

The two of them joined up with the others a couple minutes later, finding them within the stairwell that led up towards 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 and near death experience they had to endure for over a month. They had known what they were getting themselves into but certainly underestimated the ridiculous endeavor.

*Then again, without the corruption they might have actually succeeded. Weren't as lucky as me to find treasuries left and right and instead finding a deadly blood manipulation agent.*

"You made it," Catelyn said, still awake.

"It was very close. Nearly died," Ilea said in a dry tone.

"I can imagine," Catelyn said in the same voice.

Elfie hissed and turned away in his terribly overdressed bedroll.

"Didn't tell me you were royalty," Ilea whispered his way.

"I simply have a sense for dignity," the elf whispered back.

"He hates sarcasm," she said to the fox. "You should get some sleep, you look rather spent."

"You first. I don't need much and while I've been awake as long as you have, I didn't exactly fight as much."

Ilea smiled. "True. You could join, cuddling is nice," she said and summoned her bed into the corner of a flat area in the stairwell.

"Enough rumors will spread as it is, no reason to add more. I am a council member of Hallowfort," Catelyn replied.

Ilea stored her bone armor and added an ashen blanket to her armor, enjoying the soft mattress and pillow below. "Your loss," she said and closed her eyes, out in a moment.

She woke to a tapping of her nose, the Fae standing on the bed and in front of her face.

*Sleepyhead*

*Ah, a victim presents itself,* Ilea thought and slowly reached out with her ash, wrapping the creature up 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, more a general statement the creature sent out.

"Sssh, it's warm and you feel like a Galaxy," Ilea said, not finding a better word at the moment. She saw the rest of the camp packing up, someone waking up a grumpy fox sleeping on a comfortable looking little bed.

“Four hours have passed, human,” Niivalyr said as he stepped up to her bed.

“Go ahead, we need to wait anyway. Tell Ilas to get me here once you’re through,” Ilea whispered.

“And here I thought you powerful. To lose to the lull of sleep, of all thi-” a hiss interrupted him.

“Leave, elf. I will find you when the time has come,” Ilea whispered, seeing many of the Dark Ones frozen by her enhanced voice but she didn’t care.

“Very well,” he said and bowed. “Apologies.”

She waved him off with an ashen arm that grew outwards from her blanket. A giggle resounded in her mind.

The survivors didn’t make a single noise as they passed, various clues for a wide range of emotions graspable within her sphere before she was about to doze off again.

“I’ll probably be near Riverwatch if that’s alright with you,” Maro spoke, only him and Catelyn remaining.

Ilea nodded.

“Come visit some time and don’t get yourself killed. Not for a long while at least,” he added and bowed. “Knight of Rhyvor.” He vanished when the last word left his mouth.

Ilea just smiled and cuddled the Fae closer.

“Visit us whenever you are around and have time,” Catelyn said, floating next to the bed as she eyed the two.

Ilea nodded again.

The fox left, looking back once more before she vanished.

*Envy*, the Fae giggled.

*I know. My bed is awesome*, she thought and fell asleep.

Ilea woke up the instant Ilas appeared within her sphere. She had slept much longer than necessary but after all the fighting and healing, she really enjoyed the nap. Several hours didn’t really constitute as a nap but Ilea didn’t support such restrictions.

Everything beyond an hour was a nap because her body simply didn’t need more, even after days and weeks. She hadn’t tested it in a while.

*I hope I never get a sleep resistance*, she thought and sat up, tapping the Fae that she was pretty sure just acted asleep.

Ilas bowed and waited.

She put on her bone armor and extended her ashen one above before she got up and stored her bed again. Her necklace had the benefit of storing the warmth of the bed as well. Still, she would have to let it air out soon. *Not using it nearly enough anyway.*

“So. Ready for your little adventure?” she asked the ancient guardian of the first layer.

He nodded. "It is the only purpose left to me," he said with conviction.

Ilea rolled her eyes. "Come on, you're nearly at level three hundred. You will live a long time as it is, don't get overly dramatic on me now. Even if we succeed, there's plenty of purpose you can find."

"I... I will think about that once it is done. Come then, let me shroud you against the creatures awaiting above," Ilas said and activated his spell.

The Fae returned to her shoulder.

*Violence!*, it conveyed with a hand thrust forward.

"Sure. Oh, before I forget. Don't intervene in the fight if I don't ask you to," Ilea said to the Dark One.

