

“Work for you?” Lucas asked after a short while had passed. He definitely seemed skeptical.

“Eh, you can still do whatever you want. I just provide what you need and well... you in return share your findings,” Ilea suggested.

“And what will you do with such information? Is this a request from the Shadow’s Hand?” the man said.

“You are the Shadow’s Hand, aren’t you?” she smiled. “No, I was thinking we could profit from each other. I have gold and know people. I think the world would very much welcome a more balanced and green north.”

“Mhm... why would you care about the north so much? I appreciate the idea, I do. It is simply difficult to understand why you, the battle lover... would care for this,” Lucas said. He paused his spells for a moment and dragged from his pipe.

“More livable space is always nice to have. I think Hallowfort would benefit too. Look... this doesn’t have to be anything formal, no contracts, goals or anything. Just let me know if and when you need anything. And feel free to share any crazy findings, I’d be happy to fund help or research. Be it for the Hand or me personally,” Ilea suggested.

The man thought it over and nodded after a while. “Hm... you saved my life. Several times already. And you... prevented me... of committing more violence. I’ll do what I can. Who should I contact to get in touch with you?” the elder asked.

“For now, I’ll come find you I suppose. Otherwise you can leave things with Catelyn or Claire from the Hand. Depending on where you are,” Ilea said.

Lucas continued his attacks and nodded. “For now I don’t particularly need anything. A storage item perhaps but that would be stolen by the first scavenger that crosses my path,” he laughed.

“Self defense should really not be an issue,” Ilea sighed.

He shook his head. “It is a term misused often and easily. Self defense from revolting peasants, self defense from expansive but ultimately peaceful animals and beasts. Not that many care for an explanation at all,” he said. “No, I will not compromise.”

“Stubborn old man,” Ilea said with a smirk. *Anybody that actually attacks you will learn quickly how peaceful you really are.*

She didn’t want to insult him outright, both of them knew about his lacking control. Perhaps at some point in the future, if their paths cross once more, she would ask him if he wanted to learn train, to keep himself in check. For now, she decided to avoid that discussion.

“Did the others find anything else?” she asked, changing the subject to something a little less touchy.

“Indeed. The ramblings of a lunatic the book may have been, yet some things could be gained. Specifically, information on some of the lower levels,” Lucas said.

“The next layer, the tenth, holds a powerful lightning creature. Perhaps something akin lightning itself. An elemental. There is however a lot of cover as well, rocky cliffs leading down as well as powerful winds,” the elder said.

“An elemental? I think I’ve fought one before... the elder had one, Adam,” Ilea recalled, thinking about it. “If I managed to hold my own against him then, I shouldn’t have much of a problem here.”

Lucas chuckled. “You fought the Wyverns... I will not doubt your capabilities again. However, I most certainly doubt Strand had an elemental. Not a true one, perhaps a variation or young offspring, if such a thing exist.”

He sighed. “You are about to face lightning itself. Much like the storms darkening the skies of the north. You should not expect anything weaker.”

Ilea smirked. “Sounds exciting then. My Lightning resistance will benefit greatly,” she said and quickly checked the skill. *2nd lvl 8. Plus I get a shit ton of mana from lightning.*

The elder laughed. “Hmm... personally, I feel obligated to suggest you avoid that monster. Just so I don’t feel terribly bad if you end up as a burnt corpse.”

“Noted. Did he only go one level down? Or was there more?” she asked.

“There is more. The eleventh layer is comprised of a snow covered valley. Food and monsters aplenty, Spirits of Winter, Snow Owls and northern rabbits. Stone Cyclops are mentioned too. The last one I have never seen but he mentions a powerful paralyzing spell, so be careful,” he said and paused.

“There was a mention of something lurking within the snow as well but it appears the priest avoided it whenever it closed in,” Lucas added.

“The twelfth layer is the last one he visited, not going further because he didn’t consider his research on these layers done. Perhaps he was afraid, or considered the risks too great,” Lucas said.

“Dude seemed crazy, could also be a voice told him to stay away,” Ilea joked.

“Yes, or there was an actual voice telling him that... hmm. Well, anyway... the twelfth layer holds ice and reflections, illusions perhaps and traps. He did encounter a beast but other than injuries, nothing was mentioned,” the elder explained.

“Dude spent decades down here, or even centuries... that’s all?” she asked, more herself than the man.

“He appears to have been obsessed, a madness spreading in his mind that perhaps prevented him from being very effective. In an environment like this, it is difficult to survive,” Lucas said.

“Are you defending the guy?” Ilea asked, more interested than accusatory.

“Hmm... am I?” he chuckled. “Not his actions perhaps but there are ways a man can be lead down such a path. I myself perhaps could have ended up in a similar way, had certain things not occurred.”

