic about their endeavors. He hid them well, though – so far, no creature had found them under his magic cloak. His opinions on the misguided “suicidal,” “idiotic,” and “prideful” wish to deal with the corruption were less of a mystery. The Awakened often reminded them of his thoughts, yet he had still remained.

*Of course he has,* Hana thought, glancing back at the creature. *Alone, he is dead.*

She’d been surprised at Jonna’s lack of complaining. The woman wasn’t exactly known for being quiet. And yet here, she barely said a word. Hana could smell the fear emanating from her, could see it in her human eyes. An understandable emotion, especially from someone of such a weak species.

She had to remind herself that it was a human who had bested her last, not one of a noble and respected line of Awakened or Feynor. Yet she knew

well that one outlier didn't change the ways of the world. The only reason humans hadn't been overrun by anything else were their high numbers, their powerful defenses and enchantments, and their ability to work in formations that few others could match.

Hana knew this to be the truth. Many respectable warriors had confirmed it. Some less well-educated creatures simply laughed at the weak essence in the human Plains, their territory undesirable and unwanted.

They were silent as they reached the last gate before the camp. Hana remembered when they had entered it – an enchanter amongst them had disabled the magic placed on the doorway.

Now the gate was open, pried apart by powerful claws and fangs.

"What do you see?" Relly asked, turning to the mage among them.

His magic pulsed out before he lowered his head a little. "Four beings, yet they are not the same as the scorpions or worms. Each feels different in their own way, yet the same."

"Corrupted," Relly hissed as he prepared his chains. "We move in together and attract them. Carul, if you can, make sure nothing hears the commotion. We deal with them as quickly as possible."

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## Games

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Ilea cleaned herself off once more, sitting down on a boulder amidst the carnage nearly five hours of battle had caused. A plethora of wounds were healing, the corruption overcome.

The only thing that remained of hundreds of monsters were splatters of blood, bone, and corruption. A true massacre. Not quite to the extent of the first layer, where thousands of corpses littered the battlefield, but everything here was her work alone.

Hers and the Fae's.

She watched it as it dodged and weaved through the attacks of the ashen form Ilea had conjured and controlled. An exact copy of the Fae, and, other than the missing white eyes, nearly of the same color as well.

"You can use magic, you know," she said, for the third time that day already.

No reaction came from the being, so she tried something else. Small tendrils of ash came out of her ashen Fae, with additional small spears forming above its head. They rushed out to attack the creature as it started to teleport numerous times in quick succession.

One spear simply vanished before it hit its head. A chunk of the ashen Fae suddenly quivered, its head imploding with a powerful force before it vanished entirely.

She had watched the entire thing in her sphere and smiled before she jumped up and clapped, dropping her dinner. Two ashen limbs caught the

plate.

The Fae looked dejected at first, turning its head before it realized Ilea seemed joyous. A giggle reached her mind as well as a questioning thought.

She smiled and pointed at herself, forming a copy of her arm with ash before she made it implode in a similar way, the ash vanishing right after.

The Fae seemed to be thinking before it reached a conclusion, tapping a balled fist into the palm of its other hand. Not that there was more than a palm in the first place.

*Certain?*

“Yes, certain. You’ve seen me destroy those creatures. I doubt you could harm me in a major way,” Ilea said with a broad grin, her ashen armor retracting to her back. Her bone set was regenerating nicely, another chunk added back every minute.

*I’m really not giving it enough credit. The way I fight just leads to non-regenerative armor being completely useless.*

Ilea doubted there were a lot of materials in the world that could withstand the continuous abuse she put her defenses under. Armor that regenerated more quickly or something like an energy shield would probably provide the best result for her, but right now, this was what she had.

“Do it,” she said with conviction, giving the Fae a look.

The Fae turned its white eyes on her before a familiar feeling of void magic started pressing into her arm.

She simply waited, her resistance skill active as well as her defenses.

Other than a feeling of somewhat powerful pressure, nothing happened. Finally, the magic ceased, and the Fae hovered down a couple of centimeters, head lowered.

*Sad.*

*Expected.*

Ilea laughed as soon as the thoughts reached her mind. She deactivated her armor and resistance before she tapped the Fae on its brow.

“Once more,” she said in a quiet tone, an expectant look on her face.

The creature seemed to understand, focusing on its magic once more.

This time, there was a reaction. Ilea smirked at the creature as she felt the attack with her precognition. It was far more powerful than before.

“You little shit,” she murmured as her arm imploded with a sickening squelch.

Her bone resisted the magic, but the muscle and flesh above were smashed to a pulp.

She heard the giggle in her mind as the Fae twirled with an innocent aura.

“It’s healed already. Do it again,” Ilea said, watching as the creature stopped and turned its head to the side.

*Joy.*

“Yes, I know you like to see things ex- or implode,” Ilea said, feeling her arm once more squeezed together by an unnatural force.

The Fae attacked her five more times before it stopped, looking at her with its big white eyes. It lifted a hand and pointed at one of its eyes.

“My eyes? You want to implode my eyes?”

The Fae looked at her.

Ilea moved her hand near her eyes and squeezed it shut, adding a noise.

The Fae nodded slowly.

## Magic

---

Ilea's vision went black once more as her eye was ripped out of its socket again. She couldn't quite decide yet if the joyous giggles in her mind were terrifying or endearing. Maybe both.

*Quite powerful for someone at level one hundred*, she thought as she started reading through the backlog of notifications from the extended period of fighting.

**‘ding’ You have defeated [Corrupted Zanedin Hunter – lvl 583]**

...

**‘ding’ You have defeated [Corrupted Zanedin Hunter – lvl 622]**

**‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 332 – Five stat points awarded**

...

**‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 335 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 331 – Five stat points awarded**

...

**‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 334 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ Sentinel Reconstruction reaches 3rd lvl 23**

**‘ding’ Azarinth Awakening reaches 3rd lvl 21**

**‘ding’ Sentinel Sphere reaches 3rd lvl 6**  
**‘ding’ Sentinel Core reaches 3rd lvl 17**  
**‘ding’ Sentinel Core reaches 3rd lvl 18**  
**‘ding’ Azarinth Fighting reaches 3rd lvl 21**  
**‘ding’ Azarinth Perception reaches 3rd lvl 2**

**‘ding’ Armor of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 22**  
**‘ding’ Aspect of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 20**  
**‘ding’ True Ash Creation reaches 3rd lvl 20**  
**‘ding’ Heart of Cinder reaches 3rd lvl 11**  
**‘ding’ Ash and Ember Unity reaches 3rd lvl 19**  
**‘ding’ Ashen Wings reaches 3rd lvl 2**  
**‘ding’ Avatar of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 10**  
**‘ding’ Avatar of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 11**  
**‘ding’ Avatar of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 12**  
**‘ding’ Keeper of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 17**

**‘ding’ Monster Hunter reaches lvl 4**

...

**‘ding’ Monster Hunter reaches lvl 6**  
**‘ding’ Veteran reaches 2nd lvl 4**  
**‘ding’ Veteran reaches 2nd lvl 5**

**‘ding’ Blast Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 17**

...

**‘ding’ Blast Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 20**  
**‘ding’ Blood Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 4**  
...  
**‘ding’ Blood Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 10**  
**‘ding’ Blood Manipulation Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 15**  
...  
**‘ding’ Blood Manipulation Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 17**  
**‘ding’ Curse Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 16**

...

**‘ding’ Curse Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 20**  
**‘ding’ Time Magic Resistance reaches lvl 20**  
**‘ding’ Time Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 1**

### ***Time Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 1***

***The intricacies of time magic are difficult to grasp, its secrets hidden forever from most who attempt the plunge. A rare few have managed to bend the elusive force to their will, making it a dangerous tool both for themselves and for their enemies.***

***2nd stage: While it certainly eludes your simple mind, your body has learned that the flows and waves of time are fickle. Too often bent and shrouded, you have found a center in it all. A calm in the sea of time. It will take a true master to disturb what you have found to be truth.***

*No wonder you elude me with those vague and fucky descriptions.*

Ilea wasn't truly annoyed – she was rather enjoying the banter between herself and her subconscious. At this point, it was the easiest explanation for the personal attacks.

***‘ding’ Time Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 2***

...

***‘ding’ Time Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 7***

*Back to insane leveling speeds, she thought with a grin, her eyes once more imploding. With her recovery active, the bleeding stopped nearly instantly.*

There were two ashen Fae now, each moving quickly through the air and trying to catch the real one. The small forms made it easier for her to control two at the same time. Their movements were simple as well.

For the first time in a while, she had jumped quite a few levels in a short period. Yet she felt that she would move on soon; the experience that the Zanedin Hunters provided was decreasing already.

*Now, where’s the layer with the level seven hundred version of you lads?*

A dozen or so creatures remained on the layer, moving alone or in groups of two or three on the fringes of the level. Far enough away that the loud battle hadn’t reached their ears.

Ilea made an ashen spear vanish right before it was about to hit the Fae. The ashen creatures followed, returned to the magic permeating the very air around them.

“You alright, little guy?” she asked, extending an ashen limb toward it.

*Tired.*

Its eyes were a little smaller now, partially closed as it drifted onto the ashen limb.

*Eat?*

“You want food?” Ilea asked, summoning one of Keyla’s meals.

The Fae shook its tiny head as it was moved closer to her.

“That’s a grave insult. If you were anything but a cute little Fae creature, I’d probably fight you for that,” Ilea said with a feigned warning tone.

*Eat.*

“I mean, go ahead if you need anything from me. Health, stamina, mana. I have it all,”

Ilea half-expected a massive maw to rip out chunks of her flesh. What happened was much less spectacular and gruesome. A simple mana drain.

She kept her resistance deactivated to make sure the Fae wouldn’t get damaged by her mana.

*No shit you’re hungry,* she thought, watching her resource drain by nearly twenty points per second.

Ilea soon realized that the creature had fallen asleep. Its six small dark wings rested on its back, sometimes quivering a little as it continued to drain mana from her.

*Is this going to wake some kind of maternal instincts?* she wondered. The Fae was cute, certainly. And also a highly respected being amongst ancient Awakened and probably not something she should take as lightly as she did.

*As well as a great many other things,* she thought with a smile.

The fact that it could injure her without defenses was undoubtedly out of the ordinary. A level one hundred creature.

Ilea was pretty sure her own existence was more than a bit of an outlier as well. People had already freaked out at her quick advancement to level two hundred. Now, she was three thirty and beyond any sapient creature she had met or identified so far.

She decided to ignore it. The feeling of being special or different. Ilea had been taken from Earth and brought here. She had paved her way and had settled into a more comfortable self. She enjoyed it, and she would make her own decisions, would find her own answers.

And so she petted the little Fae. Its head was composed of a black material that seemed to absorb the very light around it. It felt like nothing she had ever felt before or could categorize in any way.

The experience was weird, and she let go of it again. Her mind was whirling, trying to find a way to understand and make sense of what her fingers had touched.

It had been a long time since she'd felt like something really deserved the name 'magic'. The elemental had come close, and perhaps her feelings would change if she could actually touch it, but this Fae really deserved its mythical status.

*Great, now I want to touch that lightning bird.*

Ilea tapped her leg with a finger as she checked the notifications she had received from the eye-popping game.

**'ding' You have learned the general skill – Space Magic Resistance – lvl 1  
Space Magic Resistance – lvl 1**

**Most who try to chase this elusive school of magic will find and choose the void instead. You have fought a being of truly peculiar making, have faced and survived its spells, and may count yourself amongst the few to call this skill their own.**

**'ding' Space Magic Resistance reaches lvl 2**

*Hmm, I was sure that was void magic. Didn't feel any different to what Maria did to me.*

She spread her wings and looked for some of the remaining creatures. It didn't take long, but she didn't want to engage them while the Fae was unconscious.

"Hey, wake up, little guy. I'm going to train a little more," she said.

No reaction graced her.

"You can watch me get injured," she added, seeing its wings twitch a tiny bit. "Blood and guts."

It slowly woke, eyes opening as it took in its surroundings.

*I knew you heard me, Ilea thought, but she couldn't be mad at the cute little thing. I didn't think this was supposed to happen until my mid-thirties... Oh well, let's cap out some more resistances and then move on.*

This time, she let the creatures attack without any ashen blades moving around her. She noted that with her Time Magic Resistance active, the skips

didn't happen anymore. It seemed the monsters weren't considered true masters of the magic.

*Good to know, I guess.*

When she deactivated her defenses once more, the skips started happening again. Four of the creatures dug into her flesh as she stood and healed. Yet again, Ilea thanked Pain Tolerance for making this opportunity feasible.

Had it not been for the skill, she'd be reduced to a quivering mess of tears and sorrow in a matter of seconds. Most people likely would, their bodies and brains made to protect themselves. Not to stand in fire or smile amidst four rabid corrupted magical creatures that tore and bit into one's body.

Ilea blinked up from time to time, reactivating her resistances to cleanse her body of the vile orange goo. The Fae watched all the while, hovering a couple of meters to her side.

*Just a little bit creepy*, she noted before diving back down.

The curses had little effect on her by now, and she left her resistance active as it was capped at level twenty anyway. It was about time magic and blood manipulation now.

After around ten minutes, Ilea decided to add a bit of spice to the mix, summoning a bottle of poison and taking a sip. She glanced over to the Fae.

"Care to continue popping my eyes?" she asked, forming a copy of her head and turning an ashen eye to nothing. With her armor active, it would be more difficult, but she believed in the little Fae.

The Fae formed a fist and nodded. *Support!*

*Quite motivated, the little bugger*, she thought before blinking down again.

\* \* \*

She blinked up as her body recovered. Both her insides as well as her skin and muscles were pretty fucked up. Even with the curses' power vastly reduced, the beasts still had sharp teeth. Teeth that could penetrate ashen armor that even the combined effort of ten Hallowfort mages had a hard time getting through.

And that was before the upgrade to its density.

*I love this dungeon.*

By now, she felt like she had grown into her new evolutions.

She decided to continue until her Blood Manipulation Resistance reached level twenty in the second tier. Three levels wouldn't take much more time without the damage reduction and the active removal of the corruption.

Ilea wondered how someone without this additional ability could even train the resistance after reaching the second tier. *I haven't tried turning the effect off yet. Might work just like the Pain Tolerance one.*

Should there be a need to test some blood manipulation on her with the damage reduction present, as specific and unlikely as that scenario was, she would give it a shot.

The remaining training lasted three full hours, one for each level in Blood Manipulation Resistance. Her other skills leveled quite a bit more quickly. The main reason was her healing, which constantly fought against the spread of the corruption. Without it, even Ilea wouldn't have survived a Zanedin onslaught for long.

She flew up and motioned to her shoulder, flesh and ash reforming as the Fae appeared and sat down. It had little trouble staying balanced, even in flight. She was glad the creature at least seemed to understand the danger these monsters posed to it. And yet she had never felt discomfort or fear.

Ilea had located the exit and way to the seventeenth layer some time ago, a half-open gate sitting in the wall around sixty meters above the ground, hidden between large boulders.

When she was done, she hunted down the remaining corrupted creatures before she checked the fruits of her labor and pressed on.

**‘ding’ Monster Hunter reaches lvl 7**

...

**‘ding’ Monster Hunter reaches lvl 9**

**‘ding’ Veteran reaches 2nd lvl 6**

The taunts had no discernible effect on the monsters, but she still used it whenever possible. Their corruption had likely already fried their minds, and she was happy the skill even leveled at all.

**‘ding’ Blood Manipulation Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 18**

...

**‘ding’ Blood Manipulation Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 20**

**‘ding’ Poison Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 13**

**‘ding’ Poison Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 14**

**‘ding’ Space Magic Resistance reaches lvl 3**

**‘ding’ Space Magic Resistance reaches lvl 4**

**‘ding’ Time Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 8**

...

**‘ding’ Time Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 10**

She was surprised her Poison Resistance was leveling so slowly. The stuff was pretty fucking strong, after all. Then again, so were most of the other magics she was getting hit with.

The Fae had tried its best, but with her armor active, there was just too little damage being done, even with her resistances deactivated. She would find some time soon, in case the creature stayed around for another few days.

For now, she focused on the next layer.

Ilea wasn’t sure if she’d obtained sufficient power at this point to have the impact she’d had on the earlier layers. On the one hand, she had just slaughtered hundreds of level six hundred creatures alone, but on the other, the elemental and the Griffin had proved unbeatable. For now, at least.

It all depended on how far the expedition had gone, on how far the corruption had spread. And on where her team currently resided.

*Alright, so from now on, I’ll only engage monsters that are corrupted. I can come back whenever I need to check out the rest.*

“I’ll go find my friends now, alright, little guy?” she asked the Fae on her shoulder, landing in front of the slightly ajar steel gate.

*Violence?*

“Don’t worry, my dear. There will be plenty of violence either way,” she said with a grin, blinking past the gate.

## Ghosts

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Ilea and her Fae companion found themselves in an eerily quiet cavern. It expanded for kilometers in every direction, crystal growing on the numerous pillars that reached from the bottom to the top. Stalactites overgrown with the shiny mineral hung from the stone ceiling.

*Maybe the crystal is the real corruption here,* Ilea wondered as she looked up.

*Shiny.*

“Yeah, it’s pretty shiny. Do you want some?”

The Fae tilted its head, seemingly not quite understanding the question.

“Crystal,” she said, pointing up and then at the Fae.

It shook its head.

*Well... that was... something?*

Ilea chuckled to herself as she started walking through the layer. So far, no movement was visible at all.

*Sad.*

“Sad? You’re sad?”

The Fae didn’t react, its white eyes focused ahead.

They walked a couple of dozen meters farther before Ilea halted. She perceived something ahead of them. Her eyes didn’t inform her of the presence, but her sphere did. A humanoid shape without a face or discernible legs.

## [Spirit of Elysium – lvl ???]

Identify worked as soon as she focused on the skill through her sphere's perception.

The being didn't do anything, simply remaining where it was.

"Hey there," Ilea said and waved at the creature.

The Fae looked up at her before a giggling sound came into her head.

"Shut it. You should greet them too. It's rude to stare at a stranger," she reprimanded the creature, though she made sure a hint of joy remained in her voice.

The Fae stared at her for a moment before it turned and waved at the spirit.

The being, of course, did not wave back.

*Rude.*

"Yeah, maybe a little," Ilea said as she walked around the creature, leaving it alone for now. If it didn't attack her, she had no reason not to do the same.

She kept an eye on it through her sphere, but they were quickly past the thing.

"Weird. Was that why you said *sad* before? Because of them?" Ilea asked, seeing more of the spirits floating around.

She didn't get an answer.

The skeletons of various creatures and rusted gear that soon started to pop up didn't exactly create an inviting atmosphere. Her nose picked up very little, meaning most of these creatures had died a long time ago.

*Others made it this far, then,* she thought, picking up the broken handle of an axe or whatever weapon it had once been. A sniff didn't tell her anything about the thing.

She held it out to the Fae, who seemed interested. It grabbed the handle and held it, sitting down on her shoulder once again.

*Hmm,* she mused, continuing through the open cavern. More spirits showed themselves from time to time. None were hostile, and Ilea didn't want to be the first to initiate combat.

At first, the layer seemed like a wasteland without anything of interest. Just a deep underground cave. After exploring for a while, however, Ilea stumbled upon something different.

A temple of sorts, built with crude stone that blended into its surroundings. Different entirely than the steel facilities they'd found before. But it had been built by something intelligent.

Ilea also noted that there were no spirits nearby. It was almost as if they avoided the space. Carved into one of the walls near the entrance, she found a short message in Standard.

*Danger. Do not enter.*

Ilea ignored the message and immediately entered. She noted the smell of dried blood and rot when she stepped into the structure. Dust-covered skeletons lay in the corridor beyond.

"I hope I don't unleash more corruption or something," she whispered.

There were cadavers from a variety of creatures down here, most reminding her of species found within the last few layers above.

*Something lives here, and it hunts.*

A slight grin spread on her lips as she felt a faint presence. Something was stalking her.

"I want you to get to safety as soon as that thing attacks," Ilea said, nodding to the Fae on her shoulder.

The creature started floating next to her and nodded back.

*Close.*

"I feel it too," Ilea whispered.

She reached a central hall of stone. There was writing on one of the walls and an altar holding half-used candles and dust-covered artifacts. She narrowed her eyes and looked up at the writing. It wasn't a language she knew.

Ilea was ready when something jumped at her from the ceiling, both her sphere and precognition alerting her long before the creature got to her.

She blinked to the other end of the room and looked at the monster as it landed with graceful dexterity. Its whole presence screamed danger.

Ilea watched as it turned its distorted human body that looked elongated and unnatural. Its jaw was unhinged, revealing sharp and long teeth, the canines ridiculously broad and almost fully covered in dried blood.

Its eyes were thin vertical slits of black with some red coloration. Black greasy hair and a beard of the same color accentuated the pale skin. While rather thin, the body looked powerful nonetheless, with wiry muscle visible below the shreds of red, white, and gold that remained of its garb.

It reached nearly three meters in height, and both its hands and its feet were equipped with sharp but somewhat short nails.

### **[Fallen Hero – lvl ???]**

Its tongue moved out of its open maw, too large and full of teeth to close.

*Another remnant of the Red Church? Let's see what you can do, then.*

"Any intelligence left in there?" she asked, summoning a couple of chunks of meat and throwing them at the monster.

It completely ignored them, its eyes focused entirely on her.

"Didn't think that would work, but I suppose it was wo—"

She was cut off as she had to step to the side when the being appeared before her and slashed at her.

Its sharp nails brimmed with magic as a thin line of blood formed in front of them, cutting into the stone behind Ilea. Then she felt a sudden push against her mind as the creature rushed her.

As her Mental Resistance reduced the attack to a slight pain that healed quickly, Ilea jumped past the rotten benches and corpses in the hall while the Hero cut through it all close behind.

Ilea's ash cut deep into its skin, but she found that its wounds healed in mere moments.

*This is going to take a month,* she thought, still smiling as she continued to dodge.

Ilea found herself unable to dodge the next attack, so she decided to take it while she smashed her own fist into the creature's stomach. Five lines of blood slashed into her ash, digging deep but not penetrating to her second set of armor.

"That all you got?" she asked, her voice enhanced as her ash reformed.

The creature looked at her before its mouth opened a nearly imperceptible amount more. She dodged to the side when it bit down, but her body was somehow dragged toward the open mouth.

*Fuck that,* she thought and blinked, but her skill only took her a little farther away before the teeth bit into her outstretched arm covered in ash.

She immediately felt her health draining, a deep cold spreading into her body and mind. Its clawed hands dug into her sides as she charged Absolute Destruction.

The drain was already slowing down, and she identified the rest as a combination of mind magic and blood manipulation. It had dug into her flesh, its teeth grinding against her arm's bones.

*The draining sucks, plus it's got self-recovery...*

"You're nearly as annoying as I am," she said, sacrificing five hundred health and slamming her fist into its head, sending a thousand points of destructive mana into it with an added side-serving of heated embers.

The beast was ripped away from her arm, chunks of flesh and muscle going with it, before it staggered for a few steps.

Ilea healed her arm, her ashen armor covering the injuries immediately as well as the wounds on her sides. She stepped into the middle of the room and started charging her Heart of Cinder, sixteen ashen limbs fanning out, ready to deliver more destructive mana into the monster.

It recovered and went on all fours, glaring at her as it hissed. For the first time in their short battle, it seemed to look at her with apprehension.

Ilea glanced at her arm before she crouched and grinned. "Let's see who has the better recovery."

They exchanged dozens of hits in the next seconds, Ilea having a considerably easier time dodging the blood magic of the Fallen Hero than it had against sixteen moving ashen limbs.

Destruction didn't come into play often, but Storm of Cinders continued to burn into the creature. Each hit dealt a little more damage, continuing to rip away any defenses it had against mana intrusion.

Its blood magic claws now dug deeper into her flesh, easily penetrating her ashen armor whenever it managed to get in a hit. The mental pressure continued to increase, but it was nothing that would knock her out, so it could be ignored.

Neither of them showed any lasting wounds, their recovery enough to stitch together any cuts and heal any bruises formed from the constant attacks.

The being was wary about biting her, having learned of the consequences earlier, so it mostly dodged her attacks and used broad strikes from long range to counter her.

There was a short lull in their frenzy when the creature nearly cut through her neck, Ilea blinking away to heal the wound, covering it up with ash a split second later. The monster hissed, standing tall as it glared at her.

By now, the floor was covered in blood, flesh, and guts, but neither Ilea nor her foe looked worse for wear.

“Yeah, we’re going to be here for a while,” she said, glancing at the floating Fae above as she heard a giggle. Then she spread her wings and charged.

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## Hero

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Ilea reformed her arm as she jumped back, watching the Fallen Hero devour the limb it had managed to rip off.

Its recovery seemed to have no bounds, and neither did her own. She hadn't managed to get through its bones, but by now, Ilea was pretty sure she wouldn't have to.

Her own mana intrusion spells had been reduced to the occasional Storm of Cinders to preserve mana. She wouldn't hesitate to use her full power if it decided to grab her again, but the creature was wary now.

It looked at her, stopping its assault as it too seemed to focus on recovering lost mana and health.

Barely a minute had passed, but they had exchanged hundreds of blows. It was both terrifying and thrilling. To face a creature like this and live. Not just that, but to make it stop and reconsider her.

*I can recover from this. Let's see if it can too.*

She moved eight of her limbs around each arm, intertwining the spikes at their ends right on her fists. She blinked close, coming face to face with the creature and slamming her fist into its chest.

It clawed into hers in turn, its left arm cutting into her leg, getting a third of the way into her bone.

Ilea adjusted the spikes at the last moment and shredded past the Hero's ribs, completely squashing its heart. Moving the ash was nearly impossible as soon as it entered the body of an opponent, but lining it up just before

was sufficient. She trusted her Unity there, knowing the ash would find its target.

Teeth came down on her neck and bit deep, not quite severing her spine but getting close.

Ilea just grinned at the hideous creature as her left arm lashed out, a charged Absolute Destruction coupled with the physical power of her ash ripping through its shoulder. She grabbed onto its bicep and pulled, sacrificing some health to make herself just a little stronger.

Her legs pushed against its thighs as her wings pulled, wrenching herself free of the creature with one of its arms still stuck in her chest, her head hanging to the side with half her throat removed.

New tissue formed near instantly, her third-tier healing replacing the missing parts as she tore out its severed arm, throwing it to the side as her wings moved lazily.

The remains of its heart dripped from the combined eight spikes above her fists.

The being staggered back, nearly falling before it caught a nearby stone pillar with its one remaining arm. The second one was healing, but it looked painfully slow, blood still dripping from the violent wound.

The same was true for its chest. Ilea could see the wound close, but the heart within struggled to reform.

“Oh?” She enhanced her voice. “You’re slipping.”

She blinked close behind it. Her combined limbs punched through the tough muscle on its back, ripping through and trying to grab onto the spine.

The monster turned, a powerful swipe of blood magic slashing through her as an unending assault of mental magic battered her mind. It was enough to make her stagger back, forced to dart away as another swipe clawed through the air.

Ilea continued flying through the room, observing the now stationary monster slowly healing its grave wounds. Deep cuts, arteries, and bruises weren’t a problem, but it seemed that it had difficulties with its heart and missing limbs.

Ilea formed a dozen spears, sending them at the creature before she rushed in, tackling it as it bit into her with a frenzy, tearing chunks of flesh from her chest, neck, and face after getting through her armor.

Her right arm came down, ripping through the monster’s right shoulder. It took her two punches before she had to back off, her head nearly cleaved

entirely from her body. The same was true for the Hero's arm; a couple of slashes of her extended ashen limbs were enough to sever the remaining connecting tendons.

Ilea's wounds healed as she breathed out, spitting out blood. She coughed once as her lungs reformed, watching the creature with a bunch of meat in its maw and half an arm.

She didn't let up, attacking with her ashen limbs now that the Hero didn't have arms to fight back with. It charged and ran, teleporting from time to time to sink its teeth into her.

But it didn't matter.

Ilea flew through the small room with her third-tier wings as if it were an aerial battle. Third-tier healing won the fight, coupled with her second-tier resistances against everything the monster threw at her.

Without Blood Manipulation Resistance in the second tier, a single hit could have been fatal. Without the second tier of Blood Magic Resistance, she didn't know what the creature would have done to the blood in her body. Mental Resistance was crucial; a single second of mental shutdown would have been enough for it to rip her to shreds.

All her combined skills gave her the advantage, allowing her to be the one who regenerated quicker, dealing damage instead of taking it. All of them together allowed her to fly through the hall, dodging any attack that came her way as she twirled around the jumping Hero, its jaws its last remaining weapon.

It only took a couple more minutes.

Finally, the Hero fell, hitting the floor and sliding in the blood that now covered the ground before Ilea landed on it with a heavy thud. Her ash slashed into it, cutting through its neck and back before she ripped its spine from its bloodied body.

Heart of Cinder discharged into the heavily fire-resistant creature, burning it up from within as she threw the spine to the side.

Several charged two-handed strikes against its skull followed while her ashen limbs continued to tear out chunks of flesh, punching through all of its highly resistant and still-regenerating organs time and time again.

A last hit cracked the skull before it caved in, brain matter covering her ash-layered hands. Yet Ilea didn't stop, not until the being had turned into something barely resembling a once-living creature and the ding finally rang in her mind.

**‘ding’ You have defeated [Fallen Hero – lvl 753]**

**‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 336 – Five stat points awarded**

...

**‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 338 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 335 – Five stat points awarded**

...

**‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 338 – Five stat points awarded**

Ilea sat back and cast Heart of Cinder once more, burning and pushing the blood and guts away. Then she closed her eyes and activated meditation to deal with both her low mana as well as the smells and sight around her.

**‘ding’ Absolute Destruction reaches 3rd lvl 21**

**‘ding’ Sentinel Sphere reaches 3rd lvl 7**

**‘ding’ Sentinel Core reaches 3rd lvl 19**

**‘ding’ Azarinth Fighting reaches 3rd lvl 22**

**‘ding’ Azarinth Perception reaches 3rd lvl 3**

**‘ding’ Azarinth Reversal reaches 3rd lvl 16**

**‘ding’ Armor of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 23**

**‘ding’ Aspect of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 21**

**‘ding’ True Ash Creation reaches 3rd lvl 21**

**‘ding’ Heart of Cinder reaches 3rd lvl 12**

**‘ding’ Storm of Cinders reaches 3rd lvl 14**

**‘ding’ Storm of Cinders reaches 3rd lvl 15**

**‘ding’ Ash and Ember Unity reaches 3rd lvl 20**

**‘ding’ Ashen Wings reaches 3rd lvl 3**

**‘ding’ Avatar of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 13**

**‘ding’ Keeper of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 18**

Ilea heard the giggling in her mind as the Fae slowly floated down, clapping its hands menacingly.

*Joy!*

“I’m pretty fucking exhausted, not gonna lie,” Ilea said as she circulated healing mana through herself.

She kept checking the Hero’s remains, sending Heart of Cinder into the chunks of meat and bones whenever it was sufficiently charged, just to make sure.

If anything had a recovery as ridiculous as her, it was that.

**‘ding’ Monster Hunter reaches lvl 10**

**‘ding’ Veteran reaches 2nd lvl 7**

**‘ding’ Blood Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 11**

**‘ding’ Mental Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 18**

“You enjoyed the violence, it seems,” she said, letting her wings carry her up toward the Fae.