"Of course. I have no interest in the resulting experience, only in the creature's demise," he replied.

"I thought you wanted to get the remains out?" Ilea said.

"That as well. And yet I cannot deny a wish to see it destroyed," he said.

Ilea just nodded, the group coming up on the eighteenth layer.

The shroud remained over them as they floated down to the surface, keeping around half a meter above ground.

Ilea kept her eyes on the floating Sun Sprites, their forms barely distinguishable in the distance.

Fifteen tense minutes later, they entered the stairwell leading up to the seventeenth layer, undiscovered and unbothered. Ilea was almost a little disappointed.

"No violence," she murmured.

The Fae nodded but gently caressed her armored cheek.

Ilas just glanced at them briefly before he continued, his spell still active. "The Spirits that roam this layer are hostile to those moving closer to the facility. My shroud will keep them unaware. We found that they do not enter the facility itself."

"Good to know. Anything practical you can tell me about the vampire?" Ilea asked.

"It was brutal, fast and strong but none of that is surprising with a level above five hundred. I am somewhat sure mind magic was involved as well. We could not injure it back then, one of my companion's summons dragging me out as the rest stalled the creature. It... is rather tall as well. If you can beat it..." Ilas said.

"I'll try. You search through as much as you can. Also, remember... tell me all you know right now, as well as any hidden intentions. If they're there. I will come for you if you are deceiving me," she said.

"I would not dare lie to the one offering to free me of this burden. I swear it, on all that I am," Ilas said and bowed deeply.

*Trust*, the Fae said.

"Let's see what that thing is about then," Ilea said, motioning for him to lead the way, shrouded and hidden.

The Spirits didn't see them, dozens of them floating close to the facility that came into view ten minutes later.

Ilas' hiding spell really highlighted how the expedition managed to get through all these dangerous creatures.

Ilea wasn't sure about the utility though. If a huge treasure waited behind the monster, then maybe but at this point fighting the creatures was the main thing she was looking for.

She looked at her hands, blinking a couple times as she watched the minuscule changes and movements in her own ash. She felt it too, had felt it long before but now she saw it as well. It was a little weird but Ilea slowly got used to her eyes.

*It probably feels similar to near blind people getting their eyes lasered. Here in Elos the best way to get rid of medical issues is to level up.*

*All my skills are in the third tier now. I wonder what happens if I reach level three fifty.*

"Time will tell," she whispered to herself as they entered the facility through a heavily damaged steel gate.

Ilea immediately noted the smell of dried blood and rot. The remains scattered in the broad hallway leading into the structure of steel only added to the grisly atmosphere.

"You came through here?" Ilea asked. "When was that?"

"Over ten years ago. We did come through here and went into the first side corridor we could find. The creature found us, tracked our steps and even my magic could not deceive it," Ilas whispered.

"Then I'll just walk in and confront it, you search through the place," Ilea said.

"You do not want my help?" Ilas asked.

"If it's too much for me, I doubt your assistance would make much of a difference and in that case, you will have more time to search. I will send the Fae to find and warn you in case I have to retreat, that ok with you two?" Ilea asked.

*Agreement*

"Thank you," Ilas said and stepped closer to the wall, shrouded in shadow before he nearly vanished.

Ilea could still tell him apart from the wall with her eyes but she wasn't sure if that was due to her newfound third tier skill. Her sphere could spot him too, although more an absence of something. *Even so far in the north, Eve isn't bested. A shame, really.*

*Sad?*, the Fae sent.

"I'm alright. Come on, let's see what this Vampire can do," she said and kept walking, keeping her skills and buffs active.

There were cadavers from a variety of creatures down here, most reminding her of species found within the close layers both up and down. *It hunts*, she noted.

A slight grin spread on her lips as she felt the hairs on her back stand up. She couldn't hear or see anything but she felt a faint presence. Something 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, my young padawan," Ilea said, not caring much about the noise her steps produced.

Other than the smell and rot, the facility looked similar to others they had found within the Descent. Machines and runed tables of unknown purpose decorating many of the rooms.

She reached a rather spacious hallway, making sure the enemy was still nearby as she focused on the feeling. A combination perhaps of her Sentinel Huntress, her sphere and all her other enhanced senses combined. It would make her feel quite shit if it turned out Ilas had been slaughtered while she was aimlessly strolling about.