Ilea nodded. “I guess you’re right. Well, didn’t know the guy. Just found the creatures he experimented on and left to die.”

“His life is ended, his soul at rest,” Lucas said and gave her a nod.

Ilea remained silent for a while, checking on her levels.

‘ding’ ‘Wood Magic Resistance reaches lvl 13’

‘ding’ ‘Wood Magic Resistance reaches lvl 14’

‘ding’ ‘Wood Magic Resistance reaches lvl 15’

‘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 sun 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 have really 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 or lack of light.

Ilea immediately noticed that she could easily see Lucas now, despite the bright beam of light burning into her stomach. The light was still there of course but it was simply less blinding.

Got it, magical sunglasses, she noted and smiled. I wonder what an actual flash grenade would do to me at this point. They do more than just blind you but with all my defenses?

It was hard to gauge the damage difference between a modern rifle and an arrow shot by a level two hundred Shadow. Ilea assumed it was perhaps similar, leaning towards the arrow being stronger even. Yet she lacked the scientific knowledge and testing for something like that as well as any experience with getting shot.

Taleen don't count, she told herself, just as unreasonable to compare as an arrow.

“Is the training effective?” Lucas asked, seeing her thoughtful expression.

Ilea closed her status and smiled. “Very much so, yes. Is it alright if we do this for a couple hours? I’d love to get my wood magic resistance to the second tier as well.”

Her ash density had just gone up another five percent. Ilea wasn’t sure if it was a multiplicative change or if it somehow just added to her Unity skill. Definitely a more noticeable upgrade than the defensive buff from her second tier Avatar of Ash.

“Are you sure you want to invest more time for this? Instead of fighting more Wyverns? Your level growth is incredible. A resistance is certainly not as effective,” he said.

“I get bonuses other than just the resistance. I think it’s worth it. The Wyverns are pretty elusive. I only found two in the last six hours. I think I’ll move on soon if I don’t catch more of them,” Ilea explained.

The elder nodded. “Hmm... it seems they could fight the corruption somehow.”

“Was there anything else about that in the book? How it spread?” she asked.

“No, sadly not. The priest got aware of it and was ecstatic about finding the activated blood. Hmm. Knowing how few bodies we found... of creatures not part of the respective layer, I believe it must have been released throughout the whole dungeon,” Lucas said.

“We just haven’t found evidence of that either. I suppose a couple corrupted beasts are enough however. Just seems odd that all of them streamed to the first layer and further down, they seem to be staying put,” she said.

“The Shredders had difficulties burrowing up higher it seemed. They themselves had survivors amongst them, resisting the corruption. More powerful beings might have simply resisted the blood manipulation or they understood how to fight it,” Lucas suggested.

“Many beings we call monsters are more intelligent than is commonly believed,” he added.

“Are you trying to make me feel guilty about killing them?” Ilea asked.

He smiled. “Your conscience will do that either way. Don’t get me wrong, while I personally disagree, you are free to retaliate against a beast that attacks you. Just understand that not all of them do so for the same reason. Some might simply be frightened or defend their home from invaders.”

Ilea nodded. “I survived. I think with some species I overdid it, like the Drakes near Riverwatch. Most of the beasts I faced however were instantly hostile and attacked for no other reason than me being there. I don’t regret any of those fights. A deer or rabbit would run away. If a predator chooses to challenge me, I won’t back away.”

“A fair argument. Still, you have the intelligence to choose. Whether to kill or not to. I will not lecture you, with or without my own lack of control...,” he paused. “I simply wish to give another perspective.”

“Where I’m from. Humans are the top of the food chain. We overpopulated the planet and destroyed the living space of most animals. Those that remained were allowed to do so, by our choice. And still, most died out anyway,” she sighed.

“Elos is different however. Most people would get ripped apart by the average monster in the wild. Some few have the luxury to chose here but honestly, I’d still slaughter a weak monster in the wilderness if a sapient creature can survive because of that.”

Lucas was quiet for a while. He finally cleared his throat and talked. “Every creature has its place. Magic, nature, humans and every other race. There is a balance. I believe that balance has a reason to be there. The realm you speak of, do you not think it unnatural for humanity to have such power?”

Ilea smiled. “Maybe. And still, a lot of people lived in peace, without fear of monsters and hiding within walls. They lived in wealth and luxury our ancestors could never even imagine. Still human of course, with all our faults and selfishness. I don’t deny that.”

“Hmm... perhaps I am a cynic. Yet I would rather trust predators to keep us in check than humans themselves. It would not be a surprise to me, if this very dungeon was built and used by humans. From this realm or another. Whatever purpose it served,” he said.