It landed on her shoulder and nodded.

*Beautiful.*

\* \* \*

Ilea spread her wings before speeding up and flying through the rest of the cavern.

The exits to the next layers were usually either straight down or ahead. Usually.

This time, she could see from pretty far away that there was a break in the crystal growth on the far wall. Likely where the way to level number eighteen was located.

She noted that some of the spirits floated even fifty meters above the ground, where she was currently flying. “Can you talk to them?” she asked the Fae.

It nodded a couple of seconds later, holding the weapon handle a little closer to its body.

“Want to talk about it?” she asked, finding it strangely easy to be open with the Fae. Then again, perhaps it wasn’t that strange, given how otherworldly the creature felt to her.

She let it be when it didn’t react, not about to pry. It was difficult enough having to deal with the lack of communication tools.

She landed near the cave's far end and could already see the steel gate that led out.

Her sphere picked up something when she got closer. Sentinel Huntress activated and let her know that her team had moved through here. Not too long ago, either.

There were also signs of a struggle – older, however, than the tracks her group had left behind.

Something was scratched into the stone right next to the gate, but Ilea couldn't read it.

She tapped the Fae with an ashen tendril. "Can you read that?" she asked, pointing at the scribbling.

The Fae nodded silently.

*Violence bad.*

*Disagree.*

"The first sentence is the translation?" Ilea asked, assuming the creature had added the second part.

The Fae nodded.

"Why do you understand me perfectly sometimes and then you just don't again? It's almost like you answer on a whim and ignore me when you feel like it," Ilea said, turning her head slightly toward the creature.

*Agree.*

"Asshat," she said with a smile.

The Fae giggled.

"Now I want some violence too," Ilea said and blinked past the door.

\* \* \*

Hana bit into the piece of wood Jonna had handed to her. She glanced at her arm, nearly overcome with corruption.

She nodded to Relly. The large saurian was watching her with an unsure expression. His armor had been destroyed again in the fight.

The more aggressive three corrupted had been taken down rather easily, but Krentin had certainly put up a fight.

*Just as I hoped he would,* Hana thought.

She was proud to have chosen him as a team leader, and it wouldn't have been right if his corrupted body hadn't nearly killed some of them. His

cunning and planning hadn't come into play this time, though, which was the main reason why their group had prevailed.

Hana gave the warrior a nod. Jonna's healing could keep the corruption at bay, but in the long term, there was only one thing that could be done.

Relly seemed to find some courage, gripping her blade before he lifted it above himself. The blade came down with all his strength, aimed rather well. It slashed into her arm, near the shoulder.

Hana bit through the wood and hissed. Her oversized blade wasn't exactly made for producing clean cuts. Most of the flesh was separated, however, and the bone was nearly sliced through.

Relly yanked the sword out and cut down again, separating the arm from her shoulder. She was glad he hadn't hesitated again.

Hana focused on the healing magic flowing through her, ignoring the pain from the severed arm and the bleeding. While this wasn't the first time she'd lost a limb, it wasn't exactly her favorite pastime. Jonna's magic could recover lost limbs if the injury wasn't older than a few weeks.

"We shouldn't remain here. The area is too open, there are bound to still be creatures nearby," Relly said, handing her blade back to her with a nod.

Jonna inspected every intersection, every door and room. She had an exceptional memory for places. Krentin had usually sketched a map as they explored dungeons, but in an emergency, he'd trusted the healer to find the way.

"We're approaching the core of this facility. If it is built in a symmetrical manner," Jonna commented, eyes focused on the dead scorpions nearby. Patrons of Torment, shredded by magic. At least five of them.

The group moved on through the corridors, avoiding any stray corrupted monsters until they reached a massive closed steel gate.

Three Patrons of Torment were crawling on the ground in front of it, occasionally clawing at the walls or hitting it with their spiked venom-filled tails. Deep gashes and dents showed in the metal.

"Can we take on three?" Relly asked in a whisper. "This is the core, is it not?"

Jonna nodded.

"I can't fight one alone," Hana admitted. As much as she wanted to run in there and battle the creatures, she wouldn't risk her group for a foolish

attempt. Krentin had explained the benefits of caution and calculated risks to her many a time. Some of it had stuck.

“I can’t fight them – they would rip me apart,” Jonna whispered.

“We could sneak past, teleport inside,” Relly said.

“We don’t know how thick the gate is or if there are enchantments in place against intrusion,” Hana said.

“Right,” Relly commented. “Perhaps there is another w—”

“Something is approaching,” Carul said, interrupting him. “I have just perceived them. They are... shrouded... I know that spell. We may have potential allies incoming,” he said, nodding back the way they had come.

“Let us not reveal ourselves until we know what or who we are dealing with,” Hana said, taking the lead. “There may be creatures here with similar spells.”

Jonna nodded.

“We shouldn’t meet them here, so close to the monsters,” Relly said.

They moved farther back through the steel corridors occasionally broken through by one of the Fang Shapers. None were close by anymore, at least.

“They are here,” Carul said in a whisper.

Hana couldn’t see anything.

“We have no choice,” Relly said and teleported out of their own shrouding spell’s influence.

He reappeared with open arms a couple of meters away from the group. Close enough that they could interfere should the shrouded being be an enemy.

“Greetings. I am a warrior of Hallowfort, and I ask you to reveal yourself,” Relly said in a confident voice.

*Not what I would have said,* Hana thought.

A few seconds passed before a shadow appeared, the shrouding veil lifted.

Hana’s eyes went wide as she glanced at the familiar forms of Catelyn and the first layer guardian, whose name she did not know.

“Relly,” Catelyn said, glancing over at Hana as she stepped out of the spell’s area of effect as well, followed by the others. “It is good to see you, truly.”

Catelyn looked at each of them and sighed, as if a weight had been lifted from her shoulders.

“I had nearly lost all hope,” she said, nodding to them all.

Hana laughed and walked over to Catelyn, glancing at her companions, one clad in armor, the other in robes, their faces hidden. There was a human too that she didn’t recognize.

**[Necromancer – ??]**

**[Mage – ??]**

**[Mage - ??]**

*Powerful beings*, she noted. *Who are they?*

She hadn’t seen either of them in Hallowfort before.

“The corruption, what happened?” Catelyn asked.

“You knew? Is that why you’re here?” Hana asked.

“It has spread throughout the dungeon. Corrupted creatures have risen to the first layer and attacked our settlements,” the guardian of the first layer said.

Hana gulped.

“All the way to the first layer,” Carul murmured.

“What can you tell me? And where are the others?” Catelyn asked.

“We’ve been recovering – we chose this facility as a place to set up camp for a while,” Relly said. “Reaching the twentieth layer... was difficult, even with all the preparation and concealing magic we had. Some of the beasts noticed our passing. The treasure was... underwhelming.”

Relly glanced between Hana and Catelyn, embarrassment obvious on his face. Then he breathed in and continued.

“We couldn’t go deeper, and we knew the way back would be arduous with the losses we’d already endured. Many wouldn’t return with empty hands. You know how it is. The leaders decided we should at least explore these facilities. Two days in, the monsters changed their behavior. They moved in a more aggressive way, driven by something beyond their instincts and hunger alone.”

“Someone triggered a trap,” one of Catelyn’s masked companions said. The other one hissed. It was a familiar sound to Hana, and she felt herself tense up.

“We think so too, or they found something they shouldn’t have,” Relly said. “Since the corruption spread, we’ve been trapped here.”

Catelyn listened to the saurian and gritted her teeth. “Foolishness,” she hissed, flames dancing on her form.

They were all quiet for a moment, staring at each other.

“Have you found a way to stop it? Or do you have any idea where it started?” one of the masked companions asked, his helmet adorned with antlers.

“Not yet. We were on our way to the core of this facility,” Jonna said, her voice shaking slightly. “Maybe there’s something there...”

Her voice trailed off as she stared at the ground, and Catelyn glanced at her companions.

“We have made it this far, and the corruption has spread already,” the guardian said.

“There may be more survivors, too,” Relly said hopefully. “Our group cannot face these creatures alone, but with you, it may be possible.”

“Then let us move – and let us hope we don’t unleash yet another calamity.”

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## Sunlight

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Lying prone on the steel floor right behind the gate that led into the eighteenth layer, Ilea squinted her eyes.

The gate was located a couple of dozen meters up from the ground floor of the next layer. It had been pried open from the bottom, prompting her to lie down and survey the scene for a moment.

The Fae was next to her head, bent on one knee with a hand on its nonexistent chin.

“What do you think?” she asked, her eyes scanning the bright landscape.

Ilea couldn’t tell anything about the bright light other than the fact that it was coming from above. Without her second-tier Light Magic Resistance, she would have certainly gone blind a couple of times already.

The landscape itself reminded her of the Isanna Desert. It looked wrong, however, the sand reflecting a little too much light. It looked too hard and flat. She also occasionally saw small spots flying high above the ground.

*Guess I can’t just fly up to get to safety for this one.*

A blink brought her out, and she quickly flew down to the ground. The surface looked even weirder from close up, and when she landed, it cracked slightly under her weight.

*It does look like sand, though.* Ilea dug a little deeper with some of her limbs and found normal sand farther down. *Hmm.*

*Heat.*

She looked over at the Fae floating a meter away.

“Ah, I see,” she said, looking up and spotting one of the flying forms approaching. “We’ve got a visitor. Stay behind me.”

The Fae listened and moved close to her back.

Ilea spread her wings and tail before flying up a couple of meters.

She could see the creature better now. It had an elongated vertical body that resembled a plant’s roots. Wings spread behind it, made of the same thin root-like tendrils as its body that intertwined into each other. Oddly, its speed didn’t correspond to the slow and eerie movements of its wings at all. Not that the thin tendrils provided enough physical resistance to create working wings in the first place.

The being was off-white in color, akin to faded bark or bone. Its head reminded Ilea of dice, a single ten-sided one, perhaps, but smooth.

It stopped a dozen meters away. The creature itself was easily that large, its wingspan double that.

### **[Elder Sun Sprite – Lvl ???]**

“*Quach sezim naa quip.*”

Sounds reached her mind, but Ilea had no clue what to do with them. No emotions were transmitted, nor was there an incline or decline in the tone to indicate a question or statement.

The words seemed taxing to her mind, but she was pretty sure they hadn’t been intended as an attack.

“English, Elos, or emotions and thoughts?” she asked, sending calmness and a mental greeting back.

The creature remained quiet for a moment.

“*Sena lari,*” it said, but Ilea just shook her head.

“I don’t understand you.”

*Stupid.*

She had to focus for a second to realize the thought had come from the Fae.

The Sun Sprite twitched a little, moving a meter closer.

“What is it, little guy? Can you talk to this one?”

*Danger.*

*Stay.*

*Hidden.*

The Sprite suddenly appeared behind her, still at the same distance. It immediately screeched into her mind and focused a sphere of bright energy between its thin, tendril-like arms.

Ilea could feel the energy from the distance as well as the heat. She turned, keeping the Fae behind herself and waiting for an attack.

“*Saaa maduun*,” the creature said, the mental pressure much more powerful this time.

“He’s a friend, alright? We’re just going to move through. No fight needed,” she said.

“*Saaa maduun*,” the Elder Sun Sprite repeated.

*Warning*, the Fae conveyed.

“I figured as much.”

Ilea started moving backward over the landscape, slowly and with spread arms. The being followed at the same speed, energy still held within its hands.

“I’ll protect you, little guy, don’t worry.”

*Danger*, the Fae said, and she saw through her sphere that it was pointing at its own body. *No danger*, it added, pointing at Ilea’s back.

“Yeah, seems like it has a problem with you. I’d rather side with something that can communicate with me than a weird sprite sending cryptic warnings for no apparent reason.” She laced her voice with Monster Hunter. “Hear that, flying root thing? You better back off!”

The being recoiled at the sound before unleashing the energy in its hands.

*Shit.*

Ilea was hit near instantly. The light magic attack came faster than her precognition could inform her. It burned a hole into her ash and left a seared spot on her skin behind.

The ash reformed, as did another ball of energy. Ilea could see it form within her sphere, the power gathering within a near-invisible field around it. The field quivered before a minuscule opening formed that let everything out in a focused beam. She was seared again, deeper this time.

“You might want to think about what you’re doing, big guy,” she said, lacing her voice once more. A warning, this time.

She spread her ashen limbs behind her, and heat started to gather in her chest. The being stopped collecting energy and instead lifted one of its

arms, a bright ball coming to life, nearly blinding Ilea even with her resistance.

*Flee.*

Ilea trusted the Fae. Never before had she felt such urgency coming from a transmitted thought. She turned and sped up, not risking the charge-up time her third-tier wings would require. An ashen limb moved the Fae from her back to her front, her hands holding it in a protective manner as ash formed to further shelter the creature.

A powerful beam of light struck her side, not destabilizing her but burning into her shoulder, before four more slammed into her back. Her healing reformed the molten skin and muscle.

She sped up and used the newfound agility in her flight to twirl up and down, changing trajectories so quickly that a normal human body would've been squashed to a pulp.

As she flew, Ilea saw dozens of sprites moving in from all directions. Many of their beams missed, their eyes and arms not as fast as their actual spells. Her wings were burned through twice by concentrated, small beams, but her healing took care of it quickly.

Ilea continued her acrobatics without retaliating, knowing her body would be reduced to a steaming pile of bones the moment she stood still. Even her quick recovery wouldn't deal well with so many powerful attacks.

When the beams suddenly stopped, she focused on the distant wall, flying as fast as she could, still moving in a zigzag to create a difficult target.

Her eyes went wide when the moving landscape around her slowed down. Her limbs reformed into a thin barrier of ash on her back as she felt magic emanate from the Fae in her arms. She glanced back and saw a circle of at least fifty sprites, a large flaming ball of light in their midst.

The beam reached her instantly, slamming into an invisible barrier that cracked and quickly vanished. Her ash was washed away, and then went her skin. She felt her bones disintegrating as she activated her third-tier recovery.

The beam passed before her perception sped up again, her body explosively growing back bones, organs, muscles, and skin as it was covered by ash once more. She was falling, but her wings caught her as soon as they reformed. A slight wobble, and she was back on track.

The Fae had passed out, a slight nudge reaching her mind.

*Go for it, she said, deactivating her Mana Drain Resistance.*

She was focused now, her eyes trained on the far wall and her arms gripping the creature with as much protection as she could provide.

Ilea stopped and created as much ash as she could in a wall behind her, charging her wings with power in the meantime. She sacrificed two thousand points of health to push Azarinth Awakening and recovered them almost instantly with her healing, bright blue runes shining on her skin below the ash. She felt her wings reaching the necessary power and rushed forward, keeping the ash connected to her back as dense and compact as possible.

The air was split by her passing, her Wind Resistance working hard to keep the pressure down. Healing mana poured into her and the Fae as she formed a protective cocoon of ash around it just before her perception slowed down again.

Heat reached her back, burning into and through the ash in an instant. She saw a small hole in the distant steel right before her brain was scorched.

When she came to again, her wings were instinctively flapping as her body reformed. Her chest and arms were still there, and she held the small creature surrounded by ash and a thin barrier.

She crossed the last dozen meters in a flash, twisting her body in the air to fit through the open slit of the steel gate before she tumbled to a stop in the corridor beyond.

Ilea spread her ashen limbs and dug them into the steel around her to slow her down. At the same time, she formed ashen walls in front of her, her wings adding to the protective wall.

She moved the Fae behind her, the creature still siphoning mana from her as it slowly woke. When it opened its eyes, it held out both hands, a bright barrier appearing in her sphere.

The steel gate in front of them vanished in bright light, the barrier cracked and shattered, and her ash was burned through. Her armor followed before the magic dissipated.

Ilea took a deep breath, the molten skin on her chest, face, and legs reforming as she looked at the creatures floating a hundred meters away.

**‘ding’ Azarinth Awakening reaches 3rd lvl 22**

**‘ding’ Azarinth Perception reaches 3rd lvl 4**

**‘ding’ Armor of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 24**

**‘ding’ Ashen Wings reaches 3rd lvl 4**

**‘ding’ Avatar of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 14**

**‘ding’ Veteran reaches 2nd lvl 8**

**‘ding’ Light Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 3**

...

**‘ding’ Light Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 10**

The messages didn’t surprise her. Nothing before had decimated her defenses to that extent, not in an instant. Not the Griffin, nor the Lightning Elemental.

**‘ding’ Monster Hunter reaches lvl 11**

...

**‘ding’ Monster Hunter reaches lvl 13**

“Is that all you have?” she shouted.

The creatures prepared another attack, remaining motionless and silent.

The beam came and washed over her defenses, her bones now just barely withstanding the blast.

**‘ding’ Light Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 11**

“Come on... I’m right here!” Ilea shouted, her voice rushing out in a boom as she spread her arms, a thick mist of ash forming behind her to protect the Fae.

More of the sprites had appeared now, the ball of energy growing once more. She squinted and glanced at the Fae.

“We should probably find cover.”

The Fae teleported down, and Ilea followed just before her sphere lit up with bright energy. She laughed and fell to the metal floor.

“That was a close one. You alright there, fella?”

The Fae bowed to her, the gesture visible through her sphere.

*Friend.*

The word made her smile, and she nodded in return.

Ilea stood up and rolled her shoulders. “Now, let’s try that again.”

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## Mirage

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When she felt ready to face another laser beam, she blinked up. But she found that the large cluster of creatures had dispersed somewhat, the beings either having lost interest or no longer seeing her as a threat.

She stepped closer to the molten gate and clapped her hands above her head. “Still here!”

A few small groups formed new beams of light a moment later, and Ilea smiled.

Soon, she decided to turn off her Light Resistance, both to insult the creatures and simply because they’d given up on their clustered attack. With the high mana return, even her near-instant healing could be fueled for a long while.

She clenched and unclenched her fists as the light burned away her skin and muscle. Avatar of Ash deactivated from time to time when their magic threatened to overwhelm her. All the while, the Fae watched on in silence, eyes focused on her.

**‘ding’ Sentinel Sphere reaches 3rd lvl 8**

**‘ding’ Avatar of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 15**

**‘ding’ Monster Hunter reaches lvl 14**

**‘ding’ Light Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 12**

...

### ***‘ding’ Light Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 19***

The skill leveled even faster with her resistance deactivated. She decided to stay until it reached twenty to see if she could fight them.

“Why are they so persistent?” she asked, glancing back at the Fae.

Many of the beams were aimed at it, redirected toward her when they entered her sphere. The speed of the attacks didn’t seem to matter – her sphere was getting more effective with each level of Light Magic Resistance.

### ***‘ding’ Light Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 20***

The last ding came right after she asked the question, and her eyes closed as her resistance reactivated. The ash now stopped the beams, which still dug into it but with much less punch than before.

*Hatred.* The answer was laced with a sad tone.

Ilea’s resistance was better now, but given how quickly the attacks hit her and the sprites’ ability to pool their magic, she knew it was still too much of a risk to face them.

*I’ll be back.*

\* \* \*

They continued downward, though it bothered her that she couldn’t fight the sprites. *At least they weren’t corrupted.*

*Another thing to add to the list of shit on my list,* she thought.

Sentinel Huntress informed her that she was getting closer to her companions. The magic left behind by Catelyn was nearly tangible now. Knowing how Goliath had talked about their kind, she didn’t worry about the Fae. The sprites didn’t seem to think the same way, but the Awakened wouldn’t dare attack it.

“Gotta say,” she said, watching the Fae float close to her head, “Praetorians and elves don’t seem quite as intimidating anymore after you’ve been blasted by the sun.”

The Fae looked at her but didn’t send anything.

“Think I’m getting close to facing a Basilisk?”

The creature bonked her and shook its head.

“I see. A little more violence until I get there, then.”

*Lots.*

“Lots? Well, that’s the thing, I can’t seem to get enough.”

While layer eighteen had merely resembled a desert, the nineteenth was a full-blown sandpit. Ilea was thankful for her ash – she was easily able to get the stuff off her body.

Again, the light came from faintly glowing blue crystals above, bathing the dunes in an illusion of night.

“Sense anything?” she asked the Fae, the two floating a couple of dozen meters above the ground.

The Fae shook its head.

“Well, let’s find out if there are any corrupted beings around.”

Ilea floated down to the surface, feeling herself sink into the ground when she landed.

*Quicksand? Are you serious?*

She moved her wings to get out of the stuff.

*Danger,* the Fae sent before it disappeared.

Ilea looked up but remained where she was. She’d nearly been overwhelmed by the last layer’s combined team effort of shittery, but all it had really done was make her annoyed. Right now, she was very much excited for some good old-fashioned *violence*.

The wait wasn’t a long one.

Her precognition informed her about the incoming tendrils of sand. She flew back as quickly as she could, twirling in the air as the sand shot out of the ground.

The tendrils whirled around, sharp points at their ends that very much resembled her own ashen limbs. When spears shot out of the ground too, she was pretty sure this level had somehow copied her and put Sand Monster Ilea down into the floor.

She dodged and weaved through the projectiles and tendrils with her wings of ash.

Ilea picked up the sound of giggling, but it wasn’t coming from the Fae. This sounded more malicious than anything else. It did retain some playfulness, but she felt a wickedness coming from whatever creature was causing the sand to move.

A grin spread on her face when she felt the familiar feeling of mana and health drain. More importantly, however, there was also a stamina drain.

*Now, what to do here?*

Ilea had never really tested her abilities in sand. The only creature she had fought was that fish monster back in the huge southern desert with her Shadow team.

*One way to find out.*

She stopped moving, and the sand tendrils instantly slammed into her ash, penetrating deep but not quite through to her slowly reforming bone armor. The latter piece of gear had mostly been in a state of constant repair lately.

The spears actually reached her skin, but she quickly moved some of her ashen armor to let the sand strike her directly. The health and mana drains were mostly negligible, only accomplishing a reduction in her regeneration.

*Meaning I should be a little more conservative with my resources*, she thought as the first sand spears and tendrils slashed into her skin, drawing blood.

The stamina drain would actually have been dangerous if she hadn't decided not to move at all, her meditation helping offset the loss.

The giggling remained, but it sounded curious now, though still wicked.

The creature was closer, the drains increasing in power until they remained steady. The sound also got louder. Ilea had a hard time gauging if it was a form of telepathy or an audible thing. It had an echo, too.

"You certainly win the creepy award, my man," she said, sending an ashen spear down into the ground.

The sand attacks continued for a while, crude and repetitive.

She was just about to call it a day and wait another couple of hours until her resistances had reached the second tier when the tendrils wrapped around her and pulled down.

*I don't exactly feel like drowning.* Ilea fought against it with her wings, her ash slashing into the sand but simply passing through the tendrils.

*Great, she thought, finding herself unable to blink. If I die here because I fucked around... well, let's try not to.*

Ilea formed a massive drill in front of her chest and started charging her wings as she was pulled down. Her sphere still didn't pick anything up, but there were a couple more meters to go.

*There you are,* she thought with a grin and sped up, slightly tucking in her arms and legs as the drill started spinning.

The being looked similar to the spirits from two layers before, just with an additional hood. The sudden increase in velocity sent her digging into the sand with an enormous punch, the sand tendrils ripped off the creature's main body and left flailing. The sand slowed her down considerably before the being vanished.

*Of course it has a teleport.* She copied the move, blinking up and out of the sand. *Drains all the resources I have, can bury me under the sand, and uses limbs and spears to attack at range. Also a teleport.*

“You’re almost as fucking annoying to fight as I am.”

It went without saying that the being also regenerated health, mana, and stamina.

*I’m still missing that stuff in my skill set. To become the ultimate annoyance,* Ilea thought as she tried to spot the creature.

**‘ding’ Stamina Drain Resistance reaches lvl 2**

...

**‘ding’ Stamina Drain Resistance reaches lvl 7**

**‘ding’ You have learned the General Skill: Sand Magic Resistance – lvl 1  
Sand Magic Resistance – lvl 1**

*A powerful and versatile school of magic, able to slash, crush, and suffocate. Usually found in certain desert regions, its masters are unchallenged within their domain. Exposure has made you more resilient to this type of magic.*

**‘ding’ Sand Magic Resistance reaches lvl 2**

*Unchallenged? We’ll see about that,* she thought with a grin, once more slowing down and letting the attacks smash into her. It seemed the creature had given up on trying to get her down into the sand. For the moment, at least.

“Come out and fight me, you fuck,” Ilea said, the last word laced with power.

A giggle resounded from below, and the attacks ceased.

*What?*

She watched as a fuzzy cloaked head emerged from the sand, looking up at her. It was already hard to see in the dim blue light, and the thing's color scheme didn't exactly help. It remained in the sand with the rest of its ethereal body, giggling once more.

Ilea waved. "Nice to meet you."

The being moved around a little, keeping its eyes on Ilea as she lazily moved her wings and tail.

### **[Deep Mirage – lvl ???]**

"Hey, you don't happen to be friends with the Enavurin, do you?"

She created a floating ashen image of the creature, but the Mirage just looked at her, utter lack of understanding in its eyes.

*Yeah, didn't think so. You don't strike me as a well-rounded conversationalist.*

Ilea formed an ashen copy of herself and pierced it with ashen spears, the being either unwilling or unable to communicate with thoughts, feelings, or words.

The Mirage giggled before around thirty sand spears rushed out at her.

Ilea smiled brightly and removed part of her ashen armor again, pulling the rather sloppily aimed spears toward her with her Sentinel Sphere.

The drains hadn't stopped at all, she noted. She thought it might be similar to Goliath's constant health drain when beings were in his vicinity.

The Mirage didn't seem annoyed at her second tier of Mana Drain Resistance – it was probably maxed out anyway. *What a peculiar creature.*

She could see the Fae clapping along at a safe distance.

Ilea moved in the air, sending ashen spears down at the creature, seeing it flicker around in the sand to dodge them. She was glad the Mirage had understood her request and was quite literally playing along.

*Or I'm just imagining things.*

Ilea had a hard time thinking of a way to get to the creature. It was cautious, teleporting quickly and long before her ashen spears even got close to it.

The being certainly had some level of intelligence, but it was hard to tell how far that went. In the end, Ilea was pretty sure it wouldn't hesitate to bury her under a thousand fucktons of sand if it could.

She smiled to herself, dancing around with a likely ancient and powerful creature in a dimly lit desert kilometers underground.

*Annoyed.*

The thought reached her a couple of minutes later, making her turn toward the distant Fae, its white eyes glowing slightly in the dark. It was far enough away to escape the influence of the Mirage's drains, but it could apparently still see what was going on.

"What is it?!" Ilea shouted as she twirled and laughed, hearing another wicked giggle from below.

The Fae turned away and crossed its arms.

"Are you pouting!?" Ilea blinked and reached the Fae as she laughed. "You're pouting? Really?" She flew close to it, putting her face right in front of the Fae's.

*Negative.*

"Oh no, no, this is positive. Very much so." She touched her chin. "Do you want to join us?"

The Fae looked at her with one eye and then down at the sand.

*Danger.*

"It's draining health, stamina, and mana. I can give you health, and you can drain my mana. Just don't use it – I have a second-tier resistance. If your stamina gets low, if you even have that, just teleport away."

The Fae was looking at her now and seemed to consider the suggestion.

"Drain my mana if you understand," she said and watched it lift a hand. The pulse was much weaker now with her resistance active, but it didn't seem to hurt the creature.

She formed a small seat on her shoulder and pointed at it, smiling when the creature appeared on it. Two ashen safety belts closed around its shoulders.

"Ah, also teleport away if I get dragged down or if the Deep Mirage does anything different. It still wants to eat us... I think."

The Fae gave her a nod and giggled in her mind when Ilea sped back to the waiting Mirage.

*Aww, you look like a lost puppy,* she thought as she approached the Mirage, unsure if it felt similarly about the Fae as the Sun Sprites did.

The Mirage looked up and stopped its giggles, rising from the sand before its cloaked form was completely revealed. Tendrils of sand moved around it before it spread its ethereal arms and bowed slightly.

“Friend?” Ilea asked the Fae.

The Fae didn’t reply and turned its head away from her.

“What is it?” she asked, but she didn’t get an answer.

She formed a series of ashen spears and formed another copy of herself, repeating the gesture.

The Mirage returned into the sand’s depths and started giggling once more.

*That gesture was obviously respectful, but it’s not a friend?*

Ilea wasn’t sure what it meant, but the Fae intrigued her even more now. Goliath had thought them ancient beings, even for him. He had nearly spoken of them with reverence.

*Maybe this is the same. Might be I’m underestimating this little guy here just because of his level.*

Ilea stopped herself from further wondering, instead focusing on the forthcoming battle with her new spear buddy.

*Should have gone for a Spear Master Class. Ilea Spears, spearing the competition with piercing accuracy.*

She preferred her body as a weapon, of course, but following her bow and hammer escapades, she didn’t feel particularly averse to learning about the spear.

*Might take a couple months off and join some classes. Too much to do, too much to fight. Like taking care of the corruption and finding the expedition.*

Ilea winced a little at her enjoyment of this situation. It was a little easier to accept with the giggles coming from both her current companions, one perhaps a little more murderous than the other.

*Second-stage resistances, then I continue on.*

## Remnants

---

Ilea continued her training for around an hour, working on her resistances and getting more used to the speed and maneuverability of her new wings.

The Fae was giggling in its seat, its previous jealousy forgotten completely.

“We should leave soon,” Ilea said as she twirled backward, sand spears pulled toward her, piercing her skin.

*Disappointed.*

“We can always return.”

Ilea waved to the Deep Mirage, forming a basketball-sized sphere of ash before she dropped it into the sand. She added an ashen copy of herself and the Fae as well. Her True Creation made sure all of it would remain. It would fall apart after she went too far away, but without communication, she wanted to leave something.

She bowed to the creature and flew up, checking her notifications. The Mirage didn’t copy the gesture, which made its previous greeting to the Fae even more mysterious.

**‘ding’ Sand Magic Resistance reaches lvl 3**

...

**‘ding’ Sand Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 1**

### **Sand Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 1**

*A powerful and versatile school of magic, able to slash, crush, and suffocate. Usually found in certain desert regions, its masters are unchallenged within their domain. Exposure has made you more resilient to this type of magic.*

*2nd stage: Through exposure and forced understanding, you find it easier to move through sand. An ability most sand mages and creatures master early in their development and one of their core advantages.*

**‘ding’ Stamina Drain Resistance reaches lvl 8**

...

**‘ding’ Stamina Drain Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 1**

### **Stamina Drain Resistance – 2nd lvl 1**

*The more rarely used drain magic focused on stamina. Its effects are not as immediately noticeable as health or mana drain skills, but the end result is just as devastating. You have learned to resist such spells to an extent.*

*2nd stage: Stamina exhaustion won’t impact you as heavily anymore. Your body is used to rapid magical stamina drain and can counteract its absence through mana and health.*

**‘ding’ Stamina Drain Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 2**

**‘ding’ Stamina Drain Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 3**

Ilea sped up through the rather dark layer, and after a little bit of searching, she found the tunnel leading out of it, dug into the stone and earth. The sand ended at the edge of the tunnel, marking the end of the Mirage’s influence.

Ilea hadn’t checked if there was more than one Mirage in the layer. One had been sufficient for her training – the only goal had been reaching the second tier, not the very end of it.

