

## Chapter 383 Powerburning

“The fourth layer, the Heroes’ Decent. City of the Red Church.” Ilas spoke ominously, all four arms crossed as he looked 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 acid and gore that had still clung to it.

“Ancient red fluid, may I have a look?” Maro asked, helmet off to activate his charm skill set.

“You’re not a blood mage. I wanted to keep it safe with me but if someone could compare it to the corruption, we might find out something.” Ilea said, considering his request. She did assume he mostly just wanted it because of the novelty.

Niivalyr hissed as he looked at them. “You foraged into these parts and do not even consider that your interference has caused this outbreak?”

“Many venture into the deep. Nothing she speaks of is of special notion. If the expedition had reached only the fourth level, we would already know. The wood spirits and moths are from lower layers, I doubt a trip to the fourth had anything to do with the corruption’s spread.” Ilas tried to mediate, gesturing for the elf to calm down.

“That was quite some time ago.” Ilea commented. “The corruption is here and while I doubt my actions had anything to do with it, I’m here now too.”

The elf hissed once more, considerably less annoyed. “I apologize.” He said. “It is merely your... human... curiosity. Every secret in every dungeon must be unearthed. Every ancient and forgotten evil, released, sold or even outright used.” He shook his head and murmured some presumed curses in elvish.

Lucas chuckled and looked at the elf. “A disposition as natural as is your blood hunger.”

Niivalyr hissed again but started walking down the tunnel.

“Done?” Catelyn asked. “We probably have many layers to go and I’d like a full night’s rest within the month. Three hours just isn’t the same.” She said the last part with a quiet voice.

“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 some parts of the tunnel, the Veramath not caring much for a usable architecture.

Trampled remains of various monsters still marked their ascent, living ones now showing up rarely within the tunnel.

“They want to live, just as we do.” Catelyn said. “I suspect even in the second and third, there are many still hiding away.”

“It is my hope that most of the 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, a group of undead walking to his side.

“There have been reports, yes. However nothing confirmed by myself nor anybody I trust. I do not believe there are any beings of higher intellect in the upper layers at least.” The dark one replied, returning to silence.

“The Veramath already helped us.” Ilea said. “Albeit not exactly willingly.”

Ilas stopped and crouched down. “We are getting close.”

“With all the pure blooded, I doubt there are many of them left down here.” Ilea said, seeing the stone ceiling separating the third and fourth layer below the tunnel.

“Much of it remains sealed off, many of its secrets and beasts hidden away.” Ilas said as he stood back up. “Yet the corruption may not have reached those. We should press on, destroy those 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 sealed do not concern us.”

“And you’re sure it didn’t start on this level?” Maro asked. “With what Ilea talked about, it seems experiments using blood and corruption would be done here, if anywhere.”

Ilas shook his head. “Too many have come this far. It seems unlikely that such a poison would be found or released here. After all this time. It is not the only place meddled with. This whole dungeon might have been created. The Red Church merely followed their gods in their work.”

“You know a lot about this dungeon.” Maro said and looked at him. “I’ve been past the twentieth layer, a long time ago. There was nothing artificial about them then, merely a peculiar dungeon.”

Ilas stopped walking at that and looked towards the necromancer. “You are... older than. Than any of us here. Do you not see, the stone separating the layers we are in right now? The quality it has? Nature rarely works such wonders.”

“I don’t remember it having such separations, just the habitat changing. Then again, I was younger, less interested in such things. As long as there were monsters to fight.” Maro admitted.

“Enchantments perhaps? Now in disrepair, forgotten. The great shift changed all, the Descent included.” Ilas said.

“You mean when the mana changed in the north?” Ilea asked.

“Has to be.” Maro said. “None of the monsters up here were anywhere near level two hundred.”

“The north is peculiar in this, birthing only the strongest. I have heard only stories and little remains from before the shift.” Ilas said. “You perhaps, are one such thing.” He nodded to Maro.

“Well, I would have been out of my city a little earlier if that shit hadn’t happened.” He sighed and shook his head.

Flickering lights were visible now, chunks of the fourth level 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.

Catelyn 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 as their enhanced hearing was focused on any reaction.

*Did they all come out already?*

The question was answered with several clearly audible screeches, frenzied Pure Blooded and other variants running into the corridors leading towards the group.

They were all corrupted.

Their activity apparently prompted yet more of them following behind, the screeches combining into a horrifying orchestra of gurgled voices.