There was writing on one of the walls in the spacious area, as well as an altar holding burnt down candles and smelly artifacts.

She rolled her eyes and looked up at the writing. It wasn't a language she knew but the cliché was almost perfect. *All we're missing is a goblin in the walls playing one of those weird steel instruments to create scary noises.*

Ilea wasn't caught off guard when something jumped at her from the ceiling, both her sphere and precognition reacting long before the creature got to her.

She blinked to the other end of the room and looked at the monster that landed with graceful dexterity. Its whole presence screamed danger.

Ilea watched as it turned, a distorted human body that looked elongated and unnatural. Its jaw was unhinged, all teeth sharp and long, the canines ridiculously broad and near fully covered in dried blood.

Its eyes were black, thin vertical slits showing some red color between. Black greasy hair and a beard of the same color accentuated the pale skin. While rather thin, the body looked powerful nonetheless, wiry muscle visible below the shreds of red, white and gold that remained of its garb.

It reached nearly three meters in height, both hands and feet equipped with sharp but somewhat short nails.

***[Starving Vampire – lvl ???]***

Its tongue moved out of its open maw, too large and full of teeth to close. It looked like an arm made of flesh.

"Ew, holy shit tuck that back in mate." Ilea said and looked at the creature. "Any intelligence left in there?" she asked and summoned a couple chunks of meat, 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's wo-" she said, stepping to the side when the Vampire appeared and slashed at her.

Sharp nails brimmed with magic as a thin line of blood formed in front of them, cutting into the steel behind where she had stood.

*That's some absurd range, five or six meters,* Ilea thought and jumped back, attacking with her ashen limbs that could reach even farther.

She felt a sudden push against her mind as the creature rushed her, with speed higher than herself.

Her Mental Resistance reduced the attack to a slight pain that healed quickly, Ilea jumping past the steel beams and machinery in the hall as the Vampire cut through it, close behind.

Ilea was surprised to find her ash actually managed to cut the skin, rather deep as well but glancing off the bone whenever she got that far. The less surprising thing was that the wounds healed nearly as quickly as her own did.

*This is going to take a month,* she thought, still smiling as she continued to dodge. If anything, it would be good for her skill levels.

This thing was made for hunting, efficient and quick movements and deadly magic at its disposal. She was sure Ilas' team only survived because it liked playing with its prey. Or they managed to surprise it with something.

She was pretty sure the dark one hadn't made a fool of himself and lied to her. She would beat him to death with whatever treasure he had found. No, his emotion had felt true and he had stuck with them throughout the whole adventure, despite the dangers.

Ilea found herself unable to dodge the next attack, deciding to take it as her own fist smashed 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 tiny bit more, nearly imperceptible.

She dodged to the side when it bit down, her body somehow dragged towards the open mouth.

*Fuck that,* she thought and blinked, her skill only bringing her a little further 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, added to the self recovery it already has.*

"You're nearly as annoying as I am," she said with a smile, sacrificed five hundred health and slammed her fist into its head, a thousand points of destructive mana spreading into it with an added side of heated embers.

The Vampire was ripped away from her arm, chunks of flesh and muscle leaving with him before he stumbled away a couple steps.

Ilea healed her arm, her ashen armor covering the spot immediately as well as the wounds on her sides. She stepped to the middle of the room and started charging her Heart of Cinder, sixteen ashen limbs fanning out, ready to deliver 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 did it look at her with apprehension.

Ilea looked at her arm before she crouched, "Let's see who has the better recovery."

Dozens of hits were exchanged in the next seconds, Ilea having a considerably easier time dodging the blood magic of the Vampire 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 dealing a little more damage, continuing to rip away any defenses it had against mana intrusion.

Her impression had been right, the Vampire had even played with her at first. Its blood magic claws now dug deep into her flesh, easily penetrating her ashen armor whenever it managed to get in a hit.

The mental pressure too continued to increase but still nothing that would knock her out for even a moment.

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 Vampire was wary about biting her, having learned of the consequences earlier, now mostly dodging her attacks and using its broad strikes with 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 creature hissed, standing up as it glared at her.

Neither of them looked any different than before.

"Yeah, we're going to be here for a while," she said with a smirk, glancing at the floating Fae above as she heard the giggle. She spread her wings to avoid the floor, wet with their mixed blood and charged.