*Trail.*

“I just noticed,” Ilea said, stopping in her tracks before she used her sphere and Sentinel Huntress to check the tunnel. “The others went through as well – just a couple hours ago, I think. Hmm... I’m pretty sure there

were more people present than just my group... and some of the damage... I have a hard time seeing one of them causing that. Maybe Elfie got frustrated and scratched the walls..."

A large part of the tracks stopped a couple of dozen meters into the tunnel. From then on, only slight remnants of her team's magic and physical passage were noticeable.

*Spells to hide it all? So the expedition did come this far...*

"Do you not level?" she asked the Fae in a conversational tone as they descended through the tunnel. She was pretty sure some of the battles would have counted as a team effort. Of course, she was glad the experience hadn't been split at all.

It looked her way but didn't send anything by way of response, as it tended to do.

"You like being mysterious, don't you?" Ilea asked, squinting at it.

The creature actually winked at her.

"Ancient Fae, toying with a young human to get entertainment in an endless void of time. I'll never understand ageless creatures like you." Ilea shook her head, not hiding the joy she was feeling. Most of her traveling companions weighed on her after a while. This one had yet to come even close to that.

Its small frame wasn't very heavy either. That possibly helped.

"Number twenty," she said, reaching the exit of the tunnel after a steep decline. "Another desert."

The dunes spread for kilometers, an enormous sandstorm raging in the distance.

*Team,* the Fae sent, pointing.

Ilea looked but didn't see anything in the distance, though it wasn't for lack of light, warm illumination provided by growing crystals far above.

"Feel free to lead me there, little guy," she said with a smile, watching the Fae appear on her head and grab some ashen tendrils not unlike reins.

Ilea laughed, reminded of her sprints through the western forest, Alice on her back as they ran toward Riverwatch.

*I wonder if she's even still alive. Might be the only other human with an Azarin Class, if she didn't waste the stuff I gave to Jaime.*

Then Ilea focused on the now again, keeping her eyes peeled for any kind of danger. She moved her wings behind her, extending her tail as she ascended, flying over the dunes while the Fae steered her.

*I wonder if this is where your friend is, old Kraken.*

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## Friends with Benefits

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Ilea saw the facility in the distance, not quite as hidden as those she'd found previously. Massive steel structures were partially set into the wall of the layer otherwise covered in sand and stone.

A bunch of scorpions and worms had shown up when she'd landed, quickly turned to shreds by her limbs and spears. None of them were above level six hundred, and their abilities weren't very impressive either.

She would have to check the scorpions again – their tails were likely laced with venom. Sadly, the sand magic they'd shown was considerably less impressive than the Deep Mirage on the previous floor.

“You think they’re in there?” Ilea asked the floating Fae.

The creature wasn’t looking at her. Instead, it was staring at the sandstorm raging in the distance. It looked to have moved closer.

Ilea followed its gaze. “Looks dangerous. Let’s check that out later.”

The Fae kept staring at the sandstorm before it glanced her way and nodded.

“What’s wrong? You don’t seem excited.”

The Fae simply pointed at the facility and started floating toward it.

Ilea looked at the sandstorm again before she turned and followed.

\* \* \*

Hana glanced at the corruption-riddled dead. The group that had entered the central hall of this steel facility.

The corrupted beings had put up a fight, but with Catelyn and her group present, they had prevailed with no further casualties.

Hana smiled at Jonna, who was still healing Maro, the elf, as well as the guardian. Corruption was visible on their arms. One of Catelyn's companions, a human named Lucas, was healing them as well, cutting out corruption with his wood magic.

The hall wasn't particularly large, but it had a few unknown devices built into its walls. None of them seemed active. In the center of the hall was a pedestal, above which floated a sphere of steel, covered in hundreds of runes and pulsing with magic. No answers, nor treasure. Just a sphere of metal.

Catelyn paced before the sphere. None of them had interacted with it yet.

"What do you think?" Relly asked as he stepped over to Hana.

"We should just bury this whole facility and forget about it," Hana replied. "Nothing good will come of our tampering."

"It probably started all this," Maro said. "I've seen runes like these before, Catelyn. We should search the facility, find any survivors, and leave."

"This is the first thing we've found that could offer any answers," Catelyn said.

"And none of us know what we're dealing with. All I know is that this thing is layered in enchantments I can't even begin to understand."

"Something is approaching," Carul suddenly said in a distressed voice.

"Something? Be more precise," the necromancer complained.

"Two beings... they are powerful, approaching fast," he said, glancing at Catelyn.

"Maybe we've already triggered something," the elf said with a hiss.

Magic surged as the others prepared.

A few tense seconds passed before the elf hissed in amusement.

"What?" Maro asked.

A being shrouded in ash appeared near the entrance, with more than a dozen protrusions extending from its back, interspersed by two wings that looked otherworldly.

Hana felt its presence, gripping her blade before her eyes opened wide at the Spirit of Old sitting on the being's head.

"Decided to join us at last," Catelyn said with a nod.

"Too late for the fight, it seems," the female said.

Hana recognized the voice, her eyes opening even wider.

*Are you serious?!*

"What's that floating ball of magic?" Ilea asked, pointing at the device.

\* \* \*

"Oh, we've met before. Good to see you two survived," Ilea said with a wave at the lizardwoman. The expression on her face confused her a little.  
*Maybe she forgot about me?*

"You've brought someone with you," Catelyn observed, bowing to the Fae before she looked back at Ilea.

"Yeah. Little guy, this is my team – and some survivors of the expedition, it seems," she said, gesturing to the group.

The Fae reappeared on her shoulder and sat down, waving at them all.

"So, what have you found?" Ilea asked.

Ilea and Catelyn quickly brought each other up to speed. The expedition had reached this layer, but exactly why the corruption had spread remained unclear.

"I knew there was something in that pool of water," Maro said.

"So the blood of that creature was used to make the corruption?" Catelyn asked.

"Likely by the same beings that built this facility, or the whole dungeon for all we know," Ilea said as she walked around the central chamber.

She could no longer deny it – the resemblance wasn't just uncanny, this was the same architecture, the same machinery, and the same steel as the place she'd been to in the demon realm.

"I've seen something like this before," she said. "In the demon realm."

"The runes are the same," Maro said, giving her a look. "The ones we saw in Rhykker's diary."

Ilea nodded slowly. "They're not Taleen, though, right?"

The elf hissed and shook his head. "Whatever beings or civilization left this behind, they're not Taleen. I'm certain of it."

“And yet they were just as advanced, if not more so,” Catelyn said as she circled the floating sphere.

“Either way, we can’t read the runes, and we shouldn’t tamper with this device,” Maro said. “If the corruption was some kind of defense mechanism, I don’t want to find out what else this place has in store.”

“I kind of do,” Ilea deadpanned.

*Read.*

“Oh?” Ilea looked at the Fae on her shoulder. “You can?”

It nodded, and she smiled.

“What did it say?” Catelyn asked.

“It can read the runes. I just doubt a translation will be very detailed.”

“So we should just let this Fae tamper with this dangerous and ancient device?” Maro asked, clearly not convinced.

Everyone else looked at him as if he was the weird one for asking.

“Come on, Ilea, you’re human. Don’t you think it’s a bit ridiculous? It can’t even speak in complete sentences – no offense,” he said.

*Offended.*

“Yeah, he can be annoying. He’s good at heart, though. I’m, like, sixty percent sure of that,” Ilea told the Fae.

Maro sighed.

“Let it try, see what it can find out,” Elfie said.

“We want to learn more about the corruption and why it has spread. We want to prevent something like this from happening again. Any defensive measures you can disable would be helpful as well,” Catelyn said, glancing at the Fae. “If you desire something in return, I will do my utmost to fulfill your requests.”

The Fae waved her off.

*Help.*

*Friend.*

The Fae pointed at Ilea.

Magic flowed from it before invisible forces changed parts of the runes with blinding speed.

“Wait, I can’t foll—” Maro said before a powerful surge of magic washed over them.

Elfie hissed.

Maro stored his helmet, revealing wide-open eyes. “Unbelievable. There were over sixty layers...”

“What happened?” Ilea asked.

“It disabled all defensive enchantments,” Lucas murmured.

Ilea turned her attention back to the sphere, which had started shifting, rectangular shapes moving in and out from the previously perfectly seamless sphere.

A deep and almost static voice resounded from the sphere, speaking in a language Ilea didn’t understand.

Another surge of magic mixed the runes up again.

“*Language change accepted*,” the voice said in the same deep tone.

“Holy shit,” Ilea said, smiling at the Fae. It glanced back at her and giggled in her mind before continuing.

Ilea was sure it was using its space magic to reshape the runes somehow. The others were watching in sheer disbelief, one of Maro’s eyes literally twitching.

“*All defensive measures and traps disabled. Remaining Manipulation Agent destroyed*,” the voice continued. “*Displaying map of Testing Facility Zeta.*”

A hologram appeared above the sphere, displaying the Descent in its entirety.

“*Displaying population and parameters for Project Animus.*”

As various new pieces of information appeared, displaying the species and levels of various monsters, the group looked at each other with surprised expressions.

Ilea stepped closer and looked at the list of species and levels. “That doesn’t exactly line up with what I’ve fought.”

“Maybe the information is out of date,” Elfie said.

“What is this magic?” Lucas wondered.

Maro breathed in deep.

“The Lightning Elemental is registered on level ten, same with the Veramath on five,” Ilea said.

Twenty-five levels were listed in total. Everything below level twenty was listed as unstable and had no species information at all.

“The Young Lightning Elemental is listed as level nine fifty. Does that mean whoever built this place can identify that?” Ilea asked.

“It could also just be an estimate,” Maro said, one hand on his chin.

“Project Animus is the corruption?” she asked the Fae.

Hundreds of small lights appeared on the hologram. “*Displaying Manipulation Agent distribution systems. Time elapsed since activation – 42 cycles.*”

“That should line up with the first sighting of the corrupted,” Relly said.

“It lines up,” Carul confirmed.

“Is there more information on Project Animus?” Catelyn asked.

The Fae used its magic again.

“*Project Animus – Priority: 1.*

“*Facility restructure into Testing Facility Zeta. Blood manipulation of redacted range of subjects to facilitate survival rate with prolonged exposure to atmosphere of redacted.*

“*Status: Failed.*”

“What have we stumbled into...” Maro breathed before the disembodied voice resumed.

“*Redacted failed to change composition in meaningful way. Distribution approved by redacted in case of facility breach. Document success rate.*”

“Facility breach,” Catelyn murmured.

The expedition members seemed to shrink.

“Are there other projects?” Catelyn asked with a tense voice.

The Fae nodded.

“*Project Fluctuation – Priority: 3.*

“*Observation and documentation of long-term atmosphere and mana fluctuation change after redacted redacted.*

“*Status: Ongoing*”

“Is there a mention of when it was started?” Maro asked.

“*Time elapsed since completion: 1,123,935 cycles.*”

“That’s a lot of days,” Ilea murmured.

“Three thousand years, give or take a century,” Carul commented.

The Fae nodded.

“The Enavurin... you said he came here centuries past, not millennia,” Catelyn said. “When was the status change of Project Animus?”

*“Time elapsed since project designation change: 108,184 cycles.”*

“A little less than three hundred years.” Carul supplied again.

Ilea nodded. “That fits with what the Enavurin told me.”

“So whoever built this facility was still working on this project three centuries past,” Catelyn said.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” Relly said.

Ilea looked at the floating hologram.

*The Demon Realm, Tremor, and the Descent. What is all this? Did Adam know?*

## Ancients

---

Maro and Elfie continued to ask the Fae a bunch of questions, the three of them going through whatever else the sphere could provide. But most of it was redacted.

“What do you think?” Ilea asked, looking at Catelyn.

The fox murmured to herself before she returned Ilea’s gaze. “We should look for survivors. And we should try to remove any corrupted creatures on the way. It’s the least we can do. As to whoever built this, I don’t know. Better to leave hidden secrets where they lie.”

“Not sure I agree on the secrets bit, but I’m happy to fight a few more corrupted creatures. Not that I think they’ll get far with that Griffin and that lightning bird ready to fight anything that may climb up from below.”

“Yeah, this one may be a problem,” Maro said as he looked at them, pointing at the detailed information on the twentieth layer and its denizens.

*Sand Elemental – level ????*

*Success rate of Manipulation Agent: 5%*

*Status: Success*

“Ah, fuck,” Catelyn whispered.

Ilea blinked her eyes. *Enavurin, I think we found your friend.*

“I don’t think we can kill a four-mark creature,” she said.

“It hasn’t moved up yet. We could just leave it here,” Maro said.

Lucas shook his head. “Elementals are creators first and foremost. It will not stop until all of the Descent is filled with sand. And it will not stop after.”

“How long do we have?” Ilea asked.

“It’s hard to say,” Maro said. “It’s possible the thing is only here because creatures free of corruption remain.”

“It’s a four-mark elemental, but according to the sphere, it is corrupted,” Catelyn said.

“It will not retreat nor fight in an intelligent manner,” Lucas said.

“We’re still talking about an elemental,” Maro said.

“There may be other survivors, too. They could help as well,” Ilea said.

“Adding even ten level two hundred mages will not be enough against a mountain,” Maro said.

“I agree,” Catelyn said. “According to the few records we have, elementals remain within their territory and are rarely even hostile. No records would exist otherwise. They predate most beings we know of. And this isn’t a young one, like the one in the tenth layer.”

“Fighting a four-mark elemental,” Ilea murmured to herself.

She heard a giggle resound in her mind.

*Help*, the Fae sent to her.

Ilea glanced over and saw it go back to the sphere before it used its magic to change the orange hologram into a map of the twentieth layer.

Another facility in the corner of the area came into view, massive steel gates closing off a large cavern.

*Trakorov – level ????*

*The success rate of Manipulation Agent: <1%*

*Status: Failed*

Ilea read the description and slowly started nodding to herself.

The Fae reappeared on top of her head.

*Violence!*

\* \* \*

Before they could enact their plan, they had to prepare.

Catelyn and her team focused on finding survivors and clearing out the corrupted creatures that had found themselves inside the facility. It was up to them to decide if they wanted to fight against the Sand Elemental or if they were more of a liability than help.

Ilea, on the other hand, went back to an acquaintance she'd made on the nineteenth layer to raise her Sand Magic Resistance to a more acceptable level. It wasn't quite what she'd wanted, but the Fae urged her to move the plan along.

***'ding' Sand Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 2***

...

***'ding' Sand Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 13***

***'ding' Stamina Drain Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 4***

...

***'ding' Stamina Drain Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 8***

Ilea felt the sheer power at play as she returned to the twentieth layer and looked into the storm. It had grown, the sand moving more wildly now.

And she also felt the pain and anger the Fae next to her openly transmitted. The elemental had been killed, and its magical might was now twisted and corrupted, bent on chaos and destruction.

She knew it was there, somewhere amidst the storm that expanded over several kilometers of the layer.

Sand cut into her ash, brushing against the Fae's shield at the same time.

"Can you see it?" Ilea asked, looking at the Fae.

It nodded, white eyes focused on the storm of sand, a whirlwind of destruction.

"Let's meet our potential friend, then," she said with a smile, blinking away from the storm, quickly followed by the Fae.

They reached the second facility after a few minutes of fast flight. Ilea landed a dozen meters in front of the massive steel gates inlaid into the rocky wall of the layer.

She felt a breeze flowing over her as she checked the surroundings for monsters, but her sphere had a hard time penetrating through the gate. When she attempted to blink past it, she found herself back in front of the entrance.

*I'll just dig a way around it,* she thought before the Fae sent a suggestion her way.

"Sure, if you think that's faster," she said, feeling her mana draining into the creature.

Half a minute passed before a surge of mana ripped out a chunk of the steel gate, making it vanish in an instant.

"Nice," Ilea said with a smile.

The Fae twirled. *Joy!*

"That's some Grade-A violence, my dear," Ilea said as she felt the heat flowing out of the new entrance. "Here we go."

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## Meeting the Competition

---

Ilea glanced at the Fae and entered the cavern. The sand ended at the entrance, though specks floated into the darkness, sticking out against the charred black rock.

“Think I should make light?”

The Fae shook its head.

She felt the mana in here, its density making it nearly tangible. If she’d learned anything about mana, this was definitely a spot that a powerful creature would like.

“We don’t exactly want to fight it, though. Maybe some light would be good. As a warning,” Ilea suggested.

The Fae considered it, then a white flame appeared between them.

“You never used that before – we could have trained more resistances!”

Ilea said in a loud whisper, disappointed in her friend.

*Negative.*

“You mean it wouldn’t help me, or you just don’t want or can’t use it on me?”

*Heat.*

“Ah. Hey, how did you know I capped that resistance already?”

*Deduction.*

“Deduction my ass,” she whispered to herself. “I could also just use a torch.”

*Insult.*

“Didn’t mean it that way, Mr. White Flame.”

The Fae tilted its head before it shook it. It pointed to itself and shook its head again before pointing into the darkness ahead.

“An insult to the thing in there?” she asked.

*Child.*

*Learning.*

*Proud.*

“You sound decidedly sarcastic. Don’t get cocky just because you’re an ancient revered being that is entirely too cute,” she said, bumping the Fae’s head with an ashen limb. It giggled in her mind before focusing forward again.

Ilea felt the being now, similar to the elemental outside. She could hear it breathe, could feel the heat and magic coming from it. Still, she assumed it to be several dozen meters away, invisible in the darkness and not yet within range of her sphere.

“It’s sleeping,” she whispered, suddenly feeling the pressure increase tenfold.

Her buffs and resistances kept her alert, and Ilea didn’t react to the presence except to be wary in her mind.

There came a low growl, entirely too close. She could feel the magic flow over her. The second tier of Veteran prevented her from freezing, but this was not something in her league, not something she could entirely comprehend. Her instincts had to be reined in to keep her mind and body steady.

She smiled and growled back, the sound enhanced by Monster Hunter and a good imitation of the monster’s warning. She was glad the magic helped – otherwise, she would have made herself look quite ridiculous with her monster noises by now.

The flame between Ilea and the Fae intensified and grew, its light reaching farther into the darkness as the sound of something heavy impacting the ground reverberated in the cavern.

Ilea could see faint shapes now, massive talons digging into the black ground, three times her height in length and several times as broad as her.

Feeling magic emanating from her companion, she looked up.

There was another growl as two blue reptilian eyes closed in, the shape of its head illuminated by the flame. Several horns protruded from its skull, and a layer of broad, dull black scales covered its head.

Ilea's first thought was a dragon, but as her eyes adjusted, she thought it looked more like some kind of dinosaur. Its head was too broad to be what she thought of as a dragon or drake, while its two largest horns jutted out behind its jaws and angled forward.

Ilea breathed in and stared at its massive eyes.

### **[Trakorov – lvl ???]**

The head alone was four or five times her body's size. It was truly a behemoth, possibly the largest living creature Ilea had ever seen.

“Friend?” Ilea asked the Fae, who was obviously communicating with the creature. She was pretty sure her little companion was the only reason she hadn't been squashed already.

*Negative*, the response came.

*Ally*, the Fae added a moment later.

“That's all we need,” she said.

*Corruption*.

The Fae looked at her and gestured at its own hand.

“You want me to show it to the Trakorov?” Ilea asked and got a slight nod in return. She summoned a vial filled with the orange goo and let a few drops fall onto her hand after making a small cut with her ash.

She held her hand out to the creature, which moved a little closer, its eyes focused on the orange goo.

It growled.

Ilea could feel the magical pressure increase, so she decided to improvise. She started healing herself to show the spread stopping.

“Healing magic can stop it from spreading, but it cannot destroy it,” she said as she started charging Heart of Cinder.

The Fae pulsed with mana next to her and sent a quick thumbs-up into her mind.

“A second-tier Blood Manipulation Resistance can fight it,” she said, activating her skill and showing the corruption receding before she stopped again.

Several of her limbs moved in front of her, angling toward her hand. “Fire works well against it too, burning it away.” She released her spell, the heated beam of flame and energy removing the corruption without injuring her body.

She used a couple more drops of the agent. “If fire isn’t available, cutting out the corruption works as well.” She kept eye contact with the being as her ashen limbs cut out a bit of her hand, dropping the bloody piece of corrupted skin on the ground in front of her.

The Trakorov kept its eyes on her before it growled, heat and a furnace-like smell hitting her as it opened its mouth slightly, showing sharp black teeth the size of a greathammer.

She watched as something glowing orange-red came from behind the huge teeth, the substance slowly flowing forward before it dripped down its chin and onto the ground.

The Fae moved back, but Ilea remained where she was, her eyes focused on the Trakorov’s as the lava flowed out and over the corruption, burning it away in an instant before it reached her feet.

She repaired her ashen armor, her maxed-out Heat Resistance doing its job to negate most of the damage. Still, she felt it wouldn’t take long for the lava to get through her defenses.

“The elemental will not stop until everything in its path is dead. You included,” Ilea said, feeling the magic pulse from the Fae.

A growl was her answer.

“We have to stop it here. Now.” Ilea spread her arms, wings and ashen tendrils fanning out behind her. “I will help you, heal you, and cut out any corruption that spreads onto you.”

The creature huffed as soon as the Fae had translated, its nostrils visible for a moment below the scales, their size and form reminding her of a carapace.

She felt an attack coming but remained where she was, seeing more lava spurt out before it covered her entirely, the ground around her sizzling as the molten liquid burned into her.

Ilea moved her arms back and looked at them as her ashen armor was eaten through. *It’s not just heat, is it?* she thought with a broad grin.

**‘ding’ You have learned the General Skill: Lava Magic Resistance – lvl 1  
Lava Magic Resistance – lvl 1**

**An elemental form of molten rock reserved for those few living in conditions most consider deadly. You have met and fought such a being, resisting its magic, close to fire and earth but older and more primordial.**

For the first time since its rescue, Ilea felt distress coming from the Fae, if only a little.

She watched the large creature as the lava made its way through her ash, healing her skin as the molten liquid started to singe her flesh.

Ilea stepped through the lava and stopped right in front of the creature's looming head. She started charging Absolute Destruction, deciding to sacrifice around a thousand mana as well as a thousand health into Azarinth Awakening.

Magma still dripped from her body, some of her skin molten but already regrowing. She looked at her fist and back at the Trakorov, the heat coming from its mouth now nearly damaging her with its intensity alone.

Azarinth Awakening activated, and she slammed her fist into the creature's massive chin. A dull *crack* echoed as a tiny shockwave rippled over the ground, and her ashen limbs were buffeted back slightly. A chunk of her mana was ripped out of her and flowed in chaotic patterns into the creature.

She felt that a large part of it had been unable to penetrate, but she had also very much noticed the slight distance its head had moved as the physical energy went through her body, bones vibrating. It felt like she had hit solid steel.

"Ally," she said, her voice infused with magic. She stood, her body healed and her armor reformed, eyes locked with the creature's.

### **'ding' Monster Hunter reaches lvl 15**

The being huffed and turned its attention back to the Fae before it growled and stood up, the ground shaking in the process.

"Did you convince it?" Ilea asked as she flew over to the Fae.

It appeared on her shoulder as Ilea tried to make out where the Trakorov's head went. The thing was about fifty meters in height, nearly reaching the cavern's ceiling.

The Fae shook its head slowly as they reached the exit, teleporting out into the light and quickly moving away from the gate.

Ilea saw the Fae point at her face as it giggled in her mind.

*Convincing.*

At the same moment, the steel gate bent outward, as well as a thirty-meter section of the stone wall. It wasn't a violent explosion, reminding Ilea

more of a burrowing creature bursting out of soft earth.

Ilea had a broad grin on her face as she watched the massive armored creature shake off debris that was twice her size, its eyes scanning the surroundings before they fell on her flying form.

*Challenger.*

“Yeah, fucking right. You think you can survive on my shoulder? I don’t intend to watch from afar,” Ilea said, flying toward the Trakorov.

*Distance*, the Fae confirmed, but for now, it remained with her.

The monster really reminded Ilea of some form of dinosaur-dragon mix. The creature lacked wings, but following its small demonstration, she gauged it was more of an underground dweller anyway.

It stepped out onto the sands on four armored legs with claws that could shred through city walls with ease. Its form was massive, built for armor and weight instead of speed and flexibility. Despite all that, it moved with fluid steps, neither sinking into the sand nor losing balance.

Its horns were slightly chipped and vicious, near-black bones jutting out from its skull as well as numerous parts of its massive body.

It terrified her, and she loved it.

*Into battle*, she thought as she landed on its head, moving her ash around some of its horns to keep steady. Ilea hadn’t considered asking or approaching slowly. She’d know if it was a problem.

“That way, dear calamity,” she said and pointed, enhancing the last word with magic as she imbued it with her excitement.

The monster roared, making her hold on with all her strength.

*Deranged*, the Fae sent to her excitedly.

Ilea just grinned and held on as the Trakorov moved and jumped, magic thrumming before it dug into the sand.

\* \* \*

Niivalyr adjusted his mask slightly as he floated near the facility. He had offered to make sure no more creatures breached it from outside.

Several corpses riddled with corruption lay below him, having fallen to his curses and barriers. Their lack of ranged attacks really made them simple targets, as did the mindless state they had been rendered to.

*Perhaps I should have joined her, should have fought these creatures alone to gain power,* he wondered. Still, it was done now, and he wouldn't waste more time here than necessary. It was through his destruction of the Taleen that he would find strength.

"Brooding again?" the necromancer asked as he flew closer.

Niivalyr hissed. "You have found the survivors?"

"Yeah. Illusion, shadow, mind, and dark mages, as well as warriors that are pretty much just scavengers. Not much for what we're about to do," Maro said.

Niivalyr watched as the necromancer summoned a group of Cliff Wyvern corpses, death magic emanating from the former king.

The elf glanced down as one of the corpses twitched before he looked back at the raging storm in the distance. The power of the elements themselves, controlled through raw magic.

*The power of the Oracles.*

The survivors of the expedition joined them soon after, though few were likely to provide useful spells. The rest would hide and wait for the fighters to return.

Niivalyr landed close to the Wyverns and hissed. Monstrous creatures, but they were about to face an elemental.

He watched Catelyn step up and grow into her massive form, joined by a masked Awakened clad in loose yellow pants and shirt.

### **[Mage – lvl 305]**

*Perhaps another useful member,* he thought. But their group wouldn't make a difference if Ilea failed with her plan.

Then he felt a surge of mana flow over him, accompanied by a distant roar that sent shivers through his body.

**'ding' You have heard the roar of an ancient being – You are paralyzed for 10 seconds.**

He smiled and hissed. She had succeeded.

## Fire and Sand

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Ilea held on to the Fae within a small cocoon of ash as the massive beast moved through stone and sand with ease, its magic pushing aside whatever lay in the way. Her second-tier Sand Magic Resistance helped, massively reducing the pressure she was under.

When they emerged back in the open, she fanned her wings out to protect herself against the strong sand-filled wind. “You should get some distance now, little one!” she said to the Fae, moving the ash away.

It teleported in front of her and gave her a small nod.

*Violence!*

“I’ll focus on survival!” she said, seeing the Fae vanish without a trace right after.

The Trakorov continued with the same momentum, pressing forward and through the storm with heavy steps. Each step brought them closer to their goal, the storm increasing in intensity all the while.

The visibility was atrocious, but she kept steady, trusting the Trakorov to find the way. Her buffs were ready, all her skills much more powerful than they had been back on the first layer.

Ilea was under no illusions about fighting the elemental herself. The magical pressure she felt was extraordinary, something she could only compare to the northern storms or the creature she was currently holding on to.

This time, she would take the part of a healer. If the Trakorov died or fell to the corruption, nothing else would stand in the elemental's way.

She felt the pressure from below and grinned.

### ***'ding' Arcane Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 17***

Heat rushed out from the Trakorov, small flames clinging to her ash as the monster roared its challenge.

Its maw opened wide before a stream of lava sprayed into the storm of sand. It didn't stop, instead increasing in both heat and velocity as the size of the cone increased. Everything it touched mixed with the molten rock, sticking to it and falling to the ground. A path was thus formed within the storm, filling up again quickly but not before they got a glance at the enemy they were facing.

Ilea stared at the eagle-like wings spreading out from a flying cat-like body. A woman's head adorned with goat-like horns sat on the body's shoulders. The being was made of sand, a part of the storm and its center at the same time, and lined with corruption throughout its form. It was roughly the size of the Trakorov – but it could fly.

It turned toward them just as the lava slowed down and hissed at an almost inaudible frequency.

As Ilea instinctively covered her ears, the elemental was once more hidden within the storm before waves of sound washed over her. Blood dripped from her ears before her hearing finally returned.

### ***'ding' You have learned the General Skill: Sound Magic Resistance – lvl 1 Sound Magic Resistance – lvl 1***

***Intricate and difficult to master, used by both mages and monsters. You have withstood and survived sound attacks, making you more resistant to its effects.***

Ilea sent healing magic into the creature below her, focusing on the organs she thought to be its ears. They had withstood the attack but showed signs of damage.

Her precognition made her form a wall of ash in front of her, adding her wings to the mix before the storm twisted and moved as if it were living. It

first moved away and up before it came down upon them, a thousand blades of condensed sand that washed into both her and the Trakorov.

It flowed down like a river, and Ilea's defenses were shredded away as the sand was deflected to the side, chipping at her wall of ash, constantly regenerating until her defenses were breached. Her skin held up better, but it too was cut and bruised, increasingly so with every passing second.

Heat gathered within her as she regenerated her body against the constant assault, pulsing as much healing mana into the Trakorov as she could. Corruption seeped into her body from the sand, only to be countered and removed by her resistance.

The storm returned to its former state as Ilea stood up from her crouched position, her ash and body reforming at the same time. She breathed out when a wave of heat rippled out of the Trakorov, the corruption forming on its body washed away in an instant.

Its wounds closed quickly, even without her help. Ilea held on as the creature roared, watching the storm twist and condense before them, whirlwinds of sand filled with chunks and spikes moving over them.

The monster below her slammed its tail down into the sand and spewed lava. The river turned into a high-pressure beam as the heated material cut through the storm, reaching the elemental and slathering its whole right wing and body in burning red heat.

Another hiss cut the air as Ilea continued to heal them both, gritting her teeth against the magical pressure, feeling it build in her head before a chunk of it exploded outward. Instant healing reformed her skull as she took a deep breath, watching the elemental shed a truckload of sand covered in lava, its body reforming as the storm raged around it.

\* \* \*

Catelyn felt the pressure even from this distance. Their group was approaching quickly after the elemental's cry had frozen them in place, and she spread her tails to protect the group of support mages who had volunteered to join them.

The elf had formed a broad white barrier in front of them, stopping the occasional sand projectile that made its way toward them.

Five Wyverns were flying around the group, purple flames dancing in their maws. Maro controlled them, his whole focus taken by the high-level undead.

Venekov, one of the expedition's support mages had insisted on joining them, golden sparks occasionally visible around his body as he protected a small group of flying mages.

They watched the sandstorm condense and form a river a hundred meters wide that washed over the scaled black monster.

"Now! Go!" Catelyn shouted, and all of them advanced as one, barriers around them as the Wyverns fanned out to draw the elemental's attention.

She felt the familiar feeling of bard spells, making her focus better and her flames burn just a little brighter.

Catelyn flew upward, condensing her mana into a glowing sphere of fire. She watched the Sand Elemental and pushed more and more into the spell, more than she had ever risked before.

The river stopped before a stream of lava broke through, covering a part of the flying enemy. The Wyverns rushed forward before she released her spell, the flaming meteor vanishing with blinding speed as the sandstorm reformed around them.