“Here we go again.” Ilea commented and stepped ahead, still inside the Veramath tunnel. “I suggest you lot just drop spells into the mass and I try to occupy them. Not much space here to fly above or do a more complicated formation.”

“That should be effective.” Catelyn said as she transformed into her huge form, taking up nearly half of the tunnel.

Niivalyr stepped aside with an annoyed hiss, directed at the sudden heat. “I will keep them focused on you.” He commented, looking at Ilea.

“Here they come.” Lucas said in an anxious tone, moving further back as a wooden cocoon started forming around him.

Ilea was prepared, the first corrupted blood monsters ripped apart by fire and death rays, barriers and ashen spears following after.

Maro’s undead surrounded her to provide some literal meat shields against the frenzied beasts.

Old blooded and Blood Carriers were a bit of a nuisance to deal with, the former quick on their feet as well as regenerators and the latter having the strength and speed to tackle her away. Their massive form required her to use some offensive spells to kill them quickly too.

Her evolutions however had simply made her too tough to make the beasts anything more than a minor inconvenience. Most of the damage she took came from the apparently just as frenzied spell casters that seemed to abuse her as a target doll.

There was little else they could do of course, the tunnel simply not allowing for a safe environment. Some of Catelyn’s spells had an area of effect that filled the whole tunnel and several adjacent corridors with smoldering flames.

Maro’s undead were certainly lessened in effectiveness by this too.

Ilea on the other hand welcomed the spells, few of them even getting below her ashen armor. All of those that did were Catelyn’s. That fox certainly packed a punch, even with her high resistance.

Hours passed once more, in a battle that seemed more like a cleanup grind than anything else. The only thing Ilea was missing were some podcasts.

Only a little of course. Fighting all out with her skills and insane powers while a group of supernatural beings helped with spell support was more entertaining than most things she had done back on earth. Even if the enemies posed little threat or tactical finesse.

A combination of her own Heart of Cinder and Catelyn's fires turned whatever remained of the monsters into ash that she continuously used to attack, occasionally turning some of it back into ambient mana when the mass simply became too much to control efficiently.

She felt a little bad for Ilas and Lucas, both of them not participating in the battle, one stoically waiting with his swords drawn and the other one hiding within a cocoon of protective roots.

*They've got other motivations.* Ilea reminded herself amidst the chaos. Getting more levels and fighting constantly wasn't on most people's wish list. Not if one was inseparable from the other.

*Again, not much gained from all this.* She sighed and looked through the few notifications, skipping the group kill messages.

*We killed what? Five hundred? A thousand?*

Solo fighting miststalkers still seemed like the most reasonable thing to do for her. When it came to leveling itself that was.

***'ding' 'Sentinel Core reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 5'***

***'ding' 'Azarinth Reversal reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 7'***

***'ding' 'Heart of Cinder reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 6'***

*Not even a resistance level.* Maro and Elfie had focused on the enemies this time, enough targets around for both of them. The curse did occasionally hit her but it had apparently not been enough for a level up.

It was quiet now, most of the nearby magical lights had been destroyed. Only the flames still clinging to carpets and bits of corpses remained.

Catelyn silently cast four more explosive fireballs before the group waited once more.

"Let us move on." Ilas said a minute later.

The tunnel led further down, through and past the city in the fourth layer.

It opened up once more, into near complete darkness.

"Fourth layer?" Ilea asked, seeing only as far as her sphere reached. She summoned the cloak she had gotten from the Gray Company but it didn't improve her sight in the slightest.

"Yes. The bears and wood spirits should have been from around here." Ilas said, his voice a little more quiet now.

Catelyn and Lucas' lights moved out a little farther, trees faintly visible as well as grass.

"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.

“Seems like they all found their way up already.” Maro commented.

“Quiet.” Catelyn hushed him.

Ilea could make out light steps in the distance, coming closer. Dozens. Hundreds.

She prepared her spells and waited, the light reaching 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 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 formed with both Ilea's creation magic as well as the beast remains created by Catelyn's magic.

Elfie filled the gaps with his barriers, the low level monsters not making a dent in either of their defenses.

There were however hundreds of the beasts, Ilea just waiting 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 beasts.

Lucas averted his eyes while the flickering light reflected off Ilea's armor and swords.

The swarm didn't slow down for a whole fifteen minutes, smoke rising above the line of visibility, a couple of trees having caught fire near where the squirrels were coming from.