“Yea... we’re a bunch of bastards,” she smiled and left it at that. Ilea didn’t have the answers he perhaps sought. Humans were diverse, capable of incredible creation but just as much of horrible destruction and suffering.

She had some ideas about how the longer lifespan with higher levels as well as insane personal power could influence the whole structure of societies in Elos but so far, most of what she had found was quite familiar and similarly diverse as back on Earth.

“Did you check out the tuner?” Ilea asked a couple minutes later.

“I... something might have happened to that horrific thing,” he said, a little more quiet, barely audible.

Ilea laughed. She couldn't see inside the stone shed from here but certainly saw where he came from.

"Hmm... nothing good can come from such a device," he said.

"Probably," Ilea said. *Other than maybe four arms... for more punching*, she thought. The creatures in the fourth layer as well as the corrupted certainly spoke against blood manipulation being anything but fucked up.

"Something else, Ravenhall started to use the Haven for food growing. I'd assume you to be quite knowledgeable about all that. Might be worth a visit, to share your insight," Ilea said.

"I do not plan to visit..." Lucas said.

"Just if you ever find yourself in the area," Ilea said. *Stubborn old man*.

A few hours passed, the two further discussing resistances before Lucas went into a long talk about the plants he had found, as well as his project in Lisburg. The major difficulty seemed to be the higher mana density in the north, preventing most southern vegetation to thrive in the area.

Even vegetation found within dungeons didn't like it here, requiring constant attention from the man. The trees in Lisburg were originally from there, multiplied and now forming a whole forest but still remaining within the dungeon.

Ilea earned more levels in her resistances and finally decided to continue with the Wyverns.

'ding' 'Wood Magic Resistance reaches lvl 16'

...

'ding' 'Wood Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 1'

Wood Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 1

A connection made from a mage to nature allowed for 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: 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.

'ding' 'Light Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 2'

'ding' 'Light Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 3'

'ding' 'Light Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 4'

The additional life absorption really was minimal. For someone without a very high health regeneration, it would prove useful of course. In the rare event of facing a wood mage.

Ilea shared another meal with the man, the two having reached a lull in their conversation.

"Will you stay here?" she asked, preparing to leave.

“Mhm... another day perhaps... or two. And then I shall move to the fifth layer. If... if you come across more vegetation deeper in the dungeon. I would be happy to study them. Of course only if it is safe to retrieve it,” Lucas said.

“Thank you. Ilea. For the company and the food,” he said and bowed lightly.

“Thanks for helping with the resistances, despite your pacifism,” Ilea smiled. “Guess I’ll throw myself into more danger then. Good luck with your studies.”

“May you survive,” the man said in a sincere tone, lighting his pipe once more.

“You too, Lucas,” Ilea said with a smile and blinked out.

It took a couple hours but the second tier resistances would be more beneficial than the one or two Wyverns she could have realistically killed in that time.

Now, more Wyverns or should I check out that lightning thing?

Ilea knew the beasts now, knew that she could probably get another one or two levels out of them if she managed to find them.

Then again, having an easier time won’t be super beneficial either, she finally decided to work her way down and towards the next layer, slow and methodical.

The mists soon enveloped her, near black wings moving behind her as she circled around in the area.

Ilea saw the creature move up behind her, silent in the air. A couple minutes had passed since she started to descend.

She slowed down and waited for the attack to come.

Not for long. The Wyvern roared, releasing a wide cone of powerful flames through the low visibility of the mists.

Ilea was enveloped by it, slowing down further as her wings disintegrated.

She turned and punched towards the monster’s mouth, hoping it would go for the bait.

The Wyvern opened its maw and bit down, teeth grinding against her ashen armor.

Ilea smiled, the gesture a grotesque movement on her half molten face. She charged her Heart of Cinder and slashed against the creature’s head, aiming for its eyes and ears.

Her ashen limbs left scratches now, digging just a little deeper with each strike she managed to land. She refrained from cutting into its neck just yet, wanting to get off at least one internal fire spell. It seemed the most effective attack she had at the moment, next to her mana intrusion.

The latter built up over time and would kill the beast in the end but it had little direct effects, unlike sending a cone of fire down into its body.

She accounted it to the thick scales and skin that protected the creature.

It held her aloft, digging into her skin now as its claws ripped into her from below, swatted away or blocked by her left hand whenever she managed it.

Heart of cinder was released, stunning the beast for a second which allowed her to cut off her own arm at the shoulder, swinging around and locking her newly formed arm around its neck.

Got you now, she thought, a smirk on her face as the creature started to panic, a wave of fire expanding immediately after.

Ilea held on, pulsing her mana into the Wyvern as her ash locked around its neck, starting to rotate.