Catelyn teleported down when she heard the creature's cry. Their group now flew close together as the healers activated their spells, shining white barriers taking the brunt of the force, quickly cracking under the pressure.

\* \* \*

Ilea flew down in front of the Trakorov's maw before her limbs lashed out, ripping out a human-sized chunk of corruption that had lodged itself in its carapace.

She stabilized herself and dug farther down before a wave of heat made the rest of it burn up. Her ashen armor reformed quickly, her burnt skin healing below.

As she remained hanging from the monster's face, she watched the sand around them focus once more, forming hundred-meter-long blades above them.

*Shit.*

She aimed her limbs upward, releasing Heart of Cinder into the closest blade that approached. Fire and heat slammed into the sand, changing the blade's trajectory enough to slide past the Trakorov's armored back. The other six blades crashed down, making the creature buckle as it roared.

A shockwave followed, and Ilea held on with her wings and all her ashen tendrils as her body was buffeted by it.

She blinked up onto the Trakorov's back and found two of the weapons had penetrated its carapace, one deeper than the other. Ilea jumped into the wound and released Heart of Cinder with the little heat it had managed to store already, burning away the corruption that clung to its insides before she immediately started charging it again.

Her ash spread and pulsed healing mana into the Trakarov's wound, slowly reforming tissue as she felt more rumbling from outside. She focused on her task, hearing explosions boom and thunder.

Then there was a roar from the Trakorov, followed by a high-pitched whine.

Ilea felt the sweat rolling down her brow and back, reforming cubic meters of flesh before she blinked into the other wound twenty meters away. There was enough room within it for her to stand, and she activated Heart of Cinder again. It had only been recharged for a couple of seconds, but that was enough to burn up the corruption.

Ilea was nearly done when the creature buried itself in the sand again. She held on inside the small crevice that was left of the second wound and waited.

They burst back out of the ground mere moments later, an explosion of heat, fire, and lava washing over Ilea as she formed her wings and covered herself in all the ash she could.

She saw the Trakorov looking up toward the elemental, its maw opening wide as a spreading heat instantly changed the very air around them.

Then a beam of blinding light, fire, and lava exploded upward, engulfing the elemental entirely. A wave of wind and sand washed over her, followed by a scorching wave of heat.

Ilea felt her eyes pop, her mind blanking for a moment before she was back, seeing the scorched remains of her bones as they quickly recovered, muscle and skin reforming as her ashen armor spread over her again.

The spell hadn't activated Azarith Perception, but she knew she'd dipped below half of her health – at least. Her wings reformed as she

tumbled through the air, and she saw the skeleton of a Wyvern falling twenty meters away.

Ilea twirled in the air and saw the Trakorov diving toward the ground. Drops of lava spread outward from above like fireworks, part of the layer's ceiling covered in the glowing molten rock.

The sand on the ground had turned to glass for at least a hundred meters in all directions. The storm had been pushed away by the explosion, a wave of sand still visible in the distance.

The elemental remained in the air, turned to glass in its entirety.

A serene calm followed as Ilea held her breath.

Two seconds later, the Trakorov landed on its four legs, a booming explosion resounding as its weight crashed into the sand and stone below.

Cracks formed on the glass form of the elemental before it shattered with a deafening hiss, followed by a wave of magic that sent Ilea rolling through the air.

Stabilizing herself again quickly, she charged her wings and watched as chunks of glass shattered and fell to the ground, the elemental breaking out of the prison formed of its own body.

Her ally turned and growled at the floating creature, dozens of wounds on its head and chest seeping dark blood.

She sped up, reaching the Trakorov almost instantly before slowing down, blinking the rest of the distance, and cutting away the corruption. One of its eyes had been infected, so she ripped it out and reformed it as she flew around its face, continuing to heal its chest and legs a moment later.

"Don't give up on me now, big guy!" she shouted, her voice enhanced with all the encouragement she could muster.

The terrifying creature sent a wave of heat outward, and the remaining corruption was burned up as Ilea's armor vanished and reformed again. She gritted her teeth and continued healing as massive shards of glass crashed down into the dunes around them.

## Buried

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Ilea saw her companions in the distance, flying as a trio around the elemental, fire and death crashing against the sand, which was still half covered in a layer of glass.

“Any chance of another one of those?” Ilea asked the being, patching up its body. Even removing the corruption wasn’t easy with her ash.

*Just don’t get hit directly.*

She quickly checked her few notifications while she healed.

**‘ding’ Veteran reaches 2nd lvl 9**

**‘ding’ Lava Magic Resistance reaches lvl 2**

**‘ding’ Lava Magic Resistance reaches lvl 3**

**‘ding’ Sand Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 14**

Ilea kept her eyes on the Elemental as she flew around the Trakorov’s body, her sphere informing her about the wounds. By the time she continued with its legs, the creature had yet to make another move.

Another powerful hiss came from the elemental as tendrils of sand burst out from various cracks in the glass, wiggling into the open and trying to pry the glass away.

Ilea was done with the monster’s legs and landed back on its head. “Good to go?” she asked, infusing her voice.

The Trakorov huffed before it looked up and roared.

Explosions of fire wracked through the hovering sand. Streams of death and curse magic burned into it as well, Elfie's barriers visible here and there as he protected the others.

Ilea felt the heat build before a stream of lava covered the sand entirely, hissing sounds from both the heat and the elemental reaching her moments later.

**'ding' Sound Magic Resistance reaches lvl 2**

**'ding' Sound Magic Resistance reaches lvl 3**

"I think that just made it more mad," she said, watching a blob of sand break out and rush to the ground.

A ball of fire impacted the creature, as did another lava spell, both burning into the sand.

The flying glass prison covered in molten rock returned to being just that, crashing into the desert a moment later, shards and splinters spreading onto the thin field of glass that had formed near where the Trakorov had broken out of the ground.

The elemental moved over the glass surface as if it were slithering, its legs losing form with each attempted step, its wings flapping uselessly on its back. Sand burst through the cracks on the ground and from farther out, rebuilding the creature as it hissed, shrugging off the magic that crashed into its body.

"Come on, get it while it's weak!" Ilea shouted and blinked forward, pointing at the glassy area and the elemental.

The behemoth huffed and followed, its steps building momentum, steam rising from its mouth, eyes focused on the enemy. Ilea smiled and landed on its back again, holding on with her ashen limbs as they closed the distance.

The Trakorov was running, its massive claws and weight breaking the layer of glassy sand as if it were a thin sheet of ice over a pond.

A ball of fire flew at the elemental. It hissed and blocked the spell, engulfed in fire as the blast further cracked the glass around it. The elemental focused back on the Trakorov when it heard it roar.

Sand was pouring in from all directions, but the elemental's half-formed body charged nonetheless. Ilea formed all the ash she could, building walls in front of her in the few seconds before the monsters collided.

They crashed into each other with so much force that both were lifted up and Ilea was flung to the side and away from them, blinking up just before she hit the ground.

She watched the Trakorov bite into the elemental's shoulder as lava flowed from between its teeth. Sand spears cut into the monster from several sides, digging into its carapace and soon drawing blood. Monstrous claws shredded into the Sand Elemental, cutting away corruption and hardened chunks.

Ilea blinked again, using her Heart of Cinder to push and burn away the sand and corruption on the Trakorov, healing specific wounds she deemed the most dangerous. She weaved through the hundreds of projectiles and tendrils of sand that formed and rained down, battering its carapace.

By now, lava covered half the elemental, but more sand was endlessly flowing – as well as forming out of thin air.

Ilea used Storm of Cinders, pushing mana into the sand tendrils as she cut and healed, occasionally hit by a stray blade or tendril. Death magic and fire burned away at wounded areas or larger spikes of sand that burrowed into the powerful monster from below, her allies closer now.

The Trakorov's arms were getting caught in massive mounds of sand flowing up from the ground, building up and keeping them in place as it kept its tight grip on the elemental's shoulder with its jaws.

Ilea saw white barriers form around the sand and envelop the Trakorov's left front leg, the monster biting into the mound to get the limb free.

Ilea blinked away and charged her wings, forming an ashen drill as large as her own body in front of herself, adding ash to it until the density couldn't get higher. When her wings were ready, she made the whole thing spin around a solid base and rushed back in.

Her flight speed accelerated before she slammed into the heavy mound of sand that kept the Trakorov's left leg locked down. Her resistance to the element made her push farther, her drill burrowing deep.

And then she broke through. Ilea blinked again before the sand around her closed, seeing with joy how the arm broke out and slashed into the Sand Elemental's head, digging deep into its body.

She flew back and continued healing, cutting out the corruption that seeped into the Trakorov as she charged Heart of Cinder, keeping an eye on her resources.

Fire and death magic assisted her continuously, the corruption burnt from its wounds rendering them ready to be healed.

The Trakorov's left arm slammed into the elemental's side, the sand creature reverting to an undefined form as it slowly spread over its assailant.

"It's about to devour the creature!" Niivalyr shouted from somewhere to Ilea's left, forming a barrier to block a series of attacks.

"Stop the sand!" Catelyn replied, forming a set of fireballs.

A wave of heat expanded out from the Trakorov, burning up the building corruption but only briefly pushing back the sand, which was reforming quickly as it slowly covered the face of their fiery ally, whose arms were now completely stuck in the growing elemental.

Ilea flew as far away as she dared, then formed a drill and checked Heart of Cinder. Not quite enough, but with another few seconds, she might have a chance. She'd hoped the elemental would need to at least somewhat retain its form, but it turned out it could just become a wave of moving sand.

She sped back toward the fight, covering the distance in mere seconds as she aimed right in front of where the Trakorov's head should be. The elemental had covered a third of the other monster's body by now, only marginally slowed down by the waves of heat it exuded and her companions' shields and fire magic.

Her heavy impact sent her burrowing into the sand, stopping a little past the Trakorov's open maw. Fully surrounded by sand, Ilea started to use her reversed healing as well as her limbs to deliver mana intrusion spells.

Her eyes, however, were focused on the Trakorov's open maw, its massive teeth still moving as more sand poured into the monster's throat. She charged her wings again and reformed as large a drill as she could manage against the encroaching sand.

She shot off as soon as they were charged, burrowing through the sand and into the Trakorov's throat. Her second-tier resistance allowed her to get through the sand rather easily before she emerged deeper in its throat, where the sand had not yet reached.

"I really hope this pisses you off," she said, aiming her hand at the corrupted sand that was closing in. She sacrificed two thousand health and released Heart of Cinder, heat and fire sent forth with a blinding light as the sand started pushing against her ash.

The fire burned deep, pushing the sand back just enough for her to briefly see the monster's teeth before they were covered in sand once more. The muscles around her tensed, and heat began to form behind her.

*Cleared the way, time to fuck off.*

Her perception slowed down as she felt and saw the lava come to life behind her. The tight confines of the creature's throat meant that no matter how she moved, she was in contact with the beast, preventing her from blinking.

Instead, she formed as much ash as she could in the fraction of a second of slowed time, moving her arms, limbs, and wings out to push outward against the restricting throat, expanding it for just a moment.

Right before the lava came, she made all her ash vanish and jumped, moving into a fetal position in midair, activating her blink as soon as she wasn't touching the monster anymore.

She reappeared where her sphere had perceived nothing to be, twenty meters to the side of the Trakorov's head, right as a scalding wave of heat washed over her, singeing her skin as her ashen armor reformed, wings spreading behind her.

Ilea watched in anticipation as the sand started glowing a deep red, a large part of the elemental brightening and bubbling. The inferno spread and engulfed most of the rippling sand-form. The elemental broke away from the Trakorov before all its insides were turned to glass.

A comparatively small blob of sand remained, breaking away from the rapidly cooling glass and falling to the ground. It began to slither away before four white barriers formed around it. The Elemental was already summoning sand to regrow its form within its newfound prison as the Trakorov collapsed, hitting the ground with a resounding crash and causing the glassy sand to shatter.

Ilea blinked into the prison of barriers, spreading ash to mix it with the sand, and her reversed healing flowed into the corrupted elemental as she charged Absolute Destruction. She felt the powerful effects of Elfie's curse all around, her ears popping when a hiss of impossible volume sounded right next to her.

She could feel the monster's presence, the frenzied elemental thrashing against the cracking enclosure. It focused on her as soon as it sensed the damage, ignoring the barriers for a moment.

Ilea saw two white barriers outside the elemental's prison, one below the Trakorov's head, which was lying sideways on the ground, and one on top. As the elf slowly steered the monster's head toward his barriers, Catelyn landed on top of it and charged a sphere of fire.

"Wake up!" Ilea shouted, infusing her voice as she felt her body punctured by the sand in a dozen places, her organs and bones shattered by the powerful creature. Her regeneration couldn't keep up with the damage.

Then she saw the Trakorov's eyes flutter behind her, its mouth parting just as Elfie opened his prison. She smiled.

Ilea couldn't blink away, but she kept the Elemental's attention on her, moving through the sand as she tried to get herself behind its form within the barriers.

Catelyn's flames erupted within the prison's small confines, followed by a focused stream of lava.

Ilea held on, the sand before her glowing bright before she felt her flesh and bones melt away, her instant healing recovering her body as the prison was filled with molten rock. The barriers exploded outward, and she felt herself being dragged away.

*Elfie!* she thought as her eyes reformed. She was being held by a familiar clawed hand but had no throat to hiss her thanks – everything below her neck was missing entirely.

Her instant regeneration made flesh and muscle explode from her head a moment later. The elf, who had been holding onto her hair, was suddenly dragged down by the weight of her whole body, his robes melting and in flames as he tumbled across the glass below.

Ilea reformed her ashen armor and started healing the elf, his skull and ears heavily damaged by the sound magic. The lava and heat had burned into his body too – enough to kill any lesser being.

"You're... I saw you... reduced to a head!" Elfie shouted, ripping off his partially melted steel mask and coughing blood.

A seemingly endless series of dings hit her mind as she helped him stand up, healing mana still flowing into him as he hissed.

She grinned. "A head is all I need."

**'ding' Your group has defeated [Corrupted Sand Elemental – lvl 1483]**

**‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 339 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 340 – Five stat points awarded – One third tier skill point awarded**

**‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 341 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 342 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 343 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 344 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 345 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 338 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 339 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 340 – Five stat points awarded – One third-tier skill point awarded**

**‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 341 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 342 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 343 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 344 – Five stat points awarded**

## Recovery

---

“Focus! Stop healing me – heal that one,” Elfie hissed, pointing at the Trakorov, corruption pulsing from a variety of wounds. “Otherwise we will merely have replaced one monster with the next.”

Ilea nodded immediately, blinking toward the Trakorov before she started cutting out large swaths of corruption, healing magic flowing into the creature.

Elfie followed a moment later, still injured but helping nonetheless, his barriers ripping out as much corruption as they could. Catelyn and Maro soon joined them.

“We killed an elemental,” Catelyn said as she watched.

“Some fire would be helpful,” Ilea called to the fox. “I’m losing to the blood manipulation.”

Catelyn growled as flames lit up around her. “This isn’t how I intended to celebrate,” she commented before she started burning the spreading corruption.

They fought the spread for a while, the other survivors soon joining in too. But Ilea was slowly becoming a little nervous as the Trakorov’s condition wasn’t improving. When it suddenly huffed and opened its eyes, her own eyes went wide.

“Flee!” she shouted.

She and her friends teleported away just before a wave of heat washed over her. Then Ilea blinked back on top of the Trakorov’s head and

continued healing the creature.

### **[Trakorov – lvl ????]**

“Thought I’d lost you there,” she said and relaxed, her back leaning against one of its horns.

The creature huffed, tired and hurt, its eyes looking up at her before they closed.

Ilea smiled when the Fae appeared in front of her, gesturing at the scene around them before it twirled and bowed, giggling in her mind.

Maro approached them, his arms crossed. “You sure this is safe?”

The Trakorov opened one eye, making Maro jolt back, getting some distance again.

Ilea laughed and tapped the horn behind her. “You should leave before it thinks you’re food.”

Maro gave her a look and then smiled. “I can’t believe this plan of yours worked.”

“I can’t take the credit. Thank Mr. Violence over here,” Ilea said, patting the creature on her shoulder.

It giggled with delight.

“Is it done? Is the corruption no longer spreading?” Catelyn asked.

Ilea touched the Trakorov and nodded. “Yeah, we’re clear. Tough one, this guy. Guess I have another goal.”

Elfie hissed as he approached, stopping when the Trakorov growled. “You intend to fight this one in the future?”

Ilea smiled. “I don’t think so. But I’m inspired by its resilience.”

*Dense!* the Fae sent into her mind.

“As in stupid, or literally?” Ilea asked, but she didn’t get an answer in return.

“We’ll regroup with the others,” Catelyn said. “Might need your help to get through the nineteenth layer.”

“Sure. I’ll finish healing it up and make sure it’s fully free of corruption before I join you.” Ilea tapped the top of the Trakorov’s skull. “Really well fought, big guy.”

The Trakorov huffed and slowly started turning back toward its cavern.  
*We took down an elemental.*

Ilea was grinning to herself as the others made their way back, thinking of the battle and magic she'd just witnessed. They wouldn't have come close to winning without the Trakorov's help.

Two four-mark beings. A sandstorm and scorching heat like nothing she'd felt or seen before.

As she sat atop the monster's head, feeling the heavy impacts of its steps, she couldn't help but wonder if her own magic could reach those kinds of heights.

After making sure the Trakorov was corruption-free, Ilea flew back toward the steel facility and checked her notifications.

**‘ding’ Sentinel Reconstruction reaches 3rd lvl 24**

**‘ding’ Sentinel Reconstruction reaches 3rd lvl 25**

**‘ding’ Azarinth Awakening reaches 3rd lvl 23**

**‘ding’ Blink reaches 3rd lvl 16**

**‘ding’ Sentinel Core reaches 3rd lvl 20**

**‘ding’ Azarinth Fighting reaches 3rd lvl 23**

**‘ding’ Azarinth Perception reaches 3rd lvl 5**

**‘ding’ Armor of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 25**

**‘ding’ Aspect of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 22**

**‘ding’ Heart of Cinder reaches 3rd lvl 13**

**‘ding’ Ashen Wings reaches 3rd lvl 5**

**‘ding’ Keeper of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 19**

**‘ding’ Monster Hunter reaches lvl 16**

**‘ding’ Veteran reaches 2nd lvl 9**

**‘ding’ Earth Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 2**

**‘ding’ Earth Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 3**

**‘ding’ Lava Magic Resistance reaches lvl 4**

**...**

**‘ding’ Lava Magic Resistance reaches lvl 10**

**‘ding’ Sand Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 15**

**‘ding’ Sand Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 16**

**‘ding’ Sound Magic Resistance reaches lvl 4**

She felt that with Endurance, Strength, and Dexterity all at three hundred, her physical body had finally caught up again with all the magical power she'd accumulated, so she put her stat points into her primary stats again. Most went toward Wisdom.

*Now for the more interesting bit.*

**‘ding’ Sentinel Huntress reaches 3rd lvl 1**

**Passive: Sentinel Huntress – 3rd lvl 1**

*Huntress turned Sentinel. Your eyes are unmatched, and so is your nose. Perceive the smallest irregularities in your surroundings as well as the ambient mana to find clues about your target’s whereabouts.*

*2nd stage: You gain a sense of the distress in the people around you.*

*Amplify this by sacrificing mana.*

*3rd stage: Through Azarinth magic, you may mark an enemy or ally with the Sentinel Mark. Allies may use the stored mana to signal the Azarinth Sentinel. Each level in the third tier adds an additional mark that can be used. Marks forcefully applied have a limited duration.*

**Category: Body Enhancement**

*Interesting. What exactly does it do, though? I’ll have to test that later. Don’t want to mark the Fae with something I don’t understand yet.*

*And one mark per third-tier level? That means, right now, it’s limited to one. And an ally can signal me? Is there a range limit?*

She already knew who she would test it with.

Ilea smiled and leveled her last remaining Class skill to the third tier.

**‘ding’ Eyes of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 1**

**Passive: Eyes of Ash – lvl 3rd lvl 1**

*Increases your perception by 50.5% [404%] when fighting without a weapon.*

*2nd stage: Effects apply with weapons as well. When opportunity calls, you notice possible critical weak points on enemies with more ease.*

*3rd stage: Your eyes are vastly improved. Great distances and a lack of light won’t pose a problem to you anymore.*

**Category: Body Enhancement – Ashen Magic**

Ilea instantly noticed the change – everything both near and far immediately turned sharper. It felt like upgrading from a flip phone to the newest smartphone in both screen quality and camera resolution.

*This is fucking weird.*

She closed her eyes after a couple of seconds. She'd seen individual grains of sand a hundred meters away and the distant form of Elfie, flying at great speed. She'd seen the intricate designs on the back of his armored robe, the damage to the fabric on his right shoulder.

*Guess I'm an eagle now...*

She looked at herself, at her own hands. Even at such short range, it made her nearly nauseous. She closed her eyes again and decided to use her sphere as her primary perception until she got used to the change.

**Name: Ilea Spears**

**Unspent stat points: 0**

**Unspent 3rd-tier skill points [The Azarinth Sentinel]: 0**

**Unspent 3rd-tier skill points [Kin of Ash]: 0**

**Class 1: The Azarinth Sentinel – lvl 345**

- **Active: Absolute Destruction – 3rd lvl 21**
- **Active: Sentinel Reconstruction – 3rd lvl 25**
- **Active: Azarinth Awakening – 3rd lvl 23**
- **Active: Blink – 3rd lvl 16**
- **Active: Sentinel Sphere – 3rd lvl 8**
- **Passive: Sentinel Core – 3rd lvl 20**
- **Passive: Azarinth Fighting – 3rd lvl 23**
- **Passive: Sentinel Huntress – 3rd lvl 1**
- **Passive: Azarinth Perception – 3rd lvl 5**
- **Passive: Azarinth Reversal – 3rd lvl 16**

**Class 2: Kin of Ash – lvl 345**

- **Active: Armor of Ash – 3rd lvl 25**
- **Active: Aspect of Ash – 3rd lvl 22**
- **Active: True Ash Creation – 3rd lvl 21**
- **Active: Heart of Cinder – 3rd lvl 13**
- **Active: Storm of Cinders – 3rd lvl 15**
- **Passive: Ash and Ember Unity – 3rd lvl 20**

- **Passive: Ashen Wings – 3rd lvl 5**
- **Passive: Eyes of Ash – 3rd lvl 1**
- **Passive: Avatar of Ash – 3rd lvl 15**
- **Passive: Keeper of Ash – 3rd lvl 19**

#### **General Skills:**

- **Elos Standard language – lvl 6**
- **English Language – lvl 15**
- **Harmony of the Drowned – lvl 5**
- **Heavy Archery – lvl 5**
- **Identify – lvl 10**
- **Meditation – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Monster Hunter – lvl 16**
- **Veteran – 2nd lvl 10**
- **Arcane Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 17**
- **Ash Magic Resistance – lvl 1**
- **Blast Resistance – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Blood Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 11**
- **Blood Manipulation Resistance – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Corrosion Resistance – 2nd lvl 15**
- **Crystal Resistance – 2nd lvl 1**
- **Curse Resistance – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Dark Magic Resistance – lvl 15**
- **Death Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 8**
- **Dust Magic Resistance – lvl 1**
- **Earth Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 3**
- **Fear Resistance – lvl 10**
- **Gravity Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 3**
- **Health Drain Resistance – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Heat Resistance – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Ice Resistance – 2nd lvl 10**
- **Lava Magic Resistance – lvl 10**
- **Light Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Lightning Resistance – 2nd lvl 14**
- **Mana Drain Resistance – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Mental Resistance – 2nd lvl 18**
- **Mist Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 10**

- **Pain Tolerance – 2nd lvl 9**
- **Poison Resistance – 2nd lvl 14**
- **Sand Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 16**
- **Silver Magic Resistance – lvl 1**
- **Soul Magic Resistance – lvl 8**
- **Sound Magic Resistance – lvl 4**
- **Space Magic Resistance – lvl 4**
- **Stamina Drain Resistance – 2nd lvl 8**
- **Time Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 10**
- **Void Magic Resistance – lvl 7**
- **Water Resistance – 2nd lvl 1**
- **Wind Resistance – 2nd lvl 14**
- **Wood Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 1**

**Status:**

**Vitality:** 935

**Endurance:** 303

**Strength:** 302

**Dexterity:** 303

**Intelligence:** 936

**Wisdom:** 954

**Health:** 9002/9350

**Stamina:** 3030/3030

**Mana:** 7829/9540

## Friends?

---

The survivors were waiting near the facility, a couple of dead worm creatures on the sands nearby amid a lot of blood and corruption.

Ilea landed, waving at the group, with all eyes on her. Most of the lower-level ones were apprehensive, some outright terrified. She moved her ashen armor to her back but found the reaction didn't change much.

"You made it. How is the Trakorov?" Catelyn asked, approaching in her normal-sized form.

"Grumpy? Not sure. I'll check on it again at some point soon," Ilea said.

"You don't plan to return to Hallowfort?"

"Not yet," Ilea smiled. "I think I can get a little more out of the Descent. Even if there aren't really any monsters in the last layers, I at least want to see them."

They soon prepared to leave, gathering near the entrance to the nineteenth layer.

"I'll go on ahead and meet my sand monster friend, and you guys can move past a couple minutes later," Ilea said. "I'll send the Fae as soon as the creature is distracted. Fly high and fast."

Catelyn nodded. "Stay safe!"

Ilea gave her a nod and vanished, appearing twenty meters into the sand-covered layer before she spread her wings and started flying.

"Can you tell if there's more than one?" she asked the Fae.

It shook its head.

“Well, we’ll just have to f—”

She broke off as she felt the drain magic activate, coming closer at a rapid pace.

“There you are!” she said, waving in the general direction of the magic’s source.

Sand tendrils formed on the ground before falling down again, the head of the Deep Mirage popping out and looking at them.

Ilea formed an ashen clone and added spears as she lazily flapped her wings.

The creature vanished into the sand with a giggle, sand spears shooting up a moment later.

“Can you go inform the others?” Ilea asked her companion.

\* \* \*

“Do you think she abandoned us?” one of the Awakened asked in a whisper.

Jonna looked over but didn’t comment. She could see Catelyn and the two others near the exit. The necromancer who looked human and the elf. Both terrified her. At least she knew the fox was on Hallowfort’s side.

*A wonder she didn’t kill us back then. I can’t believe it’s even the same person.*

“She’s merely a puppet of the Spirit of Old,” another Awakened said. “Trust me, there’s a reason she’s always covered in ash.”

“I think the Spirit is her prisoner,” the first one replied. “She uses it to become more powerful. How else do you think she got down here? I bet she’s negotiating with the creature ahead to let her pass safely.”

“Stop talking nonsense,” a mage said. “The human came to save us, and she fought the elemental. Without her, we would be dead.”

“You really believe she’s human?” another asked before suddenly looking at Jonna. “What do you think?”

She looked for a reply but couldn’t think of anything, stuttering a little before Hana stepped in front of her.

“I fought her – some time ago. She is human, and she came to save us. And she won’t abandon us, believe me.”

Just when she said that, the Fae appeared within the tunnel. It looked otherworldly, beautiful and ancient. Jonna couldn’t believe it was only level

one hundred. The white eyes focused on her for a moment before they moved on.

*Safe.*

*Careful.*

It sent thoughts into her mind as if it was the most normal thing. Jonna had experienced telepathy before, but this was different. She couldn't quite place in what way.

"See? There we go," Hana said with a grin.

\* \* \*

Ilea took her time, training with the Mirage for a while as she got used to her new eyes, learning that she could change the sharpness a little. She finally waved her goodbyes, twirling through the air and guiding the last projectiles toward her unprotected body as she left.

"Do you think it will be lonely?" Ilea asked, glancing back at the head watching her depart.

*Negative.*

"No? What makes you think that?"

*Aggressive.*

*Predator.*

*Malicious.*

"Doesn't mean it can't be lonely," she retorted.

The Fae giggled in her mind.

*Simple.*

"The creature itself is simple?" She saw the Fae nod. "I'll believe you on this, but only because it makes me feel better."

*Truth.*

Ilea smiled at the Fae, sighing as she hurried to catch up with the others.

**'ding' Sand Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 17**

**'ding' Sand Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 18**

**'ding' Stamina Drain Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 9**

**'ding' Stamina Drain Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 10**

*Slowly getting there.*

“Do you happen to know anything about third-tier General Skills?”

Ilea didn’t expect the Fae to answer. She was just wondering because so many of her resistances were already maxed out in the second tier.

*More.*

“More? You mean I need more General Skills?”

*Maybe.*

“Or more of them maxed out?”

The Fae nodded.

“Oh really? So you do know about this stuff.”

The Fae feigned ignorance before it giggled.

“So, how many do I need?”

The Fae tapped its chin before it tilted its head.

*Ten.*

“Ten?” Ilea asked, slowing down a little.

*Ten.*

“Ten General Skills at the max to get third-tier skills?”

The Fae nodded.

*Maybe.*

“Maybe,” Ilea repeated, then smiled to herself. *Maybe is good enough.*

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## Regen Powers

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The two of them joined up with the others a couple of minutes later, finding them within the stairwell that led up to the eighteenth layer, where the Elder Sun Sprites were surely already waiting for Ilea's return.

Most of the survivors were already asleep, completely exhausted from the high-stress, near-death experience they'd had to endure for over a month.

"You made it," Catelyn said, still awake.

"It was very close. Nearly died," Ilea said dryly.

"I can imagine," Catelyn said in the same tone.

Elfie hissed and turned away in his terribly opulent bedroll.

"Didn't tell me you were royalty," Ilea whispered his way.

"I simply have a sense of dignity," the elf whispered back.

"You know you can store entire beds in your storage item," she said.

Elfie just gave her a tired hiss.

Ilea turned back to Catelyn. "You should get some sleep. You look rather spent."

"I will, and so should you," Catelyn said.

"Way ahead of you," Ilea said as she summoned her bed, creating an ashen blanket and pillows before lying down. She was out in moments.

\* \* \*

She woke to a tapping of her nose. The Fae was standing inches from her face.

*Sleepyhead.*

*Ah, a victim presents itself,* Ilea thought. She slowly reached out with her ash, wrapping the creature in a small blanket before she dragged it closer. It wasn't exactly big enough to cuddle, but she still held it in her arms and relaxed.

*Confusion.*

The thought wasn't exactly sent to her; it was more a general statement the creature sent out.

"Sssh, it's warm, and you feel like a Galaxy," Ilea said, unable to find a better word at that moment.

Looking around, she saw the rest of the camp packing up. Someone was waking up a grumpy fox sleeping on a comfortable-looking little bed.

"Four hours have passed, human," Niivalyr said as he approached her bed.

"Go ahead – we need to wait anyway. Or the sprites will probably attack everyone," Ilea whispered.

"Will you return with us?"

Ilea thought about it for a moment. She glanced at Catelyn and Maro and then stretched. "You know, now that I'm here, I kind of want to explore the rest of this dungeon. There are more layers to it, after all."

"I see. Then this is where we part ways again. Come find me when you've heard from Isalthar."

Ilea hissed affirmatively before she waved him off with an ashen arm that grew outward from her blanket.

Hana and the other survivors of the expedition didn't make a single noise as they passed her bed. As she prepared to doze off again, she saw various clues to a wide range of emotions within her sphere.