The fox didn't stop burning the creatures when the last of them had been killed, turning whatever remained of them to ash and with it clearing most of the smell and corruption away.

Nobody made another comment as they walked further down 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 nearby 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 weird. Ilea, the Soul Rippers were different too, summoned here by the runes Reyker had found.” Maro said and glanced her way.

“Most of the creatures and beings I’ve encountered so far have been new to me. Doesn’t mean this has a connection.” Ilea said. “Plus, you’ve been to the Descent before. Was it filled with unknown beasts and vegetation too back then?”

“Some, yes. Dungeons do form beasts according to the available mana... I’m pretty sure about that at this point. It could be a coincidence but it just seems... weird. Everything here in the north, the way it changed.” He added.

“It does have light absorbing properties.” Lucas commented. “Interesting possibilities. We could line tents with this wood or build whole camps out of it to keep monsters at bay.”

“Don’t most beasts dislike fire?” Ilea asked when she noted movement in her sphere. “Something is close by.” She warned and prepared herself, looking in the direction where she had seen the beast. Too little of it to make it out.

“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.”

“That varies between species.” Niivalyr said. “I do not think the corruption adds senses.”

“Just be prepared.” Catelyn said. The flames around her intensified, pushing a tiny bit further into the forest.

Flying over it could have easily been accomplished but their goal was the destruction of all corrupted they could get to, leaving them with the conscious choice to attract them.

“Is anybody keeping track of where we are? I’ve marked trees but honestly, I have no clue where we’re going.” Ilea said, cutting into a nearby tree with an ashen limb.

“Downwards.” Ilas said, pointing in a direction.

Ilea couldn’t tell they were actually moving down, not with all her available skills. She glanced at Ilas with some appreciation. So far he had done little but walked with them.

Lucas at least had closed up sections where the corrupted could swarm out to. With a cavern as open and huge as the one they were currently in, that job however had gotten somewhat useless too.

His light magic was nice to have at least, quite a lot more potent than Catelyn’s fire.

“We should be getting close to the next lay-” Ilas said and halted suddenly, holding up a hand. “We have company.”

Ilea saw them a couple seconds later, the wood spirits appearing in her sphere.

Orange veins showed on their wooden bodies depicting various animals as they ran or flew towards her.

### ***[Corrupted Night Forest Spirit – lvl ??]***

The trees around them bent, splinters ripping out and rushing at Ilea as she covered her body with black wings.

Her ash lashed out before she blinked to the closest forest spirit, a feline creature with long claws and orange veins lining its full two meter length.

Storm of Cinders and Absolute Destruction were discharged as she slammed down into the creature from above, grappling it right after as she brought it to a stop in the dirt.

Claws reaped into her ash, digging deep with each strike as she responded in kind, ashen limbs chipping away at the wood as her fist slammed into its head.

The spirit suddenly went limp, the mana intrusion too much coupled with Ilea's reversed healing.

She moved it aside and vanished, grappling one of the flying variants, interrupting the projectiles firing down at her companions that were grouping up, shields and fire as well as death magic and swords flashed, dulled and distant to her eyes.

*I don't like this forest.* Ilea thought with conviction, ripping away the wings of the creature. Of course it continued flying nonetheless.

Roots and spikes slammed into her ash, unable to penetrate as she slowly invaded the corrupted monster's system with her own destructive mana.

She let go when the ding resounded and spread her own wings to land amidst the battling people.

Niivalyr had it under control, his barriers chipped and cracked but holding the beasts at bay.

Ashen limbs moved out quickly, touching each of them before Ilea blinked into the fray once more. None of them had been injured majorly, only showing slight scratches and cuts.

The created wood projectiles at least didn't seem to transfer the corruption.

A couple of corrupted Needlebears joined the battle half a minute later, lured by the sounds and spells.

Their projectiles and quick rolling movements proved more difficult to avoid in the dark forest than in the open field in the first layer.

With Ilea's sphere and their comparatively low level, they posed little threat however. Ila seemed to have some difficulties, mostly teleporting around to avoid the bears.

The rest of the group had flown up, simply letting Ilea and Ila deal with the creatures while they used their spells from a distance.

*Casters.* Ilea thought with disdain, stopping one of the bears with her own strength and weight, her back slamming into a tree when the two impacted it.

It groaned, its roots slowly ripped out of the ground before Ilea killed the bear, its corpse pushing the tree back into the ground after she vanished.

Two more bears and the battle was won. *Fewer creatures than above.*