"I'll be going south once we know that the corruption is no longer a threat on the first layer," Maro said when only he and Catelyn remained.

Ilea nodded.

"Come visit me wherever I end up," he continued. "I'm sure you'll be able to find me. This has been enough adventure for me, at least for a while. And don't get yourself killed."

"I will visit," Ilea murmured and cuddled the Fae closer.

“The last five layers were empty according to the sphere, right?” Catelyn asked.

“Yes. Intriguing, right? I want to train up some of my resistances first, though, now that I have the time.”

“Just be careful. We don’t know what else is waiting in this dungeon. And do visit us whenever you are around and have time,” Catelyn said, floating next to the bed as she eyed its two occupants. “And thank you for the help. Both of you.”

Ilea nodded and yawned.

“Make sure to check the sphere from time to time. I hope that, following our efforts, we have a grasp on this corruption problem now, but more may be infected.”

“Sounds good. But first, I sleep.”

Catelyn bowed her head and left, looking back at the bed one more time before she vanished.

*Envy*, the Fae giggled.

*I know. My bed is awesome*, Ilea thought before falling asleep again.

\* \* \*

Ilea woke up sometime later. She’d probably slept much longer than necessary, but after all the fighting and healing, she’d really enjoyed the nap.

*I hope I never get a sleep resistance*, she thought as she sat up with a yawn, tapping the Fae, who she was pretty sure was just pretending to sleep.

She put her bone armor back on and extended her ashen set above it before she got up and stored her bed again. Her necklace also had the benefit of storing the warmth of the bed.

“So, ready for a little adventure?” she asked the Fae. “Or do you want me to escort you back to the surface?”

The Fae looked up at her and clapped its tiny hands together.

*Adventure*.

“That’s what I thought,” Ilea said with a grin.

The Fae appeared on her shoulder and thrust a hand forward.

*Violence!*

*Don't think I should mess with the Sun Sprites yet. Hmm, where should I go first? So many options. I do want to get to the last five layers, but I feel like I should prepare as best as I can. Who knows when I'll have access to such a treasure trove of monsters to train my resistances with again?*

She felt excited. Now that they'd found the expedition and dealt with the elemental, she had all the time in the world to explore.

First, though, they would have to sneak past the Sun Sprites.  
“Hold on, little guy,” Ilea said as she charged her wings.

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## Threshold

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Ilea reached the other side of the eighteenth layer with only a few burnt-up limbs and organs. The high speed of her charged wings had let her jet past most of the creatures before they could even react.

“So, we have a bunch of stuff to do now. Lots of violence. I suggest you start with space magic on my eyes,” Ilea said, deactivating her resistance and removing her armor.

The Fae giggled and started without complaint.

*Violence!*

They moved up soon after, a bit more training done and resources topped up.

“Hmm, so... we’re at number seventeen. Let’s start with the Zanedin Hunters. Time Magic Resistance and maybe some Blood Magic... Blast and Curse is already at level twenty. Alright?”

The Fae nodded enthusiastically.

“I’ll have to use my armor, though – their attacks are a little much otherwise.”

*Sad.*

“I know, I’m pretty fucking weak, right?” she sighed.

The Fae shook its head.

After the two moved up to the sixteenth layer to continue their training, Ilea quickly found the small groups of Zanedin Hunters left behind, all of them corrupted.

She spent several hours leveling her Time Magic Resistance, sometimes even deactivating her armor of ash if only one of them remained.

The Fae had a hard time injuring her with her armor up but still dealt a little damage, helping with her Space Magic Resistance.

When she finished off the last of the corrupted creatures, she checked her progress.

**‘ding’ Blood Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 12**

**‘ding’ Blood Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 13**

**‘ding’ Space Magic Resistance reaches lvl 5**

...

**‘ding’ Space Magic Resistance reaches lvl 8**

**‘ding’ Time Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 11**

...

**‘ding’ Time Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 20**

“That’s nine general skills at level twenty of the second tier,” Ilea said as she looked through the messages, feeling her eyes explode again.

It was a familiar sensation by now, but it seemed the Fae wasn’t getting bored of it yet, nor was it dodging the tiny ashen swords wielded by the ashen Fae.

“So, do you want to pop my eyes for another three days, or should I get the tenth skill against the Storm Griffin on layer fifteen?” Ilea asked with a smirk.

*Death!*

*Death!*

*Death!*

“Alright, you can calm down – I too choose the flying calamity.”

When they reached the exit to the fifteenth layer, Ilea glanced at the Fae. “You should wait here – that thing is dangerous, even for us. You should be able to see from here.”

It nodded and appeared near the ground, looking out through the mostly destroyed exit.

“Shouldn’t take more than half an hour,” she said as she looked up.

The upgrade to her eyes let her quickly make out the dot in the distance. She even saw the monster’s wings and legs.

It was already moving toward her.

*Here we go*, she thought, blinking near the ground thirty meters away – close enough to the exit that she could simply blink back to the Fae if needed. Her third-tier wings would help with the constant barrage as well.

She was here to take damage, but the Storm Griffin was one of the few creatures in this dungeon that could completely stove in her brains. Not something to take lightly.

At least Ilea was somewhat sure the creature wasn't out on a furious murder spree, judging by their last encounter.

*Holy shit that thing is fast... comparable to my charged wings.*

Soon, she saw the Griffin's eyes focused on her, even though it was still hundreds of meters away. She focused as her precognition kicked in, informing her about the coming attacks.

She didn't do anything about them, of course. Instead, her resistance deactivated and her armor opened up to let the weaker wind blades slash directly into her skin.

They cut her nearly to the bone.

*Yeah, this won't take long. That thing could've even helped against the elemental.*

This time, the Griffin quickly moved on to more powerful attacks, either because it remembered her or because it could tell Ilea was looking at it.

It also became apparent that her flying skills had improved vastly, making her able to dodge even the faster attacks more reliably.

Over the course of the next couple of hours, Ilea blinked away many times to heal back up and recover some mana until the last message finally popped into her mind.

**‘ding’ Ashen Wings reaches 3rd lvl 6**

**‘ding’ Ashen Wings reaches 3rd lvl 7**

**‘ding’ Avatar of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 16**

**‘ding’ Veteran reaches 2nd lvl 11**

**‘ding’ Wind Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 15**

...

**‘ding’ Wind Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 20**

Ilea waited for a moment, sitting in the stairwell with the Fae on her side.

A ding resounded.

**'ding' You have proven to be more resilient and masochistic than all except a few before you, training without ANY regard for your own body or mind in a wide variety of General Skills. Mostly Resistances. To find and acquire these skills is already an achievement worthy of mention. To train them to their maximum potential is far beyond even that. For reaching level three hundred in at least one Class, unlocking thirty General Skills, and achieving a minimum of 2nd lvl 20 in ten or more General Skills, you have unlocked third-tier General Skill points.**

Ilea rejoiced with a wide smile. "I did it!"

*Joy!* the Fae sent, dancing in the air.

She read the rest of the notification, unsuccessfully trying to calm herself down.

**One third-tier General Skill point is awarded for each hundred levels in General Skills.**

**You currently have 1,061 levels in General Skills.**

**One third-tier General Skill point awarded**

"Holy fuck... that's way more than I expected. This is a little overwhelming..." Ilea murmured before summoning one of Keyla's meals.

She needed something to distract herself, and as she shoveled the food into her mouth.*Consideration.*

"I'll think about each point carefully, don't worry," she said between bites.

As Ilea calmed down, her joy turned into anticipation.  
*Let's see what's available.*

**3rd-tier General Skill points available [1,061 total skill levels]: 10**

**General Skills available for 3rd-tier advancement:**

- **Meditation**

*You have fought with Meditation active, have trusted in the skill, and have consistently used it to its full potential in the midst of battle. It is certainly crafty and yet quite opposite to the actual intention of calm and serenity. Through your complete disregard for such matters, you have unlocked the potential third tier of Meditation.*

- **Blood Manipulation Resistance**

*You have faced both the carefully crafted Corruption of the Descent as well as the might of a Fallen Hero. Neither has fazed you, proving that your body is ready to advance Blood Manipulation Resistance to the third tier.*

- **Heat Resistance**

*Be it Cliff Wyverns or the power of a Trakorov, you have faced and survived their smoldering fire. It is remarkable your path has not led to primarily fire-related Classes, but here we are. You may advance this skill to the third tier.*

- **Light Magic Resistance**

*Not many have witnessed the combined effort of Elder Sun Sprites, and even fewer have lived to tell the tale. It is beyond anything the second tier would provide protection against, making you ready for the third tier.*

- **Wind Resistance**

*The Storm Griffin is an ancient and proud creature. Your survival is a grave insult to it and proof enough that you deserve to reach the next tier of Wind Resistance.*

Ilea read through the information, surprised that the actual achievements needed to unlock the third tier were listed. The same hadn't been true for her Class skills.

*Though it's a bit frustrating that achievements are necessary – means I have to face something ridiculous in the first place to get the option of a third tier.*

Meditation, heat, and wind were the obvious choices. Ilea kind of wanted Light Magic Resistance too, but she would think about it a little longer.

“Meditation, Heat, and Wind Resistance. What do you think?” she asked the Fae.

It sent a mental thumbs-up.

*I'll still have plenty more points to spend on everything else. Just have to find insane creatures to fight... though the Lightning and Sand Elementals must count – and the Trakorov.*

She smiled. *Need to get those resistances to level twenty.*

Ilea focused on the now. With third-tier General Skills unlocked, she had even more of a reason to train her resistances.

*I also want to explore the last five layers before going back, she thought, tapping her chin. I wonder if Trian has already started training some healers. So much to do. But first...*

### **‘ding’ Meditation reaches 3rd lvl 1**

#### **Meditation – 3rd lvl 1**

**While in the state of meditation, you cannot move. Your natural mana and stamina regeneration are increased by a factor of 423%. The factor is improved upon leveling up the skill.**

**2nd stage: Your familiarity with meditation lets you move slowly while the skill is active.**

**3rd stage: Few ever reach this stage, and those who do normally undertake centuries of study and meditation. You have stood amidst death, trusting the flow of mana to be at your side. Vast experience and understanding have changed your very core. The effects of Wisdom are doubled. Meditation is no longer limited by movement.**

“Oh my shit! “ she exclaimed and laughed, feeling as if invisible floodgates within herself had opened up.

Ilea checked her status with a grin.

#### **Status:**

**Vitality: 935**

**Endurance: 303**

**Strength:302**

**Dexterity:303**

**Intelligence:941**

**Wisdom:944**

**Health: 9350/9350**

**Stamina: 2738/3030**

**Mana: 6821/18888**

*Double the power!*

She looked at the Fae. “Meditation’s third tier doubles the effects of Wisdom... can you fucking believe that?”

The creature nodded knowingly, sending her another thumbs-up.

*Wait, the effects of Wisdom are doubled, and I can keep meditation active at all times now... Seems like I won’t really have to worry about mana in the near future.*

“Fuck yeah, Fae Fae!” she exclaimed.

No.

“What? The nickname?”

It nodded.

“Alright then, Baron Violence,” she said, elated from the skill change.

The Fae sent an approving thought.

Ilea slowed down and continued her meal, selecting Heat Resistance for the next level-up.

**‘ding’ Heat Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 1**

**Heat Resistance – 3rd lvl 1**

*Ignoring the warnings of your parents and friends, you refuse to not stand in fire. This skill will help lessen the damage and pain a little.*

*2nd stage: You’ve been burnt and melted again and again. Through extreme exposure, your skin, muscles, and bones have become much harder to burn and melt.*

*3rd stage: It is a mystery how the soul of a literal volcano has found its way into your body, forcing you to seek out fire and heat as much as you do. Do you not see how melting your body is not a good idea? The third tier lets you retain and use some of the flames and heat around you,*

***should you choose to do so. They are still damaging, of course, but it seems you are beyond caring.***

Ilea narrowed her eyes. The benefits felt unclear, making her hesitate over the third skill she wanted to improve.

*Kind of want to test this one before I advance my Wind Resistance.*

“I’ll wait with the third skill,” she said to the Fae.

*Disappointed.*

“Yes, yes... I want to see how good the Heat Resistance bonus is first.”

She stood up, excited to test some things out and level her resistances even higher.

*Give me your magic, creatures of the Descent!*

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## Open Threads

---

“Think I can ask the Enavurin to level my Mental Resistance?” she asked, checking her skills. Only two levels remained, and the creature certainly packed a punch.

The Fae nodded.

“You can help out as well with your space magic if you want to.”

*Also, I still have poison,* she thought.

“Ready to get past that thing?”

The Fae nodded and appeared in front of her chest, a translucent barrier coming to life before it was covered in a cocoon of ash.

Ilea blinked into the layer and charged her wings, keeping an eye on the Griffin. It usually took a couple of seconds before attacking, another one or two seconds passing before the wind attacks actually reached her.

Her wings thrummed with power right when the creature reached its comfortable ranged attack distance. Ilea activated her third-tier Wind Resistance and felt the air pressure increase as the ability’s second tier tried to push the element aside.

She reached the other side in no time, feeling some attacks hit close behind her as the Griffin quickly changed gears to engage more powerful spells that could keep up with her.

Ilea blinked the last stretch of the layer, appearing in the stairwell that led up to the Enavurin. She turned her back to the wall as her momentum absolutely *slapped* her into the steel.

She left a small dent in the strong steel but was mostly fine, besides a couple of minor bruises. All her defensive skills had paid off, especially her shock absorption bonus from her second-tier Blast Resistance.

*MAGICALLY ENHANCED, AND LIKELY MAGICALLY CREATED, STEEL AGAINST A MAGICALLY ENHANCED HUMAN USING ASHEN ARMOR. I'D LOVE TO SEE HOW A NORMAL CAR OR TRUCK WOULD RESPOND TO ME FLYING INTO IT WITH ENHANCED WINGS.*

Ilea was pretty sure some of the crash test videos she had seen would come close. For the cars, that was. She'd probably be fine.

"You ok there?" she asked the Fae, sending some healing through the slowly opening cocoon.

It nodded and twirled.

*Fast.*

"Right? It's pretty nuts. I just can't really steer while I use it. Now, let's see if our friend is still awake."

The Fae nodded as they ascended quickly through the stairwell, teleporting to avoid walking up the stairs.

"Can you contact it?" she asked the Fae. "I don't have mind powers."

The Fae nodded.

*Greeting.*

Ilea felt a probing pulse of mind magic before a voice spoke into her mind.

*"YOU HAVE RETURNED. A SURPRISE. I HAD ESTIMATED YOUR CHANCES OF SUCCESS TO BE BELOW THREE PERCENT,"* the Enavurin said.

"What a greeting. I expected the chances of you moving your ass away from your tank to be a similarly low percentage," Ilea replied.

*"AN ATTEMPT WAS MADE TO CONTACT ME, BUT I COULD NOT SENSE YOU WITHIN THE GROUP. I THOUGHT YOU HAD BEEN LOST OR BETRAYED. I DO NOT MEAN TO BE UNPLEASANT, BUT I WAS ENGROSSED IN A BEAUTIFUL DREAM,"* the being said.  
*"HAVE YOU BROUGHT NEWS?"*

"Yeah. The Sand Elemental. I'm afraid it was corrupted."

The Enavurin was quiet for a short while. *"SO THE END HAS COME. WHEN WILL IT BE HERE?"*

"It won't. We fought and defeated it."

*"WHAT?"*

"With help. We managed to befriend a Trakorov on the same layer. I'm sorry about your friend." Ilea paused. "It was a pretty insane fight, though."

She could sense both grief and amusement from the Enavurin. “*I’m sure it was. And I’m grateful for the risks you took to set it free. I’m sure it would be glad to know that its might was not misused for reckless destruction.*”

They were quiet for a long moment.

“*I will miss its presence,*” the Enavurin said.

Ilea smiled. “I wish I could have met it before all of this happened.”

The Enavurin sent an affirming thought.

“The corruption. We assume someone in the expedition triggered its release. And we think it functioned as some sort of trap in case someone tampered with the technology left behind in the steel facilities.”

“*I had assumed as much, though it is good not all life within this place has perished because of it. To think that my blood was used for this...*” the Enavurin said, the pressure in Ilea’s mind increasing with the last few words.

“I’ve also come with a small request, if you’re up for it,” she said, trying to distract the being from everything that had happened.

The Enavurin sent a thought, encouraging her to continue.

“I’d like you to use your mind magic against me. I’m two levels away from the second tier’s maximum.”

“*Two levels... is doable. And then I shall rest – and grieve.*”

\* \* \*

Ilea drank some poison while they trained, and the Fae helped, too.

With the benefit of a somewhat recent comparison to the Fallen Hero, Ilea could tell that while the ferocious monster had been powerful, this one here was a true master of mind magic.

Several hours passed, her resistances rising slowly before she finally reached the end of her Mental Resistance’s second tier.

**‘ding’ Mental Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 19**

**‘ding’ Mental Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 20**

**‘ding’ Poison Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 15**

...

**‘ding’ Poison Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 17**

**‘ding’ Space Magic Resistance reaches lvl 9**

## **‘ding’ Space Magic Resistance reaches lvl 10**

Ilea checked to see if it could be advanced.

### **General Skills available for 3rd-tier advancement:**

#### **- Mental Resistance**

**You have trained with true masters of mind magic: Human, Mind Weaver, and Enavurin. Their expertise has tested your defense and resistance in ways few could. Perhaps it was this training that, in the end, led to your many resistances, but there remain cracks in your sanity that even you could not heal. Stay safe.**

*I am safe, don’t worry. Plus I’ll be even safer with all those juicy resistances, she thought with a grin.*

## **‘ding’ Mental Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 1**

### **Mental Resistance – 3rd lvl 1**

**You are more adept at resisting and detecting attacks on your mind.**

**2nd stage: Your mind is nearly impenetrable. Attacks on your mind will be partially reflected, causing harm to the attacker.**

**3rd stage: Your mind is a bright shield and a warning to anyone who dares attack it. You can pinpoint attackers and gain a general idea of their mind magic capabilities. You gain the capability to initiate mental contact with those who are receptive and send simple thoughts and feelings.**

*Oh, there we go, she thought as a powerful magical presence immediately washed over her. Ilea grasped her head for a moment as she got used to the feeling, circulating healing mana through her body.*

*Ocean.*

Ilea sent the thought out to anyone who might be capable of receiving it. *Safe?* the Fae replied.

“Remarkable. You have found a way to the third tier... despite your young age,” the Enavurin said. “A matter of diverse and high-level abilities, then, I presume? Do not worry, Ancient One. She simply requires some time to... adjust.”

Each of his words boomed in her mind, the last a little dulled.

Ilea steadied her breathing and closed her eyes, focusing on meditation and her healing.

*Safe*, she sent to the Fae, as casually as if she were talking.

*Mind*, the creature sent, tapping its brow.

*Yeah*. Slowly, Ilea got used to the sensation and the presence of the Enavurin. She breathed out and shuddered.

*Everything here is ancient compared to me*. She sighed, then rolled her shoulders. *Still got a long way to go*.

*Violence*? she sent to the Fae.

*Violence*, came the answer.

They could finally communicate on the same level. Both sent giggles to each other and twirled in the air.

“Thanks, Kraken,” Ilea said. “Oh, and if you’re looking for interesting creatures to talk to, there’s a Griffin on the fifteenth layer and a Trakorov deeper down.”

*I am aware of them. I wish you good fortune on your journey, young human. It is good to have met you.*”

“Until next time.”

*I will welcome you in a couple of your centuries. Sleep well*,” the creature said, its presence changing to a more serene feeling in her mind.

*You sleep well, too*, Ilea thought with a smile.

*Leave*? the Fae asked.

Ilea watched the mind magic presence of the Enavurin for a couple more minutes. It continued to be overwhelming, but she could let it wash over her now, could accept it as reality.

*With a mind like that, no wonder it can just sit there for millennia.*

She turned to the Fae and gave it a nod before she flew up to the exit. She shivered as she did so, wondering if she hadn’t just destroyed a whole reality by waking up the ancient being.

Ilea decided to focus on something more tangible again, flying over the flowing waters of the thirteenth layer as she waited for one of the Varass Drowners to catch her in its gravity magic field.

*Poison, gravity, Harmony of the Drowned?*

*Underwater*? she sent to the Fae.

The Fae nodded. *Violence!*

\* \* \*

Slowly, Ilea leveled her resistances.

***Space Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 1***

***Most who try to chase this elusive school of magic will find and choose the void instead. You have fought a being of truly peculiar making, have faced and survived its spells, and may count yourself amongst the few to call this skill their own.***

***2nd stage: It is a true mystery how you have sustained so much damage from space magic. You must have truly angered a being to garner such scorn. Your body and its parts become more difficult to displace.***

By now, she'd gained enough levels in Harmony of the Drowned and the other skills she was working on to get another third-tier point.

***‘ding’ One third-tier General Skill point awarded***

“Fucking nice,” she said after blinking out of the water, easily ignoring the Varass Drowners’ powerful magic now that her ashen armor and resistance were active again.

The Fae appeared on her shoulder and lay down.

*Sleep?* Ilea asked.

*Exhausted*, the creature replied.

“Feel free. I’ll protect you,” Ilea said, taking a sip of poison as she moved on.

She chose not to kill the Drowners, feeling so far above their power that there was simply no need.

## Routine Training?

---

Ilea didn't feel quite as benevolent toward the Hilians and Blade Lurkers of the twelfth layer, slaughtering every last one she encountered. Neither felt much like an animal to her – they were pure monsters.

The Hilians used illusions to lure her toward them. They pried distorted friends and memories from the surface of her mind or something Ilea formed herself. She doubted the creatures could get much from her now that her Mental Resistance was in the third tier.

The Fae helped her locate more of the Hilians, and the layer became much less annoying to traverse than before. Ilea was quite a bit more aggressive this time around, trusting in her skills and newfound power as well as in her knowledge of her enemies and their abilities.

The Blade Lurkers hadn't posed much of a threat before, and the Hilians were quickly taken care of thanks to her increased mana pool. A couple of charged-up uses of Absolute Destruction made them realize in record time that what they swallowed wasn't lunch.

**'ding' You have defeated [Halian – lvl 620]**

...

**'ding' You have defeated [Corrupted Halian – lvl 603]**

**'ding' You have defeated [Blade Lurker – lvl 522]**

...

**‘ding’ You have defeated [Blade Lurker – lvl 583]**

**‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 346 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 346 – Five stat points awarded**

**‘ding’ Absolute Destruction reaches 3rd lvl 22**

**‘ding’ Blink reaches 3rd lvl 17**

**‘ding’ Sentinel Sphere reaches 3rd lvl 9**

**‘ding’ Sentinel Core reaches 3rd lvl 21**

**‘ding’ Sentinel Huntress reaches 3rd lvl 2**

**‘ding’ Azarinth Perception reaches 3rd lvl 6**

**‘ding’ Azarinth Reversal reaches 3rd lvl 17**

**‘ding’ True Ash creation reaches 3rd lvl 22**

**‘ding’ Heart of Cinder reaches 3rd lvl 14**

**‘ding’ Heart of Cinder reaches 3rd lvl 15**

**‘ding’ Storm of Cinders reaches 3rd lvl 16**

**‘ding’ Avatar of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 17**

**‘ding’ Avatar of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 18**

**‘ding’ Keeper of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 20**

**‘ding’ Identify reaches lvl 11**

**‘ding’ Monster Hunter reaches lvl 17**

**‘ding’ Veteran reaches 2nd lvl 12**

**‘ding’ Corrosion Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 16**

**...**

**‘ding’ Corrosion Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 20**

Ilea sat down near the exit to the eleventh layer with a meal and a happy Fae. Both had enjoyed a rather extensive display of violence, corrosion, and blood.

She cleaned herself and began eating a meal, having lost track of time. None of the creatures had responded to her new mind magic trick, and her Monster Hunter skill had only enraged them more.

Ilea spent her stat points on more Vitality. She had a feeling that Wisdom would become a priority again in the future, but the bonus from

meditation was so good that she decided to shelve it for the time being. She'd likely get more practical use out of some other stats.

She checked to see if Corrosion Resistance was eligible for a third-tier level-up.

### **- Corrosion Resistance**

**You have literally bathed in acid and chosen to slather yourself in corrosive substances instead of trying to avoid them. It is, quite frankly, concerning. Your body has melted and regenerated so many times that it might even be second nature by now. Should you wish to advance your Corrosion Resistance to the third tier, you may do so.**

*You're right, it is second nature*, she thought, but she decided not to advance this one either. For now, at least.

*I do have nine points, but Veteran, Monster Hunter, and a bunch of others are way more interesting.*

Ilea didn't feel like hunting down any of the Stone Cyclopes. Instead, she found a couple of Spirits of Winter to continue her resistance training. Surprisingly, the Fae stayed close to her – it seemed to want to work on its shield.

She sat down and enjoyed the breeze. Her body constantly froze up as her Ice Resistance had been deactivated and her armor removed to allow the lower-level creatures to get in what hits they could.

The mysterious presence she had encountered the last time didn't show up, and she soon reached the end of the second tier of Ice Resistance, mainly thanks to Avatar of Ash.

**‘ding’ Ice Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 11**

...

**‘ding’ Ice Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 20**

**‘ding’ Space Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 2**

...

**‘ding’ Space Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 4**

Sadly, there was no option to get it to the third tier, and her search for the presence proved futile. She gave up after a couple of sweeps of the

layer, neither her enhanced eyes, Sentinel Huntress, the Fae, nor her perception abilities able to locate a being besides the spirits, a bunch of rabbits, and the Cyclopes.

*I'll find something eventually, she thought, instead focusing on another potential third-tier skill.*

**‘ding’ Poison Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 20**

**- Poison Resistance**

*Perhaps it is only natural for humans to eat and drink things that damage their bodies. While it is alcohol and chilies for some, you choose the deadliest poisons, carefully crafted and measured by top assassins and predators. Poisons that should kill you twice over. You do you.*

“Nice,” she murmured to herself, sitting near the exit to the tenth layer.  
“Poison Resistance to the third tier, what do you think?”

The Fae was forming snow angels, briefly pausing to give her a mental thumbs-up.

**‘ding’ Poison Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 1**

**Poison Resistance – 3rd lvl 1**

*You are either a target of assassins or not very good at distinguishing berries. By surviving either of those, you have developed a general resistance to poisons.*

*2nd stage: Either you need better guards or you need to stop eating everything you see. Experience has granted you an ability to sense poison. Additionally its spread throughout your body is slower, reducing its effects.*

*3rd stage: Your favorite drink and seasoning for every food, you revel in that which destroys you. No more. You may neutralize the effects of many poisons at a touch, whether in a mug of ale, your body, or someone else’s, with the help of mana intrusion abilities, should you choose to do so.*

Ilea tested it immediately, trying to neutralize the poison in one of the little flasks.

She knew instinctively that it failed, perceiving that the poison was too strong for her current ability. *Great.*

It was an ancient dungeon, though, and she assumed most commonly used poisons were less potent.

*Plus I know it's going to be quite effective for leveling.*

"It's pretty cool that I can neutralize poisons now," she said absentmindedly.

*Great.*

*Congratulations.*

"You sound sarcastic. Are you bored?"

The Fae sat up and looked at her before it nodded weakly.

The eleventh layer hadn't been very interesting, admittedly.

Ilea smiled and jumped the creature, grabbing it before they rolled through the snow.

"Well," she said, "I've got something quite interesting for you in the layer ahead."

\* \* \*

The corpses were still at the bottom of the tenth layer, much of the stone burnt up by the creature that inhabited these parts.

*Excited!*

"Can you feel it?" Ilea asked before cupping her mouth with both hands.

"Oi! Birdie!"

She'd activated Monster Hunter, sending the challenge reverberating out through the cliffs.

The Lightning Elemental appeared near-instantly, floating proudly and with outstretched wings. It looked at her with near-white eyes but didn't attack immediately.

Then Ilea watched in amazement as the creature bowed to them.

"What?" she asked before a bolt of lightning zapped her.

*Friend?* she sent to the being.

The Fae tapped her cheek as it shook its head.

It pointed at itself.

*Friendly.*

"Ah, so it's friendly to you but not to me?"

The Fae nodded.

“Perfect, then watch and enjoy,” she said with a smile, plucking the Fae from her shoulder and setting it in midair, where it continued to float.

Then she turned to the elemental and pointed at herself.

*Lightning!*

The being remained silent and looked at the Fae for a moment before it bowed.

*Violence!* the Fae exclaimed as more birds appeared, flying to join the main body.

“Alright, let’s see w—” Ilea started before she was blasted into the wall behind her.

There was a faint giggle from the Fae as Ilea’s body reformed, her armor regenerating.

*Not one for talking*, she thought as she spread her wings, joining the elemental in flight and circling around it, dodging and weaving through the bolts and arcs of lightning magic.

Ilea found it much easier to avoid its attacks, her third-tier wings doing the majority of the work, aided by her newly upgraded Eyes of Ash and all her other skills and defensive upgrades.

It only took her a couple of seconds to realize that the elemental had previously been holding back. Massively. Area spells and powerful surges that ripped through stone soon joined the already numerous arcs and bolts. It stayed on her tail, challenging her flight, dodging, and defense abilities.

Ilea used everything she had but didn’t fight back. The creature was already willing to kill her – she knew as much. The training was perfect, but she could tell that if she hit the elemental, the benefit reluctantly given to her thanks to her Fae friend would vaporize instantly.

The longer they fought, the more it turned out to be the right decision. Despite its lack of four marks, Ilea questioned if even the Trakorov could have won against this creature.

The Sand Elemental had proved difficult with its changing form, but even having experienced that, Ilea found the Young Lightning Elemental’s attacks to be nearly as deadly. Their frequency was the main difference, unending spells wearing down her mana, ash, and regeneration even with all her newfound upgrades.

The two fell into a dance-like trance as they flew through the layer, lightning exploding wherever they went. Ilea caught glimpses of the Fae from time to time, floating or teleporting behind as it twirled in joy, not

adding its space magic to the mix. For once, she agreed that more damage wouldn't be for the best.

Ilea had no idea how much time passed. It could have been ten minutes or an hour. She twirled in the air when a series of attacks forced her to blink, finding a beam of blue arcing lightning slamming into her torso when she reappeared.

She was pushed back and slammed into a cliffside, rolling sideways before another arc slammed into her and then a third.

Ilea blinked again, reappearing on the ground as she slid to a stop, her torso gone except for most of her bones. It regenerated almost instantly as the Fae appeared close by, followed by the Lightning Elemental.

*Break?* she asked, breathing hard as her mana regenerated.

The elemental floated casually above her, occasionally moving its wings as it kept its eyes on her.

Ilea breathed out and summoned a meal.

*Impressive.*

*Powerful.*

She sent the impressions to both creatures.

The elemental didn't react.

*Impressed*, the Fae sent, pointing at the bird and sending a giggle into her mind a moment later.

A small bolt of lightning hit the ground near the Fae.

*Danger?* Ilea asked the Fae.

It waved her off and floated around.

Ilea gave the elemental a look but continued eating. She felt a little strange eating her food, basically having them wait for her weird human activity to end.

She rummaged through her necklace and found something that might be of interest to them. She withdrew her last mana crystal from the demon realm and held it out to the Fae.

The creature appeared and made the crystal float.

*Gift?*

*Rare.*

“Sure, if you can do anything with it,” she smiled.

The Fae twirled and split the crystal in two, sending one half toward the elemental.

Ilea watched with interest as the massive creature landed and picked at the crystal like a sparrow would. She couldn't help but snicker, masking it with a fake cough when the elemental glanced up at her, its immeasurable power brimming in its eyes.

She checked her progress while she ate.

**'ding' Azarinth Awakening reaches 3rd lvl 24**

**'ding' Blink reaches 3rd lvl 18**

**'ding' Sentinel Sphere reaches 3rd lvl 10**

**'ding' Azarinth Perception reaches 3rd lvl 7**

**'ding' Armor of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 26**

**'ding' Aspect of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 23**

**'ding' Ashen Wings reaches 3rd lvl 8**

**'ding' Ashen Wings reaches 3rd lvl 9**

**'ding' Eyes of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 2**

**'ding' Eyes of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 3**

**'ding' Monster Hunter reaches lvl 18**

**'ding' Veteran reaches 2nd lvl 13**

**'ding' Lightning Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 15**

**'ding' Lightning Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 16**

*Insane what fighting an elemental can do.*

The comparatively low number of resistance levels was due to the skill being active during the battle. She'd tried to avoid the spells, but many of them had still found their target.

Having finished its meal, the elemental was getting impatient. It was floating again, eyes facing her way.

*Barely four minutes, she thought. Enough, I guess.*

*Commence*, she sent, though she was pretty sure the creature didn't speak Elos or English. What she sent through these messages was the pure meaning, the concept of the word. In her mind, it was the word *commence*, but she had no clue what the bird actually received. The same principle applied to the Fae.

Either way, it understood, continuing its attacks as it had before. This time, Ilea floated in place, taking it all in as she continuously regenerated

her body.

She kept her resistance and armor active, as she would have been reduced to nothing otherwise. The returned mana from Sentinel Core and Lightning Resistance wasn't sufficient to keep up with the constant third-tier healing required to stay alive.

But the bird didn't seem to mind, sending more and more deadly spells slamming into her body.

*Bored*, the Fae transmitted after a while, giggling into her mind.

Ilea was pretty sure it meant the elemental was bored, not itself. She blinked away and saw the elemental no longer followed as ferociously.

*I'll definitely be back for you.*

Ilea was happy with the progress and training as well as the somewhat safe cooperation, but at the same time, she was a little annoyed that she couldn't even fight a young elemental toe to toe.

*High-level problems*, she thought with a smile. *At least I got what I wanted.*

**‘ding’ Sentinel Reconstruction reaches 3rd lvl 26**

**‘ding’ Blink reaches 3rd lvl 19**

**‘ding’ Azarinth Perception reaches 3rd lvl 8**

**‘ding’ Ashen Wings reaches 3rd lvl 10**

**‘ding’ Eyes of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 4**

**‘ding’ Veteran reaches 2nd lvl 14**

**‘ding’ Lightning Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 17**

...

**‘ding’ Lightning Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 20**

**- Lightning Resistance**

*Your need to electrocute yourself makes one think you should have probably chosen to become an electrician. Trades are a good option in today's economy, after all. Well, here, lightning works a little differently, and while it is certainly admirable that you try to challenge elementals, you might want to give it another couple of centuries. However, you have more than proven your capability to advance your Lightning Resistance to the third tier.*

*I'll give it a couple years before I wipe the floor with this oversized light bulb.*

She decided to advance this one, knowing a few beings besides the elemental against which it might be useful.

**'ding' Lightning Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 1**

**Lightning Resistance – 3rd lvl 1**

***Either in a storm or fighting a ferocious beast blessed by lightning, you have resisted. This skill will help further with your endeavors.***

***2nd stage: You are so familiar with lightning that your body can transform a fraction of the energy into mana and stamina.***

***3rd stage: The spread of lightning through your body is slowed down significantly, and with sufficient practice, you may redirect a part of the power out once more.***

“Interesting...”

*Lightning?* she sent to the creature.

She felt the spell approach and spread through her, much slower this time, burning through her body as she healed against it.

To Ilea, the difference was like night and day. Third-tier healing wasn't necessary against the spell that had previously chunked her health down significantly anymore. The damage itself was similar, but instead of a near-instant hit, it came in the span of a little over half a second.

*Doesn't really matter if it continues to hit me until I'm just a bunch of charged-up fairy lights. Against enemies less ridiculous than the elemental, though, it should make a world of difference.*

## Lava

---

Ilea tried the redirection thing a couple of times but couldn't quite figure it out. The elemental wasn't exactly the best training partner for this either as it simply bombarded her.

She soon decided to leave it be as the elemental seemed quite annoyed about her newfound third-tier resistance, upping the power output of its spells once more.

Ilea questioned how far the creature could actually go. Too far for her, that was obvious.

She signaled to the Fae that they would leave, and the elemental stopped its assault as soon as the little creature appeared on her shoulder.

*Thanks!* she sent to the being, bowing slightly.

It watched them as they vanished toward the eleventh layer.

*What an interesting being,* she thought. “What do you think?”

The Fae looked at her as it jumped down and landed in the snow.

*Proud.*

*Powerful.*

“I’m surprised it agreed to help,” she said and laughed. “Now I have lightning as well...”

*Dangerous.* It pointed at her before it pointed up. *Alone.*

“I’m alone?”

It shook its head and once more pointed up.

“The Elemental?”

The Fae nodded.

*Dangerous.*

“You don’t think it’d be as nice with me if I went alone?”

*Precisely.*

Ilea chuckled. “Thought as much. Well, I have what I wanted from it. Thanks to you!” She jumped down and watched the Fae vanish, blinking after it until she grabbed the creature and rolled with it in the snow.

*Thanks,* she sent.

It waved her off, and Ilea let go of the Fae as they lay in the snow.

“Alright, let me see now... I could get Wood Magic Resistance up on the fifth layer, but Lucas can help me with that – and more reliably. Anything above is useless, I think... Sixth and seventh have wind magic, which I’ve already maxed. Poison on the eighth layer is useless too now.”

The Fae floated up and twirled, flakes of white falling away from it. A little hat remained between its horns.

“The Wyverns on the ninth can’t really give me much either... More levels for my third tier, I guess, but the same can be accomplished by any fire mage, really. With Avatar... we could look for the weird creature on this layer... but I don’t want to waste any more time. If it doesn’t want to show up, then it doesn’t want to show up.

“Seems like everything except for the Deep Mirage and the Trakorov isn’t worth it for now,” she concluded and sighed. “Sorry about that, little guy. We have to go down to layer nineteen again.”

The Fae twirled and tilted its head.

*Help.*

“You want to help?” she asked with a smile.

The Fae nodded and sent excitement.

*“How?”*

*Mana!*

“Mana... you want to drain some?”

It nodded and started to do so.

Ilea quickly disabled her resistance and let the Fae do its thing, interested in what it had planned.

Contrary to last time, the drain was much more powerful. The mana flowed into the Fae like before, but instead of remaining there, it flowed straight into a circle below them.

The white glow of the magic intensified in her sphere until it became visible to the naked eye. Nearly ten thousand mana had flowed through the Fae before the space around them warped.

Ilea looked around and grinned. They were in the small cave between the nineteenth and twentieth layers. Nothing around them suggested a powerful spell had been cast, but there they were.

“Nice one,” she said and bowed to the Fae, which was now floating in front of her.

*Help.*

*Joy!*

“No shit! We just saved so much time and avoided a bunch of annoying creatures.”

The little Fae could evidently use long-range teleportation, using mana it siphoned from someone else.

“Is the range limited?”

*Secret!*

“Alright, alright,” Ilea said, putting her hands up in a placating gesture. “I just asked because I have a similar skill, but mine needs ages to charge.”

*I wonder if the time is reduced now that blink has leveled some and mana capacity has increased.* She started using the skill and canceled it after a few seconds. *I feel like it's charging quicker...*

*Slow,* the Fae sent.

“Yes, I know. That’s why I was curious.” Ilea smiled. “I guess it has to do with your space magic.”

The being nodded.

“Any ideas?”

The Fae thought for a moment but then shook its head.

*Uncertain.*

“Like so much, isn’t it?” Ilea started flying up and toward the Deep Mirage. “Well, as long as I have you around, I’d love to abuse that ability. I assume the locations are limited?”

It nodded.

“Well, I’ll just ask you if we need another teleport. Now that I have enough mana,” she added, winking at the creature.

*Affirmative.*

Ilea was happy to find the Deep Mirage quickly, and they continued right where they had left off.

**‘ding’ Sand Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 19**  
**‘ding’ Sand Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 20**  
**‘ding’ Space Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 5**  
**‘ding’ Stamina Drain Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 11**  
...  
**‘ding’ Stamina Drain Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 20**

“Level twenty in everything,” she murmured as she let the Deep Mirage attack her, all her resistances activated at that point.

She smiled at the massively reduced impact the attacks had on her. *Just shows how fucking important all these skills are. Thanks, Pain Tolerance and Avatar of Ash, for making this a possibility.*

“I think I should wait with more third-tier resistances,” she said, realizing she only had six third-tier General Skill points remaining out of the eleven she’d earned.

The bonuses from her third-tier Meditation were also insane compared to what the resistances provided. By its very nature, the skill was more versatile, while the resistances helped specifically against a single school of magic.

Ilea knew all of them could save her life in the right situation, but she decided to keep the rest of her skill points until such a situation presented itself.

*I’ve got plenty of skills to level, and now I can benefit more from Heavy Archery and skills in the same vein.*

Veteran and Monster Hunter were the most interesting to her, and the former was actually somewhat close to the third tier.

*What’s that going to be? Me being able to paralyze higher-level beings?* she thought with a grin.

They flew back down to the twentieth layer after saying their goodbyes to the Deep Mirage.

“Think the Trakorov is up for some training?” she asked, checking the new entry in her list of available third-tier General Skills.

**- Sand Magic Resistance**

***It’s been, like, a week. Please slow down with these. A Lightning Elemental and a Sand Elemental. I think it’s time to accept that you will***

***not learn. Sand Magic Resistance can be increased to the third tier, should you wish to do so.***

*Hmm, nothing for Stamina Drain Resistance yet.*

The Fae nodded in response.

“Let’s see if I can get Veteran and Monster Hunter to a reasonable level as well,” she said as she charged her wings, aiming for the entrance to their savior’s cavern.

The Fae giggled in her mind before they sped up.

\* \* \*

Ilea watched her arms melt under the Trakorov’s lava, finally understanding how her third-tier Heat Resistance worked.

Flames clung to her ash and skin, continuing to burn with minimal damage. Heart of Cinder charged much faster, absorbing a good amount of heat from the magic.

She used Monster Hunter continuously as she sent thoughts to the massive creature, which was half asleep, occasionally stirring to dump some lava on her.

It didn’t seem to mind their presence, and Ilea enjoyed both the scorching heat and the quiet of the ancient cave. She watched the Fae play with an ashen clone of itself and smiled. Catelyn’s sphere had also stayed deactivated, meaning there was no rush to return to the surface.

The Trakorov opened one eye to look at her when the flames enveloped her wings, continuing to burn for a while.

*Nice.*

She closed her eyes and lay back in the pool of lava, thinking of the wings of fire she’d seen in Riverwatch what now felt like years and years ago.

*I do think I prefer ash, though.*

## Nature

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Ilea checked her levels from the endeavor, eating another meal as she bathed her feet in lava.

**‘ding’ Monster Hunter reaches lvl 19  
‘ding’ Monster Hunter reaches lvl 20**

**‘ding’ Monster Hunter reaches 2nd lvl 1**

**Monster Hunter – 2nd lvl 1**

*Many times have you faced creatures well beyond your level. You revel in it, seek them out, and you prevail. Your presence demands respect. Imbue your voice to show your intent. Effects vary depending on your disposition as well as those affected and their levels in relation to yours.*

*2nd stage: You become better at communicating your intent. Infuse your voice with up to one hundred mana to increase its range and effect on those who hear it. When fully infused, you may lure even powerful creatures toward your location, depending on your intent.*

**‘ding’ Veteran reaches 2nd lvl 15  
‘ding’ Veteran reaches 2nd lvl 16  
‘ding’ Heat Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 2  
‘ding’ Heat Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 3**

**‘ding’ Lava Magic Resistance reaches lvl 11**

...

**‘ding’ Lava Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 1**

**Lava Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 1**

*An elemental form of molten rock reserved for those few living in conditions most consider deadly. You have met and fought such a being, resisting its magic, close to fire and earth but older and more primordial. 2nd stage: Your body can store heat more effectively, and your skin and muscles are less prone to melting. Lava has become to you what water is to others, its substance less restricting as you move through it.*

**‘ding’ Lava Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 2**

...

**‘ding’ Lava Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 20**

**‘ding’ Pain Tolerance reaches 2nd lvl 10**

**‘ding’ Space Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 6**

Ilea wasn’t sure how much time had passed while the Trakorov had happily assisted her training between naps. The thing was lazy, and Ilea was pretty sure it sustained itself off mana alone. There really wasn’t another explanation, given how little prey there was in these layers.

Some of the other monsters hunted and ate, like the Wyverns, Cyclopes, and Varass Drowners, but to sustain the heat that this creature produced, it would have to consume entire towns’ worth of people.

*Maybe it’s retired.*

Her Monster Hunter skill felt much more refined now, and the range was incredible when she charged it fully. The noise, however, seemed to annoy the Trakorov, and she refrained from using it any further.

The second tier for her Lava Magic Resistance coupled well with her third-tier Heat Resistance, allowing her to charge her Heart of Cinder more quickly and add a bunch more power before her body started taking damage.

She was even getting closer to her twelfth third-tier General Skill point.

Compared to most of her previous training, the past day had felt more like a spa session to her. When she’d reached the second tier of Lava Magic

Resistance, she occasionally left the skill active to enjoy the heat.

Coupled with her other skills, she could definitely understand why the massive creature enjoyed lazing about in its cave all day. She simply had too many other hobbies she enjoyed.

*Done?* the Fae sent.

Ilea had noticed it was lazing about as well, but for the last few hours, it had become increasingly restless. It had also seemed to lose interest in its sparring matches with her ashen clone.

“I think we can check out the deeper layers now, if you like,” she said. “Just give me another ten minutes or so.”

The Fae twirled vertically.

*Layers.*

*Empty.*

“You know that sphere might have been wrong? We might even find more ancient and powerful beings to befriend or fight.”

It stopped the twirling and looked at her.

*Violence?*

*Maybe,* she sent.

*Boring.*

“I’m sorry. You can send a complaint to our support address. I apologize for being an inefficient activity organizer.”

The Fae lifted a pebble of black rock and threw it at her head.

“Hey! That could have killed me if I was a normal human.”

It giggled into her mind.

“You’re a violent little creature,” she said, blinking over to the Fae.

They flew around the cavern, giggling and using spells to fight each other.

A loud roar resounded a moment later, and when Ilea looked round, the Trakarov’s massive eyes were open and focused on them. It huffed, expelling steam from its mostly hidden nostrils.

*Danger.*

*Definitely.*

*Leave?*

*Leave.*

The thoughts were exchanged in quick succession as they laughed and flew past the massive creature, sending their goodbyes as they approached a small crack in the wall at the end of the cavern.

No gate blocked the way, so Ilea flew down, the Fae by her side. The cave was more like a hole, leading straight down for nearly a hundred meters.

She noted that the heat was rising, even with all her buffs and defenses. When they reached the ground, she had to actually heal against the damage.

Ilea included the Fae in her healing, though it didn't seem overly concerned. Still, it accepted the small ash cocoon she formed around it, Ilea holding the creature in her arms.

"A level one hundred human would literally melt down here, you know."

Taking in the layer, she saw they were in a large cavern of black rock, like within the Trakorov's lair. Lava pooled into orange glowing lakes, streams flowing in from cracks in the walls and ceiling.

Large stone protrusions, platforms, and boulders dotted the area, and the sound of slowly moving magma was the only thing that could be heard.

The air shimmered as if twisted and torn by the heat. Many of the rocks resembled half-burnt candles, melting slowly from the top but not quite enough to form another pool of lava.

Ilea coughed, wondering if there was even any air within the layer. Drowning wasn't much of an issue to her anymore, which made her doubt suffocation or smoke poisoning would be a lot scarier.

*Safe?* she asked her little friend.

*Safe.*

*It seems entirely unbothered*, she thought, still not quite able to grasp the anatomy of its body with her healing magic.

Other than the lava streams, nothing moved in the layer. Ilea flew around for a few minutes, but nothing showed up, either from within the lava or from a hiding place near the ceiling or behind the rocks. Nothing responded to her infused voice either.

The layer was empty. Perhaps her perception simply didn't allow her to see the creatures, or maybe there was no interest, on their side, in challenging her. With the insane heat and the Trakorov so close by, she could certainly understand the layer's lack of inhabitants.

She took the Fae and made her way toward the next layer, dropping down another shaft that led down into the unknown. There was a case to be made about training Heat Resistance here or perhaps gaining a skill against the smoke and lack of air, but she could tell the Fae was looking for

something a little more interesting. Or maybe she was and she was using the Fae as an excuse.

As they descended, the heat was replaced by something else. Something Ilea couldn't quite place immediately.

Her eyes opened wide a moment later. It was obvious. Mana. Pure, unadulterated mana. She'd last felt it coming in waves from the Sand Elemental and the Trakorov before and during their battle.

The air-permeating quality she felt now was something she hadn't felt in a long while, however. It was, perhaps, a lesser version of when she'd first flown into the north. Her sphere was muddled, barely recognizing the walls right next to her.

It didn't exactly feel like drowning, nor did it feel like the effect gravity magic had on her. It was a little more subtle. Her heart was beating faster, and her jaw and fists were clenched. She could feel the ash close to her body, her tongue in her mouth, as if all of it was foreign.

Slowly, it became more difficult to breathe, her wings barely keeping her in the air as the controlled descent turned into a freefall. She tried grabbing at the walls. Blink activated, but it felt like moving through thick molasses.

Her healing still worked, informing her that nothing was wrong with her body. Yet she could still barely move, finally slapping against the stone ground at the bottom of the shaft with a loud thud. The injuries were minimal, quickly taken care of by her regeneration.

*Okay?* the Fae asked, the creature popping out of the cocoon and floating close to her face.

She had to focus on the thought. *Maybe*, she sent back as she used her ashen limbs to move her slowly back up the shaft.

Half a minute later, she was hovering ten meters above the ground, ashen limbs barely holding her body in place. Something that should have been simple, even for just one of the protrusions.

The Fae seemed concerned, floating around her, asking her if she was okay from time to time.

### ***'ding' Arcane Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 18***

*I see, she thought. It's that bad, then. Come on, second tier, you're supposed to deal with exactly this.*

*Magic*, she sent.

The Fae looked at her before it nodded in understanding.

*Help?*

No, she sent back, deciding that she should get used to it herself. Stuck within the stone shaft, she felt it an opportune moment to get her resistance to a higher level.

An inspection of her arms made her realize that dark blue and purple veins had formed, pulsing with something that wasn't her heartbeat.

*Same shit that happened to Elfie?* she wondered, remembering him passing out after the Praetorian fight. *Should I teleport up and get out? I could just chain blink, even if it feels muddled.*

She didn't feel like she was in immediate danger, however. Elfie had survived as well. *I just have to let my body adjust. Like air pressure.*

She trusted her ash to keep her suspended in the tunnel. Already her limbs felt more in control, sturdier.

### ***'ding' Arcane Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 19***

The difference was minimal, but she felt it.

It was obvious that a human shouldn't be here, but that was exactly why it was important to stay, to get her resistance up to the third tier.

Maybe she just wanted to prove that she could.

"Can... you... explain?" she asked the Fae with strained words. At least she could speak now – her body was slowly taking in the surrounding power, helped by her resistance.

*Human*, it sent, pointing at her.

*Uncomfortable*.

She smiled. *I can feel that, little one*, she thought.

"Is... it... just... more... dense?"

*Much*.

"You... don't... mind?"

The Fae shook its head.

*Enjoyable*.

"I... see..." Ilea said. "Is... it... normal?"

*Rare*.

*Mountain*.

*Or*.

*Cave.*

*So, just high up or far below the ground?* Ilea thought. She wasn't sure about the Fae's exact meaning, but at least it wouldn't be something that just happened randomly.

It really shouldn't have come as a surprise to her that there were insane natural forces at play here after the last couple of layers. She just hadn't expected it to be something other than another creature.

"Third... tier... help?"

*Maybe.*

*Human.*

*Different.*

*Worth a shot, then,* Ilea thought.

Finally, the message she was waiting for popped up. The veins on her arms were already a little less visible, and her ash was even stronger now. It seemed her body had overcome the initial shock.

### **'ding' Arcane Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 20**

#### **- Arcane Magic Resistance**

*You have seen and felt mana in its raw and chaotic form. It has coursed through you, permeating your very core. Few live through what you have experienced. Not just in general – though that too – but also the arcane itself. The recommendation to visit a psychiatrist is still something you should consider. Really.*

*Got it!*

*Joy,* she sent, watching the Fae twirl in place.

*That's a point I'll gladly spend.*

### **Arcane Magic Resistance – 3rd lvl 1**

*Wielding the true arcane is a rare and powerful talent only accessible to a few. The raw energies tear not just at flesh and bone but at the magical structure and minds of whoever faces them. Its red glow turns purple the more refined it is. This skill shall help you counter masters of the arcane. 2nd stage: Your flow of mana has been ruptured many times by the raw form of magic, making it substantially more resistant to both adept mages and natural occurrences of the true arcane.*

**3rd stage: You have survived arcane storms and immeasurably dense pockets of mana. Your body has changed and adapted to be able to walk within both mana-sparse and highly saturated areas. Constructs made from your mana become more resistant and substantial.**

Ilea immediately unclenched her jaw as the power in her limbs returned, even increasing compared to before. A breath left her before she filled her lungs deeply.

“Whoa, this is fucking weird,” she murmured.

The first part of the bonus was obvious, the result immediately felt.

“I can move in mana-dense areas now,” she said to the Fae, giving it a thumbs-up.

*Nice.*

“No shit. Hmm... would I have died had I been weaker?”

The Fae pointed at itself.

*Savior!*

“I mean if you hadn’t been here. I’m aware that you’re my shining knight.”

*Dark.*

“Dark Knight, whatever,” she said with a smile.

*Yes.*

*Death.*

“Damn... pretty fucked up if you ask me. What about the Trakorov? I’m sure it wouldn’t give a shit about coming down here... just like you. Would you die if you went south? Where there are no arcane storms? Or even out of a dungeon... wait, no, I met a Fae in the south.”

*Uncomfortable.*

*Death.*

It shook its head again.

“So it just applies to weak-as-shit species like mine?”

The Fae nodded with a giggle.

“Is that why shit like a Trakorov doesn’t just waltz around in the south, stomping down cities?”

*Possible.*

“It could, though, right? It’d just be super uncomfortable.”

*Likely.*

“Could it train Arcane Magic Resistance in a mana-sparse area? Maybe Mana Starvation would be a skill one could pick up,” she suggested.

*No.*

“You’re sure?”

It giggled into her mind.

*Maybe.*

“I’ll go with maybe. Maybe if I ate the Trakorov’s kids and it really wanted revenge.”

*Bad.*

*Idea.*

“Are you sure? I already thought about stealing some scales.”

*No.*

It bumped her head with a stumpy arm.

“I was kidding. Would be pretty powerful armor, though...”

Another bump.

“Just saying.”

The second part of the skill had talked about magical constructs, and Ilea could feel that her ash was included in that. The difference was noticeable but nothing spectacular.

She jumped back down to the bottom of the shaft and looked around the dark cavern. Her sphere was still a little muddled, but not quite as much as before.

“Sense any creatures?”

The Fae shook its head.

Both of them watched as a sudden spark of purple energy flared up in the distance, zapping through the cavern before it vanished into the ground.

“Is that a creature? Another elemental?” she asked excitedly.

The Fae shook its head.

*Natural.*

*Dangerous.*

“You think so?”

Ilea charged up Monster Hunter and roared into the cavern, trying to lure out anything that might be lurking within.

The Fae shook its head.

“What?”

It didn’t say anything.

“Hey, I’m a human. I could only laughably imitate a roar before. Let me have my fun.”

*Dangerous.*

“Why?”

*Proud.*

“That’s the whole intent of the skill. I piss off powerful creatures and they come and fight me.”

The Fae angrily booped her cheek.

*Stupid.*

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## Grounding

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“So, you like it here? Where the mana feels almost like a liquid?”

*Yes.*

“Do you have a home? Somewhere you would go after this?”

It nodded.

“Is it like here?”

The Fae seemed to hesitate.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to push. Just interested in your kind, that’s all.”

It gave her a look and nodded.

“Because you’re my friend.”

It looked at her for a while and then giggled.

*Strange.*

“It really isn’t that strange. I’m friends with elves, a dwarf, a fire fox, a demon, a Kraken from another world, a necromancer, and a talking dagger that is now controlling an ancient dwarven construct. You’re really not that strange, all things considered.”

The Fae just gave her a long look.

“Think I can befriend those arcane bolts?”

*Try.*

“I will. You know I’m not kidding. Oh, I forgot the Trakorov. Also a good friend.”

*No.*

“Dude loves me. Did I mention the Lightning Elemental?”

*Stop.*

“You’re starting to sound like my notifications. Are you the system in my head?”

*Yes.*

Ilea squinted her eyes and grabbed the Fae, moving it close to her head. It giggled.

*Would certainly fit with Fae supposedly being tricksters and all.*

*Friend*, it sent, pointing at one of the moving bolts of pure arcane energy.

“Ah, yes. I’ll have to introduce myself.”

\* \* \*

The mana surged through her, partially wrecking her body. Nothing much to worry about. A bunch of fried organs and a couple of thousand health points gone in mere moments.

Another surge formed and rushed through the dark cavern.

Ilea blinked twice to catch it, gritting her teeth as the energy flowed through her. She stayed upright, her wings moving behind her as she took a deep breath, healing the damage to her body.

“I don’t think it likes me!” she shouted to the Fae, which was floating near the entrance. So far, no arcane lightning had reached it there.

It waved back and twirled in joy, clearly visible to her Eyes of Ash.

### **‘ding’ Arcane Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 2**

*Nice.*

She continued chasing the arcane beams for a while, their insane power enough to push her resistance even higher, but stopped after a while when it got boring.

“We’re leaving!” she shouted to the Fae and blinked toward the exit she had spotted sometime earlier.

The Fae appeared on her shoulder while she checked her progress.

### **‘ding’ Sentinel Reconstruction reaches 3rd lvl 27**

### **‘ding’ Azarinh Perception reaches 3rd lvl 9**

**‘ding’ Ashen Wings reaches 3rd lvl 11**

**‘ding’ Eyes of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 5**

**‘ding’ Arcane Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 3**

**‘ding’ Arcane Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 4**

She jumped down into the stone shaft. The mana density mostly remained as they descended farther down but was joined by frost forming on the walls and her armor.

“These are some extremes.”

*Mana.*

*Powerful.*

“The denser it is, the more volatile it all becomes?”

The Fae nodded, grabbing some ash to tuck itself in against the cold. Ilea helped, leaving only its eyes uncovered under the makeshift skiing gear.

She kept an eye on its vitals as they came out into the next layer.

*Only three layers remaining,* she thought, barely able to see ten meters ahead of her through the snow and wind. Her sphere reached farther.

Ilea used Monster Hunter again, her roar echoing through the unknown areas, moving far. Nothing responded to her call.

*I doubt this experience will allow me to get Ice Resistance any higher.*

As she slowly made her way through the terrible weather, chunks of ice formed on her ash, but her second-tier bonus to Ice Resistance prevented it from digging much deeper.

The Fae certainly didn’t enjoy the experience, but neither did it complain behind its shield and ash.

Twenty minutes of searching and a trail of ice later, the two found their way down to the next layer. No creatures had shown themselves, and she suspected that nothing else would.

Maybe the extreme conditions didn’t allow anything to stay down here, or maybe nothing had found this place yet. She understood too little of how dungeons worked to make a reasonable assumption, let alone in a supposed testing facility of some unknown ancient civilization.

The good part was that there were no signs of corrupted creatures.

They descended farther down and soon came into a small room made of steel. The mana here felt even more restricting, denser and more powerful.

*Steel again? Another facility down here?*

“Still just nothing to you?”

*Nice.*

“I bet it is,” she said as she looked around. She could see a corridor lead out of the room, but no traps, enchantments, or runes were visible to any of her skills. At the end of the corridor was a closed steel gate.

*Interesting. Should I check in with the others first? Then again, the corruption agent has been destroyed, and if there’s anything down here, it would have to get through these horrific layers and then past the Trakorov.*

“Any idea what could be down here?”

*Unsure.*

The Fae reappeared on her shoulder.

*Explore?*

“Carefully,” Ilea said.

She walked to the closed door and touched it, seeing into an open space beyond. Her sphere wasn’t obstructed but muddled, even more so than before. More than in the hallway, where the mana density reached levels close to those on the twenty-second level.

“Teleport in or open the door?” she asked herself.

She decided on the door to make sure she had a way out in case she found herself locked inside the area of high mana density. Her ashen limbs smashed into the steel, cutting through it, though with some difficulty.

As soon as she pierced the door, mana leaked out and made her step back. “Holy fuck...,” she whispered, feeling the power.

Ilea coughed and spat out blood as she healed herself. Without the third tier, she would probably have collapsed immediately.

*Interesting,* the Fae sent as it floated right in front of the hole, looking into the open space beyond.

*Unnatural.*

“No shit,” Ilea said, breathing in deeply.

### **‘ding’ Arcane Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 5**

She propped herself on her knees before picking herself up again. “I’m fine.”

*Blood.*

“Ah, I’m fine,” she repeated. “You’ve seen me literally ripped apart – a little blood isn’t a concern.”

*Okay.*

“Don’t give me that look. Come on, let’s check it out.”

The Fae nodded as it watched Ilea pry open the steel gate with her ashen limbs and arms.

Magical lamps illuminated the hundred-meter-high dome-like structure beyond. Thousands upon thousands of runes glowed with dark orange-red power on every piece of metal that formed the creation.

If she’d had any remaining doubts that this place was built by the same beings as the facility in the demon realm, it was shattered right then and there.

She felt goosebumps on her arms and neck as she took a couple of steps, struggling to move in the dense mana. It wasn’t constricting and paralyzing as it had been in the twenty-second layer, but nonetheless, it felt overwhelming.

Ilea could clearly see the runes on the steel plates, yet she still failed to grasp their form. It didn’t hurt in her mind, but she could tell her Mental Resistance was responsible for that. She was looking at knowledge and truth her brain could not comprehend.

*Wrong,* the Fae sent into her mind.

It was disturbed, looking around frantically.

“What’s going on?”

The Fae stared up at the ceiling.

“Do you know what this place is for?”

*Concentrate.*

*Mana.*

“So these runes concentrate mana? Is that why you said it’s unnatural?”

It nodded.

*Dungeon.*

*Formed.*

“Here?”

The Fae nodded.

“You mean the dungeon formed because of this room here?”

Another nod.

Ilea had no idea what that implied. So there were beings that could affect and maybe grow dungeons?

“But it’s just another dungeon, isn’t it?”

The Fae shook its head.

*Balance.*

*Disturbed.*

*Unnatural.*

“I’m out of my depth here. What should we do?”

*Destroy.*

“Are you sure? We could probably learn a lot from this place. And if this is what caused the dungeon to form, wouldn’t destroying it affect the beings that live here?”

The Fae considered that for a moment.

*Maybe.*

*Idea.*

The Fae looked at her and then averted its gaze.

*No.*

“What?”

*Dangerous.*

“Maybe I can help?”

The Fae nodded.

*Needed.*

*Yes.*

*Dangerous.*

“Just explain what you’re thinking.”

*Collection.*

*Slow.*

*Drain.*

It pointed at itself and then at her.

“You want to drain the mana?”

The Fae nodded.

“How?”

*You.*

*Damage.*

Ilea could tell that it didn’t like the idea.

“Show me,” Ilea said.

The Fae landed on her outstretched palm, its eyes starting to glow white.

*Sure?*

Ilea nodded. “I’ve survived the northern lightning and the fight between two four-marks. I think I’ll be fine.”

She wasn’t.

Ilea felt as if a thousand needles pierced her body in an instant, flowing through her and wreaking havoc on her soul.

She fell to her knees and screamed, her healing trying to work against the power, but the sensation didn’t lessen. Not with healing, and not with Pain Tolerance either. This was purely arcane, magic damaging something beyond nerves and cells, her very essence trembling and splintering.

Her head hurt, and something deep within herself screamed. She felt her very existence lose focus, torn and shredded.

The Fae stopped after two seconds. Perhaps the two longest seconds of her life.

**‘ding’ Arcane Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 6**

**‘ding’ Mental Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 2**

**‘ding’ Pain Tolerance reaches 2nd lvl 11**

**‘ding’ Soul Magic Resistance reaches lvl 9**

**‘ding’ Space Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 7**

**‘ding’ Space Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 8**

**‘ding’ Void Magic Resistance reaches lvl 8**

**‘ding’ Void Magic Resistance reaches lvl 9**

She sat there on the cold floor and held her knees close to her chest. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she gasped for breath.

The Fae patted her cheek.

“What’s all this? I just got resistance levels in like six different schools of magic.”

She touched her head, feeling the strange weight that she’d experienced slowly fade with healing.

The Fae nodded.

*Painful.*

*Dangerous.*

It pointed around itself.

*Magic.*

It pointed at itself.

*Transferred.*

It pointed at her.

*Friend.*

*Resistant.*

*Death.*

It pointed at itself.

Then it pointed at her again.

*Alive.*

*Maybe.*

“How long do we have to do this?” Ilea asked.

The Fae looked down and shook its head.

“You sure this is necessary? I really don’t feel like going through that again, even with all the levels...”

Ilea bit her lip. It had felt wrong, entirely wrong.

*No.*

*Leave.*

“You don’t sound sure.”

The Fae looked away but found her eyes some seconds later.

*Power*, it sent after a moment, gesturing around itself.

*Gathered.*

*Here.*

*Unknown.*

*Possibilities.*

*Dangerous.*

Ilea sighed. She looked at the Fae before she breathed in deep and smiled. Maybe the memory of the pain was already fading with her arcane healing. Or maybe she just didn’t want to accept that she couldn’t do this.

“We continue.”

*Just another Drake.*

The pain came once more, and all her senses were overwhelmed.

She only saw glimpses of her surroundings, though she noted that she was lying on the ground now, blood seeping from her nose and ears, ash flowing into existence and slowly moving around her. Her body twitched from time to time as tears rolled down her cheeks.

Ilea screamed into her ash, her mind, soul, and body battered by the continuous stream of mana that flowed into her. Her very existence shuddered, each level-up marginally reducing the overwhelming nature of the experience.

Not enough to change it in a meaningful way, though. Not by a long shot.

Ilea lost track of time, her existence pure agony. Her resilience and resistance skills gradually reduced the effects by a large margin. Sentinel Reconstruction healed her mind and body from the physical and psychological damage. And still, she felt like she was going numb, her very being torn apart by this incredible power.

As time went on, the experience changed. Thoughts occasionally came to mind again, her brain no longer completely overwhelmed.

More time passed, and she found herself sitting up, rocking on the ground as the Fae continued to push mana into her.

A while later, she started to analyze the flows around her, started to glimpse at her inner being, her body, her mind, the part of her that she assumed to be her soul.

The mana was laced with different powers, various nuances she hadn't noticed before but was somewhat familiar with. Space, void, mind, soul, and arcane. The pain was unnatural, something that resulted from the various magics, the purity and strength of it all. It became easier to handle as all her resistances rose to meet the challenge. Her body adapted – slowly.

And then, something shifted. Something she couldn't see fell into place.

Her mind found calm as she opened her eyes and focused on the two white eyes still staring at her. She could tell her soul was cracked and injured, could feel her mind struggle to keep together a semblance of herself. And yet, she took in the power, felt it intrude her body as it burned and destroyed.

She wasn't rocking anymore, instead changing to a cross-legged position.

*More*, she sent, knowing the Fae was holding back. She couldn't speak in her current state, but simple thoughts were possible.

The Fae looked at her and nodded slowly.

The damage picked up again, returning to an experience that was difficult to handle but not overwhelming.

*I'm through the worst*, she thought, trying to relax her muscles and mind as she focused on the healing that flowed through her.

Ilea kept watching the stream of mana, warped and focused by the Fae. Seeing the levels come in, part of her was glad she'd agreed. Another part of her screamed at her to get away, to stop.

But one thought prevailed.

*Persevere.*

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## Core

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**‘ding’ Sentinel Reconstruction reaches 3rd lvl 28**

**‘ding’ Azarinth Awakening reaches 3rd lvl 25**

**‘ding’ Sentinel Core reaches 3rd lvl 22**

**‘ding’ Armor of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 27**

**‘ding’ Aspect of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 24**

**‘ding’ Avatar of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 19**

**‘ding’ Arcane Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 7**

...

**‘ding’ Arcane Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 10**

**‘ding’ Mental Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 3**

...

**‘ding’ Mental Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 5**

**‘ding’ Pain Tolerance reaches 2nd lvl 11**

...

**‘ding’ Pain Tolerance reaches 2nd lvl 20**

**‘ding’ Pain Tolerance reaches 3rd lvl 1**

**Pain Tolerance – 3rd lvl 1**

**Being a bit of a masochist, you have learned to ignore some of the pain.**

**No, only physical pain. You’re feeling a little more numb toward pain, but**

*be careful... the damage is still being done!*

*2nd stage: You've been through more pain than most others. You are now able to completely turn off your perception of pain. Be wary, as there is a reason pain exists.*

*3rd stage: Pain comes in many forms. Pain to your body, which you have learned to ignore. Pain to the mind itself, which you have resisted. Pain to your soul, which you have endured. Pain from the forces of magic, the arcane, tearing and cutting at the core of what you are. You have experienced pain beyond what should be survived. And yet you live. Resilience and perseverance, regeneration and a powerful mind. Let it fuel you, empower you. Pain now lets you focus, clears your mind instead of distracting it. You shall not be broken.*

**‘ding’ Pain Tolerance reaches 3rd lvl 2**

**‘ding’ Soul Magic Resistance reaches lvl 9**

...

**‘ding’ Soul Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 1**

**Soul Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 1**

*The fleeting conscience of man and beast. Flesh, energy, motion, and thought. The soul stands separate entirely, yet intertwined all the same. Through hardship you have learned understanding, not through meditation and study. A brutal yet comforting truth, strengthening that which cannot be grasped.*

*2nd stage: Battered and cracked. Challenged and near broken. Your soul has endured through sheer tenacity against that which sought to bring about its end. A serene calm now permeates your very essence, changed and evolved, grounded and calm.*

**‘ding’ Soul Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 2**

**‘ding’ Soul Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 3**

**‘ding’ Space Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 9**

...

**‘ding’ Space Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 14**

**‘ding’ Void Magic Resistance reaches lvl 10**

...

**‘ding’ Void Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 1**

**Void Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 1**

*The mystical magic usually used to enchant high-level items applied as a form of combat magic. It’s as deadly as it is silent. How exactly you survived is unclear; perhaps the caster willed it so. Next time, it might work against a true enemy as well.*

*2nd stage: You have resisted the true magic of the void. Your body shows unrelenting grit. More than a simple spell will be required to invade your body with the void. Your very existence and all of its parts are connected to you through the threads of magic.*

**‘ding’ Void Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 2**

...

**‘ding’ Void Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 9**

**‘ding’ One third-tier General Skill point awarded**

Ilea read it all in passing, noticing how her mind had focused as soon as her Pain Tolerance had reached the third tier, keeping her calm and ready, her mind analyzing the changes. She understood why it had reached the third tier without a skill point being necessary, the breakthrough possible thanks to her assisting abilities and the unique situation presented by the dense mana around her, collected over however many years or centuries and now funneled into her by this ancient being with destructive power.

She understood the change to her soul on a level she could not quite describe. The tears did not stop, but she smiled when it came, as if she were watching her child make its first friend, as if she were an innocent prisoner finally finding freedom after a decade-long sentence. Neither applied to her, and yet she felt them all the same. It was beautiful and confusing until the pain moved once again to the foreground of her thoughts and mind.

The change to her Void Magic Resistance was by far the most graspable and simple, the pain coming from the part of the arcane torrent that was flowing into her, moving to the background as she meditated.

Slowly, the power fizzled out, and she was left with a feeling of lightness she had never experienced before.

For the first time in what felt like a lifetime, she breathed in, filling her lungs as her mind relaxed. Her eyes opened slowly, blinking a few times before her gaze settled on the Fae.

The Fae bowed deeply.

*Friend.*

*Pain.*

It added a thought of deep respect and relief.

“It’s alright now, little one.” She felt the mana around them had normalized. It was still dense and powerful, like all mana in the north, but a mere puddle compared to the ocean it had been before.

“We did it.”

The Fae nodded.

“What exactly happened?”

*Destruction.*

*Merging.*

*Dispersion.*

Ilea lay back, looking up at the ceiling and the runes covering all the metal.

She closed her eyes and exhaled.

\* \* \*

When she had sufficiently recovered, she summoned a meal and dug in.

“How long will it take to collect that much mana again?”

*Long,* came the answer.

*Good.*

“So... excited to find an Arcane Elemental in the last layer?” she asked when she’d finished eating.

The Fae saluted and sent a stern yet excited thought. Ilea laughed and tapped her shoulder, smiling when the creature appeared on it.

She walked to the center of the dome-like layer and found a small entrance that led farther down. She jumped down and followed the small steel tunnel until they hit a wall.

*Straight up closed off,* she thought as she started to work on the ground below, seeing through it with her sphere. It took a while, but she ultimately punched through.

When she stepped into the supposedly last layer, she saw that it was much smaller than some of the previous ones, extending only a couple of

hundred meters in each direction. One end of a bridge made of steel was positioned right under the exit.

At the other end of the three-meter-wide bridge lay what looked like a castle or temple of steel. Stairs led up to a simple steel gate, several meters in height, built directly into the front wall of the structure. It had neither windows nor artistry, formed of rectangular and sharp steel blocks without so much as a seam between them.

“Looks like we’ve reached the end,” Ilea said.

She could feel her heart rate pick up. After everything she’d seen in the Descent, yes, she was scared. But there was no way she would stop here.

“Can you tell if anything is in there?”

The Fae shook its head.

*Can’t pick up anything either,* Ilea thought, using her skills and eyes to scan the area as they slowly floated toward the steel structure.

“What do you think? Necromancer? Elemental? Cursed dragon?” she asked as they landed on the stairs, her tone lacking its usual sarcasm. She checked for any magical resonance, enchantments, or traps but couldn’t find anything. “Let me know if you see enchantments.”

The Fae nodded.

“Let’s see what we find, then.”

Her ashen limbs slashed into the steel gate, making small dents and cuts until Ilea could get her hands inside, slowly prying the whole thing open with sheer brute force.

A large main hall was revealed, magical lights shining from various lamps embedded into the ceiling.

“No enchantments or runes?”

*None.*

She stepped inside, seeing several open entryways that led into various rooms. Worktables, machines of unknown purposes, a platform that looked like an elevator, and another sphere covered in runes.

“Let’s see if you can make the sphere talk again,” Ilea said as the two approached the rune-covered sphere.

The Fae activated its magic to disable any defensive enchantments as some of the runes started to glow in a deep red.

Ilea felt the slight pressure of subdued mind magic when she looked at the runes, their forms unwilling to be recognized and stored in her brain.

“*Vanu Tes okuun. Ver saa*,” a familiar deep voice said from the sphere.  
“*Language change accepted. Displaying map of Testing Facility Zeta*.”

A hologram appeared once more, showing the same layers. This time, number twenty-five wasn’t listed as unknown anymore. It showed no creatures either.

“Is there information on this facility? Specifically that platform in the opposite room? It looks a little too much like a teleportation device.”

“*Transportation Network status: active.*”

“I’m not sure we want that,” Ilea murmured. “Can you disable it? Might want to check that later.”

*I don’t think this will help me get to Kyrian, but I could at least check it out. Who knows, maybe these ancient civilizations have some connection.*

The Fae nodded.

“*Transportation Network status: deactivated.*”

“What else is in there?” Ilea said. “Anything that could be interesting?”

The runes on the sphere moved slightly.

“*Extraction – Priority: 1.*

“*Facility set-up throughout Sectors 1-127: Completed.*

“*Mana collection and observation phase: Completed.*

“*Awaiting Olym Arcena approval: Completed.*

“*Source extraction of Varion-3: Completed.*”

“Any idea what this means?” Ilea asked, feeling some distress from the Fae.

It was quiet for a little while, influencing the sphere again without giving her an answer.

“*Obliteration – Priority: 0.*

“*Priority override: Vor Elenthir.*

“*Disabling of Extraction facilities in Sectors 1-10: Completed.*

“*Disabling of Extraction facilities in Sectors 11-20: Completed.*

...

“*Disabling of Extraction facilities in Sectors 121-127: Completed.*

*“Information suppression and destruction in relation to Extraction, in accordance with Override Vor Elenthir – Redacted.”*

*Mana was collected, and then something was extracted? And then the extraction facilities were disabled?*

Ilea wasn't sure what it meant, but the information suppression and destruction bit worried her. She listened as the sphere continued speaking.

*“Observation – Priority: 0.*

*“Priority override: Vor Elenthir.*

*“Observation of Ascended, former Olym Arcena.*

*“Arav Enir – Status – Deceased.*

*“Marva En Tarim – Status – Deceased.*

*“Ravana Vor Itar – Status – Deceased.*

*“Sehl Naroth – Status – Unknown.*

*“Var El Freen – Status – Deceased.*

*“Nes Mor Atul – Status – Unknown.*

*“Hen Ra Avuur – Status – Unknown.*

*“Pan Akire – Status – Unknown.*

*“Rahk Hir E – Status – Deceased.*

*“Ker Velor – Status – Unknown.*

*“Iven Air – Status – Deceased.*

*...*

*“Nar Me Wyr – Status – Deceased.”*

Ilea listened to the strange names, noting that most of them were deceased.

*Ascended... That's the same name mentioned in the Taleen diary that Elfie translated. Is this one of their old facilities?*

*Or was it Vor Elenthir? They did apparently override a lot of these entries, or at least their priorities.*

“Do you know anything about all this?” she asked the Fae, but it showed her something new instead of replying.

*“Project Equilibrium.*

*“Priority override: Vor Elenthir – Redacted.*

*“Status: Completed.”*

Before Ilea could ask about this one, a pulse of magic emanated from the sphere, the glowing runes turning dull.

“What’s going on?” Ilea asked.

The Fae looked frantic.

*Detected!*

Ilea grabbed the Fae and rushed out of the room, seeing the platform in the opposite room light up.

*Fuck.*

She blinked close but slammed into a barrier, and though she sent destructive mana into it, she failed to blink through.

Runes appeared on the platform before a surge of power rushed out, and Ilea turned back toward the ripped-open gates. She could see the runes that had formed near the exit. Many were damaged, their magic failing to put up a barrier.

They could run, but Ilea stopped and looked at the Fae. Whoever was arriving could be responsible for capturing the Enavurin and for releasing the corruption. She wouldn’t run without learning more.

“Hide.”

The Fae looked at her and nodded, vanishing.

*Careful.*

Ilea nodded and turned toward the platform.

She took a deep breath and checked her spells, her sphere, her armor, both bone and ash, her auras supplying her with power, and her full mana pool.

She floated in the middle of the hall with her wings moving lazily behind her, ashen limbs ready to strike and arms at her sides.

Then a surge of mana expanded from the platform.

Ilea could feel the presence a moment later. Subdued but still brimming with power. Her instincts told her to run, though they were quickly quenched by both Veteran and sheer experience.

The being floated out of the teleportation room, a humanoid creature two and a half meters in height whose body was composed of dark interlinked pieces of steel that glinted a little in the magical light. Enchanted robes, lined with silver patterns, rested loosely on its form. Its head was

vaguely oval in shape, angles in the steel panels suggestive of a jaw and cheekbones.

A thin protrusion jutted out from atop its head, reminiscent of a fixture holding feathers atop a Roman officer's helmet. There was nothing attached to it, however.

Two glowing white eyes took in the hall, passing over the pried-open gates before focusing on Ilea.

### **[Mage – lvl ???]**

“Hey,” she said, waving at the being.

It remained floating for a moment. If it was taken aback by the casual greeting, it didn’t show it.

She felt the attack coming, flying back to avoid the steel that ripped out of the ground to pierce her. Splinters of steel ripped out of the ceiling, floor, and walls, turning the air into a mist of shrapnel.

Ilea blinked but found herself closer to her previous position than she’d wanted, unable to do anything as the steel rushed at her. She felt a variety of effects on her body at the same time as she watched the steel approach. *Void*.

She twirled in the air to avoid the magic that was about to rip out her head and heart. The shrapnel hit and dug through her ash and deep into her body. Another familiar magic extended toward her. *Blood*.

The eruptions ripped through her, each piece of metal the center of a small blood explosion. She used her third tier to heal the massive damage as she reformed her wings and flew again, dodging the beams and tendrils coming out of the floor and ceiling.

Large parts of her sphere lit up with the magic of the void, making her weave through the hall before the air itself was removed.

*Blinking is a bad idea. Need to get out of this steel trap.*

She made for the door, dodging the being’s attacks. A last lunge brought her through before she hit an invisible wall. She lashed out with ashen limbs and her fists to send destructive mana into the barrier as she felt void magic manifest behind her.

Ilea punched through with a frantic effort, landing on the stairs leading to the steel bridge. Her legs were gone, as was half her torso. Her blood had

barely started flowing out before she used her ashen limbs to propel herself forward onto the bridge, spikes forming under her.

By the time she saw the being appear above the stairs, her body had reformed.

She formed a dozen ashen lances and sent them at the creature. All of them vanished. At the same time, she felt something form around her, moving her toward the being. *Space*, she realized, seeing the void magic manifest within her sphere. Enough to make her whole being vanish. *Where would I go?*

*Focus.*

The creature tilted its head a little to the side as it watched her, one of its arms lifting toward her. Ilea blinked back at the last moment, the void taking a part of her chest and nose. Both reformed as she ascended higher up and away from the steel tendrils reaching out to grasp her.

The metal splintered into shrapnel before it all sped at her. It was simply too dense to avoid it all, forcing her to blink once again. *Space barriers*, she noted, finally figuring out what prevented her blink from working as intended.

She reappeared and formed as much ash around her as possible, feeling the space magic constrict her like invisible tendrils holding her back, more void magic manifesting just as the steel dug into her, exploding in ferocious ruptures as soon as it reached her blood. Huge chunks of her were ripped out as she pushed against the barrier ahead of her. Instead of trying to destroy it, she used it to provide momentum with the few ashen limbs that still held up against the steel shower.

Ilea pushed off, the little shreds of her wings that had remained vanishing in the manifesting void. She landed on the steel bridge below, her feet immediately pierced and trapped by protruding spikes. More came instantly. Her ashen armor receded at her hips before her limbs slashed into them.

Wings reformed right as another shower of shrapnel approached. Her eyes opened wide when all of it simply vanished, appearing right around her body instead. *Fuck.*

The shrapnel ripped through her, but she focused on two of her ashen limbs, keeping them intact as the shrapnel tore through her trapped legs, allowing her to propel herself away from the bridge. She left behind two legs that were nearly fully encased by steel.

A frustratingly expected barrier prevented her from getting off the bridge, but Heart of Cinder had finally charged enough. It blasted out, cracking the invisible space magic and pushing back some of the shrapnel still following her. Her body reformed once more as she flew up and away from the bridge.

She watched the being appear near her severed legs, large parts of the bridge bending and forming into spikes, sharp pieces, beams, and tendrils ready to pierce her. More steel formed out of nowhere, with wicked shapes and efficient designs. Each piece ready to deliver the blood magic imbued within.

*It's a Steel Creator.*

Ilea had barely had time to form a coherent thought during the battle so far. Nor had she been able to get close at all. Its offensive was unrelenting, unstoppable.

She realized that the short lull of less than half a second hadn't been without reason. It had provided her with a short moment to breathe. To realize that she was out of her depth here. By a long shot.

This was a being wielding power equal to the Lightning Elemental, perhaps even more. With four schools of magic at its disposal. All at that level.

A surge of mana rushed past, and as it did, a tingle went through her entire body. Ilea knew what that was. She watched the projectiles appear closer, the swarm supported by space magic trying to hold her in place, void magic forming around her.

If it hadn't been for her second-tier Veteran, she would have died there. Her blood, void, and space magic resistances helped too, of course, each one providing her with the additional resilience required to only lose half her body in this battle. And not all of it.

Her perception slowed down as she watched the impending doom, two steel-encased glowing white eyes watching it all from a distance.

Ilea released Heart of Cinder, the little power it had garnered pushing against the space magic before she blinked away, toward the exit to layer twenty-four. This wasn't a battle she could win.

She appeared fifteen meters away instead of over forty, a swath of steel bits from its attack flying past.

The attacks stopped abruptly, but she felt a powerful barrier behind her, blocking the exit. Her breathing steadied, and her wounds healed.

The being floated closer and then stopped.

*“A crafty intruder. But an intruder nonetheless,”* it spoke into her mind. It had a gravelly, deep voice. *“Azarint Healer... why did you come here?”*

Ilea took a deep breath and answered telepathically, the link already established by the being.

*“Are you the one who captured the Enavurin? And made the corruption?”* she answered. *“The corruption spread throughout the dungeon and beyond.”*

The being looked at her for a little while. *“It would only be released upon tampering. You came here in search of wealth and power. I know your kind.”*

*“I came to help with the corruption, and I came down here to explore. I didn’t know someone still lived here. I’m not with the Azarint, either. I just found one of their Classes.”*

It watched her for a moment, seeming to consider this before it shifted its attention up to where the exit to the steel dome lay.

*“You’re an Ascended? You built all of this?”*

The being ignored her question.

*“You came to explore. Here? What happened to the mana?”*

Ilea smiled at it. *“Seemed dangerous. So I drained it.”*

*“You... drained it?”* The being looked around as if to detect something before it visibly sighed and turned back toward her, arms raised as magic thrummed around it. *“I shouldn’t be surprised.”*

*Shit.*

Hundreds of steel limbs and thousands of pieces of shrapnel erupted outward. Void and space magic laced the air as she weaved through the attacks, limbs ripped off and body parts exploding.

She kept her focus on the creature, her ashen spears vanishing or slamming into invisible barriers. She felt the space magic around her, pushing past with all the strength and power she could muster.

She had stood against elementals. She would survive this steel thing.

Her wings were in tatters, her left arm was missing, and her legs had been pierced by a dozen tendrils of steel. They bent and broke as she was slowed down, now only a couple of meters away from the being.

It watched her, thousands of steel pieces flowing around it.

Ilea smirked and released Heart of Cinder, charged by five thousand points of health and all the time their conversation had taken. The third tier

of Heat Resistance and the second tier of her Lava Resistance had allowed her to charge it far longer than she could before.

A beam of incandescent fire, heat, and energy erupted from her arm. It flew out and slammed into an invisible wall, breaking through it and crashing into another wall, this one made of steel. A small hole was melted at the center, revealing the being behind.

It raised a hand and touched the glowing steel in front of it.

Then it looked her way and raised an arm.

Ilea was ripped apart by dozens of spikes, unable to blink. She looked up at the sharp pieces. Thousands of them slashed into her ash, flesh, and bone. She had been shredded entirely, her sphere the only thing that informed her about what was happening.

Her brain was pierced and exploded into a bloody pulp. She came back to consciousness, her third-tier healing overwhelming the continuous stream of damage for a mere moment.

She felt the void around her and formed a single dense ashen limb with a sharp blade. It slashed into her neck, severing her head. She continued to control the ash as the rest of her body was punctured by shrapnel.

The ash formed a cocoon around her head and shot away to the side. Her body reformed, and she slid to a stop, ash covering her once more. She saw the sphere-shaped chunk missing from the ground and the crisscrossed spikes where she had been a moment earlier.

*“A warrior through and through,”* the being sent. *“I am one of the Ascended.”*

The shrapnel stopped coming, all of it flowing into the ground instead. She dodged several hundred spikes shooting out of the ground until one of them caught her, digging through her leg from the side and piercing her lungs.

She tumbled to the ground and was immediately struck by fifty more. Her head too.

*He left my brain intact,* she thought as she looked for a way out. The ash she formed was shredded apart by steel and pushed away by an invisible force.

Ilea’s perception slowed down as she looked at the creature, hundreds of pieces of steel piercing her.

*This is it? No way to escape? Damn. Killed by a floating tin can.*

There was nothing she could do. Her blink didn't work. Her ash had been forced away. Heart of Cinder, charged for less than a second, could do little against the steel. Healing kept her alive, but she was trapped.

*I would have preferred one of the elementals.*

She watched with a smile as dense void magic started to manifest around her. She breathed in deeply, summoning all the ash that she could. It wasn't enough. She knew it, but she refused to give up.

The void magic closed in. And then it vanished, the spell dissipated in an instant.

*Mana!*

The thought reached her mind, and she immediately disabled her Mana Drain Resistance.

The Fae appeared on top of her head, arms outstretched as a barrier lit up within her sphere.

*"There it is,"* the Ascended said.

*Teleport?* Ilea asked, and she felt a powerful surge of mana from the Fae, draining her mana in moments.

Metal spikes slowly encroached upon them as more of her mana poured into the Fae's spell. She could feel its space magic holding back the steel, slowly pulling her out from the spikes still piercing her until they were both floating amidst a sea of shrapnel.

*"Holy shit, little guy."*

She looked at the being in front of her, its assault still ongoing. "Until next time," she said, blood dripping from her mouth as she waved with her one remaining arm.

It spread its arms, the structure around them starting to disintegrate.

*"Warrior. You should steer clear of our kind."*

Ilea kept her gaze on the being's two shining white eyes, the invisible barriers around her cracking before she vanished.

Ilea caught the Fae as it collapsed and fell from her shoulder.

She stared at the two moons of Elos shining down on them. Lakes of mist were visible far below as her wings reformed and kept them steady.

Healing flowed into the Fae as Ilea charged her wings. She had no doubt the being had a way to follow. The question was if it would.

*Never been thrown out quite as thoroughly as just now. Or as rudely.*

*A four-mark creature. Talking and using so many different kinds of magic.*

She smiled.

*So it's possible.*

Looking down at the Fae, Ilea wondered how much the Ascended knew.

*There were at least two instances where it would have killed me if I didn't have either my healing or the second tier of Veteran. Let alone all the other attacks it used. Was it testing me? Or was that a serious attempt at killing me?*

*It only talked to me after I survived the initial assault.*

"Either way, you got me out," she murmured, looking at the Fae.

*Ascended, hmm?*

She sped up as soon as her wings were charged, choosing a direction at random, the clouds and blizzards making the visibility limited. She was still in the north, that much she knew. She was reasonably sure the being wouldn't follow her, if only because it was a hassle, but she didn't want to risk it.

*Elementals and now an Ascended. So much fighting and progress, and these creatures still manage to utterly outclass me.*

She thought of the Fae standing on her head, using her mana to fuel its spells. It had managed to hold off the Ascended, if only for a moment.

*What exactly are you, Mr. Violence?*

She flew for a little while and gritted her teeth.

*I couldn't even make a scratch. My blink was so easily disabled... I have to find a counter for that. Third-tier Space Magic Resistance is definitely a good first step. I got away with my head – let's try not to make the same mistakes next time.*

Slowly, the adrenaline from the fight faded. Ilea felt cold now, grounding herself by looking through the gains from the battle.

**'ding' Sentinel Reconstruction reaches 3rd lvl 29**

**'ding' Azarinth Awakening reaches 3rd lvl 26**

**'ding' Blink reaches 3rd lvl 20**

**'ding' Sentinel Sphere reaches 3rd lvl 11**

**'ding' Sentinel Sphere reaches 3rd lvl 12**

**'ding' Azarinth Fighting reaches 3rd lvl 24**

**'ding' Azarinth Fighting reaches 3rd lvl 25**

**'ding' Azarinth Perception reaches 3rd lvl 10**

**'ding' Azarinth Perception reaches 3rd lvl 11**

**‘ding’ Armor of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 28  
‘ding’ Aspect of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 25  
‘ding’ True Ash Creation reaches 3rd lvl 23  
‘ding’ Heart of Cinder reaches 3rd lvl 16  
‘ding’ Ash and Ember Unity reaches 3rd lvl 21  
‘ding’ Ashen Wings reaches 3rd lvl 12  
‘ding’ Ashen Wings reaches 3rd lvl 13  
‘ding’ Eyes of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 6  
‘ding’ Avatar of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 20  
‘ding’ Keeper of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 21**

**‘ding’ Meditation reaches 3rd lvl 2  
‘ding’ Monster Hunter reaches 2nd lvl 2  
‘ding’ Veteran reaches 2nd lvl 17  
‘ding’ Blood Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 14  
‘ding’ Blood Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 15  
‘ding’ Space Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 15  
‘ding’ Space Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 16  
‘ding’ Void Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 10  
‘ding’ Void Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 11**

*Nothing against that metal... it’s just like my mana intrusion. Damn asshole has a cheat.*

She smiled and kept flying.

*Just met an Ascended and nearly died, and all I want to do is crawl into my bed and sleep.*

“Come on, little one, I still need some Space Magic Resistance levels before I can take a break from all this violence.”

The Fae woke up as if it had heard the cue word.

*Safe?* it asked, looking around at the icy clouds that flew by with insane speed.

“No idea, little one, you tell me,” Ilea said.

The Fae giggled.

*Survived.*

“Yeah, thanks to you.”

*Stupid.*

*Close.*

“Yeah.”

It bonked her head with its small arms.

*Stop.*

Ilea did so, slowing down as they came out of a large cloud. An extensive forest spread across the landscape far below. She could see creatures moving in the dark.

*Damn, I really am a hawk now. How far did I fly?*

“Where are we?”

The Fae shrugged.

“How do we get back? I could use my teleport, but I can’t take you with me.” Ilea looked back. “Do you think the Ascended will follow?”

*Unlikely.*

“What was that thing, anyway? Fucking ripped me to shreds.”

The Fae giggled.

*Ye.*

“Did you just ye me?”

It nodded.

“Thanks for saving me, by the way.”

The Fae hugged her face from the side.

*Friend.*

Ilea patted the creature and smiled.

She took a moment to take in the sight. The forest and mountains, the lakes and rivers. It felt serene. Flying in the skies once more after having been underground for weeks.

“I’m glad we both made it out,” she finally said.

The Fae nodded in silence.

## Cosmic Knowledge

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“Where to, then?” Ilea asked after a while. “Do you still want to travel with me, now that we’re done with that dungeon?”

*Unsure.*

*Time.*

*Away.*

*Long.*

“Away from home?” Ilea asked.

The Fae nodded.

“Well, as much as I’ve enjoyed exploring the Descent with you, I won’t hold you back. I’ve got plenty of things to check on as well. Although I’m a little bit worried about that Ascended now.”

The Fae looked at her and then up at the moons. It tapped its leg as it sat on her shoulder.

*Visit?*

“You can visit whenever you like – just make sure the people around don’t spot you. Don’t want you ending up imprisoned again.”

*No.*

*Visit.*

*Me.*

It paused.

*Us.*

“You want me to visit your home?” Ilea asked. “Are you sure? I don’t want to intrude, but I’m certainly curious.”

*Trust*, was all the Fae sent.

Ilea smiled. “Sure, I’m happy to visit.”

*Dangerous*.

*Mana*.

“More dangerous than the twenty-fourth layer?”

*Yes*.

Ilea looked at the Fae. “I don’t really want to feel that pain again, little one.”

*No*.

*Drain*.

“So it’s a little more dense than the layer was but it won’t hurt me because you won’t funnel it all into my body?”

The Fae nodded and twirled.

*Mental*.

*Resistance*.

*Third?*

“Yeah, it’s in the third tier. Why?”

*Us*.

The Fae stopped to consider its words.

*Human*.

*Mind*.

*Weak*.

“I’m starting to realize that more and more.” Ilea paused. “Can you teleport us there?”

It started draining mana, Ilea’s resistance already turned off. Her mana had recovered enough to allow for the nearly ten thousand points the Fae had required before. Instead, however, it kept going.

Ilea felt like she was powering a spell of her own, so easily did the mana flow out and into the creature.

It seemed that creatures around them noticed as well. Some of the monsters in the forest below ran away just as a bunch of birds flew out of the trees to get some distance from the magical phenomenon forming in the skies above.

*I hope we won’t attract something powerful*, Ilea thought as she kept a lookout for the Ascended or something else.

And then, space shifted once again.

Ilea immediately felt the mana around her crashing into her like a wall. As if she'd been teleported into the depths of the ocean, with all its weight and pressure suddenly pushing her down.

*Holy fuck, she thought, going down on one knee.*

*Okay, she sent to the Fae.*

She felt slight concern from the being within her sphere. She couldn't quite place where the creature was, her arcane perception muddled by the magic.

*This really is an issue... my sphere is the main thing I can trust when my eyes fail.*

Ilea looked up and saw the moons, which were much closer than they had been a moment prior. The winds were strong here and the air thin. Neither bothered her nearly as much as the mana density itself.

She saw a sharp decline to her left, clouds visible far below, slightly illuminated by the moonlight.

*We are definitely high up.*

There was a sea of stars above her, and sharp rocks jutted out of the terrain nearby.

This was the peak of a mountain.

Ilea glanced around but found nothing else reaching these heights. Some of the summits in the distance peaked out of the clouds, but nothing reached nearly as high as where they were.

There was no plateau per se. Just wild outcrops of stone and rock without a visible path. The highest point was around thirty meters farther up.

She slowly adjusted to the mana and kept a focus on breathing steadily. Surprisingly, the thin air didn't bother her body. Her rational mind told her she would need to exert herself more here, would need to be careful and move slowly, but nothing else seemed to support that notion.

"I'm fine," she said, finding the Fae hovering a little to the side.

The creature nodded.

It floated away and up toward the peak.

Ilea followed.

She noted that the moonlight and starlight reflected off various otherwise invisible sections around her. It was as if space itself was distorted here.

Her wings moved slowly as she took in her surroundings, finding the sky became more and more meshed with the ground until, finally, she could not quite tell up from down anymore. Even gravity didn't help.

*Where are the moons?*

Ilea forgot the question when her eyes landed on something she could not grasp. It moved. She knew instinctively that the being had turned toward her, but she failed to comprehend its form, could not understand where it began and where it ended, the shape impossible and instantly forgotten. As if her eyes looked but refused to see.

She felt a slight pressure in her mind. Something was damaging it, but it was of no concern. For she was looking at something incredible. While her eyes refused to see, her mind and body could feel the presence, the power.

The Fae close to her was gone. She hadn't noticed it leaving.

*"Welcome, human. Do take your time."*

The voice filled her mind, incomprehensible and yet as clear as the very stars around her.

Ilea had to close her eyes, focusing on the flows of mana around her instead. Her head hurt, but she let meditation and healing flow through it, slowly getting used to the presence, the sensation it brought. Part of her felt like crying, but another felt like laughing.

She was in the presence of a god. Nothing else seemed appropriate.

It took her a while to calm down. Sometimes, a giggle slipped out, or a tear rolled down her cheek. She had goosebumps all over. It was beautiful and terrifying. Slowly, she learned to accept the being as something real.

It gave her time, not speaking again as she adjusted.

Ilea didn't know how much time passed before she spoke, now calm and mostly collected.

"Way to make an entrance," she said, her eyes still closed. "Nice to meet you."

A giggle echoed all around her. "*You adjust quickly. Ilea, Kin of Ash. It was not our intention to make an impression, as you suggest. Your human mind is simply not equipped to perceive our presence.*"

"I've seen some pretty powerful beings, but none of them could match the feeling I get from you. Is my ally and friend still here?"

*"It is the Fae as we are Fae. It is part of us as we are part of it."*

Ilea breathed in and then laughed as she identified the presence within her sphere.

## [Fae – lvl ????]

The presence giggled into her mind. One and many.

“Seems like you got some level-ups. Why send out the little Fae? And why at such a low level compared to this?”

*“The mark on your soul has not been placed without reason. To think we should meet a human who holds concern for that which their mind rejects. How cute.”*

“Hold up a minute. You’re the cute one, alright? Not me. I’m the fearsome warrior, and you’re the little Fae sitting on my shoulder. Just because I can’t comprehend your form or being as you are now doesn’t change that,” Ilea exclaimed before summoning a meal.

*“We have decided that we do not dislike your notion of calling us cute. Your shoulder, however, does not have the room to hold us as we are now.”*

“Yeah, probably not the best idea.” Ilea started eating, trying not to think too hard about where she was and what she was talking to.

*“Our power leads to animosity and fear. Thus, much of what we are decides to take a more vulnerable form, requiring less energy and mana to travel the lands lived in by creatures such as you.”*

“The mark you talked about before. What does it do? The Enavurin said it wasn’t an issue, but he’s just as much of an ancient incomprehensible mind as you are.”

*“It is very young compared to us. We have decided to ignore such a grave insult to our being in light of our relationship. The mark is placed on the essence or soul of a being. Now that you have reached the second tier of Soul Magic Resistance, it will fade with time. Faster if you learn to manipulate it, not at all if you will it so. Already you should perceive a part of what is your essence.”*

*“It is a warning or endorsement we, as others, place on beings we interact with. Yours means tolerance as well as curiosity. Both warning and endorsement, depending on who might see. Though most Fae would see you as a potential ally or perhaps even more. Should you wish for us to remove the mark now, we shall oblige. Yet it would pain us deeply.”*

“Leave it. You haven’t consumed me yet, so I’m inclined to trust you. Even as a being made up of many. Are all Fae part of you, by the way? Or are there many collections such as you?”

*“We are aware of others such as us. Not all Fae you meet are us, and yet they are.”*

Ilea nodded. “I see. Why were you in the Descent? Violence, I mean.”

*“To explore it. To learn of it. To experience.”*

“Then you were captured by the Ascended and corrupted?”

*“Violence has decided to withhold this information from you.”*

Ilea raised her eyebrows. “It got corrupted on purpose? And acted as if it was imprisoned.”

*“Violence has decided to withhold this information from you.”*

“I see,” Ilea nodded to herself.

*“Seeing an imprisoned being can induce empathy, though our powers are greatly limited when traveling alone.”*

Ilea looked up at the stars, which seemed so very close from here. “Quite a home you have here. Thank you for inviting me.”

A giggle flowed through everything.

“Can I ask a few questions?”

*“Of course. You are our guest.”*

Ilea smiled to herself, wondering what this ancient being might know. “The Ascended we fought. Do you think I have to worry about it hunting me down or attacking my allies?”

*“Vor Elenthir would have killed you for intruding on one of his facilities, but you have survived. He is not your enemy or the enemy of your kind.”*

“How do you know? Who is he, and who are the Ascended? What we found in this facility, what does it all mean?”

*“We have watched this world for millennia, seen its conflicts unravel, seen civilizations rise and fall, and met and talked with beings long gone. We do not believe that Vor Elenthir will pursue either you or the part of us that intruded on his facility. But, of course, we are not all-knowing. His advice is sound. You should steer clear of their kind, at least for now.”*

*“The Ascended are not of this realm. Beings not of flesh but of steel and magic. We first encountered their kind some eight thousand years ago. Few of them were willing to communicate, let alone share their knowledge or understanding of magic, but there were differences between them. The one you encountered, we think him to be a researcher. A scholar. The Ascended that arrived in Elos came here with different interests but ultimately with one singular purpose.”*

*“The Extraction was a display of magic beyond even our understanding. So unnatural and unthinkable were its effects on the balance of all things that even the very beings that conducted this vast violation were shaken. What you found in the Descent was confirmation that that facility had once been part of something greater, something to conduct a magical ritual so grand that it could tear a sun from the very horizons.”*

*The third sun, Ilea thought. Maro said that one of the suns was missing. That’s what the Extraction was? Are you kidding me?*

*“You’re saying the Ascended came here from another realm, built a bunch of facilities, and removed one of the suns from the sky? Even with everything I’ve seen, from elementals to, well, you, this sounds absolutely ridiculous.”*

*“We were there. Three thousand years ago, when the skies darkened and the very mountains shook. Cities were swallowed into the ground. Forests vanished into nothing. The Fabric itself thrummed and tore.”*

*When the world shook... that’s what the diary mentioned.*

*“What happened after?”*

*“It was a transgression so great that even the Oracles sent their most powerful warriors to meet with the humans and dwarves of the eastern lands and the northern mountains. They tore a gate through the Fabric and invaded a realm beyond with unified hatred.”*

*The Azarinh. And the Taleen. The diary, and the figures I found, and the torn map. So that’s why they worked together.*

*“It was not a greater purpose that drove them. The wasteland beyond proved treacherous, unimaginable horrors looming in the seas and skies, many of their numbers lost to the beasts. A will for revenge soon gave way to despair and, most of all, to greed. There were treasures in this realm, and there was knowledge. There were battles to be fought, but few even met the foes they came for.*

*“Some returned, with knowledge and artifacts. Power they did not truly comprehend but clung to, as many have done before them, and many will in times yet to come.”*

*Wait. The diary mentioned unlimited energy as well. Could it be...?*

*“What happened with the sun that was taken from the sky?”*

*“We do not know, only that it is no longer where it was.”*

Ilea raised her eyebrows. “I think the dwarves may have stolen it. That or something else that would give them a lot of energy.”

*If the Ascended came here with a purpose other than destruction or experimentation alone, then it could be possible that something remained from our third star. Though the technology used is incomprehensible to us. If you find out more, do let us know.*

Ilea nodded. She was lost in thought for a moment. These were a lot of assumptions, and even if everything was true, she had no clue what to do with it. At least for the time being.

“The Azarinth were there too, weren’t they?” Ilea asked.

*The healing order, yes. You carry their magic, or at least the seed that opened your form to the arcane in ways few humans have achieved. Though, soon, you shall move past their legacy, or perhaps you have done so already. Their numbers had dwindled – this conflict was just the last of many, their supreme power already history. And yet some of their members returned. With blood. With potential. It was perhaps the greatest find this order unveiled in their time, but it would also be their downfall.*

“That’s all riddles to me. What happened to them after? Are they still around?”

*The Azarinth, in name, are no more. Only whispers in forgotten tombs and changed history in ancient libraries. There are some who would remember, and one who will for sure. Perhaps, one day, you shall meet.*

Ilea smiled. “You’re deliberately keeping information back. You know you’re an ass, right? A massive incomprehensible ass.”

A sound, a feeling, something passed. A faint taste, perhaps, of amusement, laced with hundreds of voices and thoughts. Ilea had to heal her mind.

“What about Eregar and the Shadow’s Hand?” she asked. “They were there too, weren’t they? Fighting the Ascended.”

“*They were not called such. But yes, they were there.*”

“Why does nobody remember? I feel like all of this should be well-known history. A missing sun isn’t just forgotten.”

“*You are human. Many have not forgotten, but your kind is short-lived. Your stories and memories fade.*”

“But there are books,” Ilea said before she raised her eyebrows. *The destruction of knowledge that was mentioned. This was deliberate. But why would he?*

“The knowledge of that day must have been scratched from history. Could this Ascended have done that?”

*“Records are altered and destroyed with every passing war, every passing calamity, and with intent. We do not know why Vor Elenthir would have sought to do so. Perhaps to dissuade anyone from seeking Ascended technology. Perhaps because he felt remorse or shame for what their kind did.”*

“You seem so sure that he has no sinister intentions. Wasn’t he one of the beings who caused the Extraction?”

*“He was, and then he was no longer, like many others of their kind. They fought each other in the wake of the destruction they caused. The Olym Arcena is no more.”*

“I see. Wait, the north, and Rhyvor… that all happened because of this? The arcane storms and the mists – they weren’t around before?”

The being sent an affirming thought.

Ilea thought about what she’d seen in Tremor, about what Maro had told her and what they had found in the guard captain’s diary. So it was connected after all. This was why everything had changed. This was why the Rhyvor capital was now underground and why the north was the wasteland that it was.

She wondered how much of Rhyvor’s downfall had to do with this and with the Ascended’s tampering. And yet it was done. There were two suns in the sky. Rhyvor was no more, and the north was the way it was. Humans, at least most of them, didn’t remember, or she would likely have heard this story by now.

But what did it change? Perhaps Maro and Elana could find some peace or a target for their revenge, but all of this happened so long ago.

Ilea already knew that there were powerful beings out there. She had seen the elementals, and now she was standing in front of a being so powerful she could hardly comprehend it. The Taleen, the elves, and now the Ascended. She knew very little about their kinds. All she knew was that humanity was heavily outclassed, and while other civilizations were building machine armies or invading other realms to steal their suns, humans were fighting wars among themselves.

She crossed her arms and sighed, unsure if there was anything she could actually do. *I suppose I know I have to get powerful enough to face one of those tin cans, at least.*

The fight against Vor Elenthir had been sobering, but seeing his magic had inspired her as well. She couldn’t help but compare what she’d seen

from him with what she'd seen from the elementals. He had power, certainly, but it didn't feel quite as natural as the lightning bolts that her bird friend had sent her way.

She was glad the Fae didn't think the Ascended would pursue her. If he did, she would have a problem. But if he didn't, she would just have to make sure that next time went differently.

Ilea summoned a bottle of ale and tried to look at the being before her. It felt like her brain was being squeezed.

"You don't have a way for me to instantly gain five hundred levels or something, right?"

A feeling of slight amusement flowed through the vicinity. "*You should know by now that there are no true shortcuts to power. Work, time, experience, will, and challenge. Those will guide you to greater heights. There is, however, something you might be interested in.*"

Ilea narrowed her eyes. "And what's that?"

"*You are at the brink of yet another change. Not in relation to the ash, nor the arcane within you, but something new entirely.*"

"What do you mean? Something in relation to my General Skills? Or are you talking about another Class? Can humans get a third Class?"

*Will I get a third Class?*

Ilea held her breath.

"*What we see points in that direction. Soon, you'll be faced with a choice. We suggest you prepare accordingly.*"

*Prepare accordingly? For another Class...*

She thought about what that meant. There had been so many different options for her various evolutions. Options for whatever she had done and worked on. She couldn't even imagine what a new Class would be.

But the Fae was right. If a choice like that was coming up, she needed to prepare. Maybe set up a few things in Ravenhall and get as many achievements as she could. And as many resistances and other General Skills as she could manage.

"That's very helpful, thank you. Just to clarify, when you say at the brink, you mean a few more levels from now?"

*"To shorten an answer that would be too complex for your mind to grasp, yes."*

Ilea couldn't help but smile. She felt so comfortable in the abilities she'd already gained that she hadn't even considered unlocking a new Class

entirely.

*What could it be?*

*And when exactly will I get it?*

*And when should I level up?*

She asked all those questions, but the Fae didn't give her any specifics, so she decided to change the subject.

“I wasn’t born in Elos. Did you know that?”

“*We had suspected.*”

“One day, I woke up here. I don’t know why or how. I was attacked by wolves in the forest.”

“*You don’t seem particularly bothered by any of it.*”

“Yeah, I mean, now I can fly, shoot an energy beam out of my hand, and explore a magical continent. I even have access to a high-level chef who cooks meals for me that I can store in a storage item,” she said, showing off her necklace.

“*We know what a storage item is. As to why and how you appeared here, without anyone showing themselves upon your appearance, it is likely that the event was a natural occurrence.*”

“I really don’t know what’s natural about that. I never had access to magic in my old life, nor did anyone else I knew. People can just vanish and appear in other realms?”

“*That depends entirely on the circumstances. Your inability to sense or cast magic suggests that your realm has only recently been touched by mana. In such a state, the Fabric can fluctuate, small tears forming as the realm slowly adjusts.*”

Ilea nearly choked on her ale. “Wait, wait, wait, there’s magic on Earth now? And that means there are others like me?”

She immediately thought of Cless.

“*Many would have appeared in other realms, yes. It has happened many times before with different realms throughout the Fabric. Your world would not have changed to a noticeable degree yet. It is a slow process, at least in terms of human lifespans. You do not need to worry.*”

There’s magic on Earth now. Even if it’s a slow process, that means everything will change.

Ilea took a sip of her ale and thought about the implications of it all. They were vast. And out of her control. She took a deep breath and sighed. At least now she had some inkling as to what was happening on Earth.

“How many people are we talking about? A few hundred? A few million?”

“*It is impossible to say, only that it is unlikely that you are the only one.*”

“You can move between realms, right? Do you think I could learn the same?”

“*You wish to visit your home realm? It is possible, yes. Humans are not bound by their nature as many others are. You are weak at birth, but you alone are proof that you can defy norms. Arcane energies and an ash alignment are not something many would consider natural, and yet here you are. It is fascinating to watch your kind, more so than many others. Perhaps, in time, you could learn to travel the realms, but only time will tell – and, of course, your efforts.*”

Ilea wondered about that. “So, for example, elves are not the same?”

“*Of course not. Elves are not born as you are. They are given life through magic, their nature determined in part by their creators. But they are stronger, at least at first.*”

“What about you, then? Were you born weaker than you are now?”

“*Not in the sense you suggest. Our strength has increased since then, but not to an exponential degree like your own. Humans have incredible potential, capable of being formed and shaped into what they deem useful and desirable. We did not have that luxury. Many may argue that the strength and ability we were born with is preferable to the potential your species possesses, coupled with your incredibly weak bodies and minds.*

“*We have fought and battled creatures long forgotten by this world and its inhabitants. Some have lain dormant since time immemorial, others were ripped to pieces as small as atoms, returned to the flow of mana itself. We have traveled the realms, many yet to become stable, elemental forces powerful enough to strain even our existence. We have witnessed yet have not yet understood. An infant, steered by instinct.*”

“You saw the creation of the universe, then? What was there? A being, maybe, like an architect or smith that formed the realms? Or did it just kind of come into existence?”

“*We witnessed the forming of entire worlds, and yet there was a time before we were. There were worlds and realms even before we came to be. We once sought similar answers but found that one must let go of the question to find the answer.*

*"We are born of the arcane itself, formed by will and magic, the desire to live, to observe, to experience. Many creatures have thought themselves the architect of life, some of them human like yourself. Yet their creations are incomparable to the vastness of space itself."*

"We're getting spiritual. I had a few more questions, if you didn't mind, but what I'm more interested in now is a little bit of resistance training. If you're willing to help me with that?" Ilea asked with a smile.

The being obliged. The being that Ilea started calling Superfae as their training progressed.

\* \* \*

She asked about her healing order and the idea that she and Trian had had about a new Class. As they'd suspected, her arcane healing wasn't something she could share with anyone, but what she hadn't expected was the Superfae's suggestion that they use her ash instead. A combination of healing, near-death experiences, resistance training, and her presence as an inspiration could potentially lead to interesting results.

Of course, the being tuned its magic perfectly to suit her defenses, quickly leading to results. It didn't feel strange or overwhelming, which, considering the circumstances, freaked her out even more.

### ***'ding' Space Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 20***

#### ***- Space Magic Resistance***

*Against all common sense, you have not just faced an Ascended in battle but also invited a Fae to travel and train with you. Faced with meeting the most powerful being beyond the comprehension of your weak human self, you remained mostly unfazed. To ask the true Fae to train you is not just an insult but lunacy. And yet it seems the creature has somehow come to like you. Truly, incomprehensible.*

*Yeah, I'll take that one, thank youuu.*

### ***Space Magic Resistance – 3rd lvl 1***

*Most who try to chase this elusive school of magic will find and choose the void instead. You have fought a being of truly peculiar making, have*

*faced and survived its spells, and may count yourself amongst the few to call this skill their own.*

**2nd stage:** *It is a true mystery how you have sustained so much damage from space magic. You must have truly angered a being to garner such scorn. Your body and its parts become more difficult to displace.*

**3rd stage:** *Your being comprehends space magic in its arcane nature, able to ignore some of its aspects. You may still be slowed if your adversary is too powerful, but it will be difficult to pin you down entirely.*

She smiled at the addition. *And now I get to level the third tier. Which means even more resistance.*

To her surprise, she found that looking at the Fae didn't give her a headache anymore. Its form was still changing and unclear, but it was no longer overwhelming.

She wasn't sure how long the training had taken, unable to focus on both resisting the magic and talking to the being.

Ilea wondered why seeing its magic and feeling it was nowhere near the experience she'd had of just looking at it, but she assumed she just lacked the perception to even start to comprehend what was going on. Part of her was glad for that, but another was annoyed. Perhaps when they met the next time, things would be different. She wasn't sure if that was good or bad. Maybe both.

She also got another skill that she hadn't expected. It made sense, of course, considering her current surroundings. She just hadn't really noticed with everything else going on.

**‘ding’ You have learned the General Skill: Oxygen Repository Oxygen Repository – lvl 1**

**Due to unfortunate circumstances, you have been deprived of air for extended periods of time. Somehow, you have pushed through to survive. Your body has learned that it may not always be supplied with what it needs. You may survive much longer without oxygen and store what little you get for extended periods.**

**‘ding’ Space Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 2**

**‘ding’ Oxygen Repository reaches lvl 2**

Given how extensive a human's potential seemed to be, according to the Superfae, the topic of conversation inevitably went to Ilea's ability to become an Ash Elemental. And if the Superfae would ever be interested in having a date with her if she did.

*"A 'date' would be desirable should you ever follow that path, yes. But should you become an elemental, be aware that your mind and essence would become entirely unrecognizable. If you wish to preserve who you are, we suggest you refrain from such actions."*

"Well... who knows. Maybe I'll grow tired of being me in ten thousand years. Dating you as an Ash Elemental might just be the thing I look forward to, then."

Ilea stretched and yawned. She'd learned a lot and, more importantly, she'd met a few very interesting beings.

"Thank you for the training and for the chat. I do think I should return soon. Especially now that I have an idea about what to do with you."

*"Very well. We will wait and watch your progress, young human of ash. It has been amusing – to most of us – to host you in our home. May your journeys be peaceful."*

*Violence!*

The thought reached her as Ilea's eyes finally recognized something in the weird space.

Ilea smiled. "Hey, you're back!"

*Good,* the Fae sent.

*Leave?*

Ilea nodded and waved at the unimaginable being existing somewhere around her. They left the strange space together, the Fae leading the way through their surroundings.

*Mark?* it asked when they were back on the mountain peak – or perhaps they'd never left it at all.

"You're talking about the mark left by you?"

The Fae nodded.

*Modification.*

*Visit!*

Ilea laughed. "Sure, if you want to. I'll try to learn about my soul so I can keep it there. Just be careful when you visit. You know the drill."

*Yes.*

“Now that I think about it, can I mark you too? I have a skill that allows me to put a Sentinel Mark on someone. Supposedly, it allows you to signal me. I’m not sure what else it entails.”

She’d thought about marking Claire, but now that she was here, she preferred to use it on the Fae.

*Agreeable.*

Ilea smiled and used the skill on the Fae, watching as a small rune-like symbol formed on its hand. It cost nearly two thousand mana to apply. Nothing else seemed to change.

*General.*

*Location.*

“It adds that too? I can’t seem to tell where you are, though.”

*Home.*

*Protected.*

“I see. Does it work through other realms, though?”

*Yes.*

*Home.*

*Special.*

“I could tell,” she smiled. “Call for me if you find yourself in a bind on one of your adventures. I’m also happy if you want to join me on mine again at some point.”

The Fae nodded.

*Joy!*

It hugged her face from the side, held close by her hand.

“Trian’s been waiting for me, though. I should finally show up again. Thanks for saving my life again, little one. And for the company. Visit me if you get lonely.”

The Fae let go and floated away.

*Survive!*

*Joy!*

*Adventure!*

They looked at each other and sent the last concept together.

*Violence!*

“See you around,” Ilea said, crossing her legs and floating into the air.

Her third-tier blink activated, draining her mana into the complicated spell. It still used around half her mana, but the charge time was

considerably faster. While it had taken nearly thirty minutes when she'd first used it, it was now down to a little under seven.

*More mana equals a faster charge. Who would have thought?*

She smiled at the Fae and waved, watching the creature mimic her motion with its stubby arm.

*Damn, I'll miss the little guy,* she thought as she watched her surroundings turn white.

The option to explore the surroundings of the Fae's home had been there, but she'd thought it disrespectful. Taking her there had been enough of a risk, so she wasn't about to tread on their hospitality.

\* \* \*

Ilea was back home. Her house was in the same state she'd left it in. A breeze blew through the glass balcony door she had forgotten to close. A wet spot on the wooden floor showed the passage of time. She stepped outside and closed the door behind her.

It was night, and the moons now looked terribly far away. She took a moment to appreciate the sound of the waves far below, the cool wind, and the fact that she had once again gotten away with her life.

*That was quite the adventure.*

She blinked up and into the cold night sky, spreading her wings and ascending and enjoying the flight from her house back to Ravenhall.

*Didn't say hi to the cats. Hmm. Maybe later.*

There was a lot to talk about and even more to consider.

Ilea landed within the small forest surrounding the lake in the valley, some distance away from the city. She breathed in the cold air and smiled, reminded again of her training with Eve, Kyrian, and Claire.

She walked through the forest and soon reached its outskirts, finding much of the surroundings devoid of snow. Wagons moved lazily down the road from Morhill, protected by groups of adventurers or guards. Ilea couldn't spot a single imperial soldier on the road or the walls.

*Only Shadowguards,* she thought, watching their mostly bored expressions.

It was interesting to see their faces from hundreds of meters away.

*I'm Eaglea.*

*Hmm, good thing nobody heard that one. I've been around the Fae for too long, fighting monsters alone in a deep dungeon.*

She reached the gates and joined the people waiting to enter the city.

“Shadow! Lady Lilith!” one of the guards called out.

Ilea looked at him and smiled. “What is it?”

“Please, this way,” the man said.

Ilea blinked to his side, drawing looks from the waiting travelers.

“Shadows don't have to wait. Please just quickly show me your badge and you may enter the city,” the guard explained.

He checked the badge she handed to him and then gave it back.

“Are you really Lady Lilith?” he asked with sheer reverence in his voice.

“Who's to say?” Ilea said, putting the badge back in her necklace. She didn't wait for a response and instead just walked past him and into the city.

A couple of blinks brought her to the second wall. It was enchanted, preventing her from teleporting through. A simple jump over the walls worked well enough, however. She felt a magical resonance when she crossed the threshold and waved at the two guards she saw quickly flying toward her.

*Flying. They're getting better.*

They nodded as soon as they saw her and turned back.

Ilea blinked inside a nearby store and looked around. An older lady greeted her with a nod, not terribly disturbed by the sudden appearance.

“Leatherworks. Armors, packs, pants. Anything you're looking for, Shadow?”

She nodded. “Armor sets and comfortable clothes, I guess. Generally inconspicuous.”

The woman nodded and led her into a rather large room with twenty-odd stands. “Healer and ash. What's your name, dear?”

“Lilith,” Ilea said, touching some of the sets of armor.

“Oh? It is a pleasure to finally meet my benefactor, then,” the woman said.

The only other patron in the store tried hard not to look their way, his demeanor tense. A level sixty warrior.

*New to the city, maybe,* Ilea thought before picking three sets of gray and black leather armor. Those that seemed to fit the best.

She paid and vanished, reappearing on top of the building in a fresh set of comfortable clothes covered by black leather armor.

From the rooftop, Ilea could see the sewers below and, below even that, another street full of apartments, stores, and people. *The city is growing more and more.*

Ilea wondered if an apartment down below was more expensive than up here or the other way around.

*With magical light capable of mimicking sunlight, there should be plenty of expensive shit down there.*

Even though it was still the middle of the night, the store she had visited wasn't the only one still open. Plenty of people walked the streets, many of them armed.

She looked at the central administrative building, where aim light shone from within Claire's office. *Doesn't seem like she sleeps at all*, Ilea thought with a smile.

\* \* \*

"Come in," Claire's voice was subdued, almost inaudible, when Ilea reached her office.

She opened the door and stepped inside, closing it behind herself with a small tendril of ash. She felt the enchantments snap back into place.

Claire sat at her desk, looking rather relaxed. She had a smile on her face as she looked at Ilea.

Cless was sleeping on a couch near the window. The whole area had been changed to allow for more painting supplies and canvases.

"Welcome back," Claire said. "Took you longer than expected."

"Much larger a problem than expected. Had to help out in the north," Ilea replied with a smile.

"Oh, I saw. Care to explain this?" Claire summoned a painting that depicted Ilea standing atop the Trakorov's head. She looked at it and then back at Ilea. "Or this?" She swapped the canvas for a painting that depicted Ilea surrounded by bright light, most of her body burnt up.

Ilea formed a chair out of ash and sat down, resting her legs on an ashen stool before she summoned a barrel of ale and poured herself a mug.

“That girl’s power is breaching my privacy,” she said before taking a sip.

Claire chuckled. “I’ll ask her to stop if it’s a bother. Though she might not listen. Here, at least, I can store away the paintings. She couldn’t draw you the last few days after you met that large horned creature once more. I thought it had killed you.”

Ilea waved her off. “That sweetie? Never. Interesting that she couldn’t draw me anymore. Do you know about the Fae?”

Claire sat back in her armchair. “So that’s what it was. Cless mentioned a companion, something she couldn’t see but feel instead. She decided not to try and draw it. You met another Fae?”

“I did. And quite a few other beings and monsters. Is Trian available?”

Claire nodded. “He’s been most anxious about your return.”

“Maybe we should call for him before I let you know what I found,” Ilea smiled, pouring a mug of ale and offering it to Claire.

The woman took it and lifted it high. “To your continued survival.”

Ilea raised her own mug. “To violence.”

*I want to dedicate this book to P.*

*I love you.*

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## Acknowledgments

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I hope you enjoyed this book. I'll see you in the next,

Rhaegar

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