

“These hounds caused difficulties for you?” Feyrair said as he crouched down to pet the terrified Stalker Hound.

“We don’t start at your level, Fey. They were great experience back then,” she said.

“Don’t kill it,” Kyrian said.

“Why would we, they’re not a threat, and they’re obviously smart enough not to attack us,” Ilea said. “They’d get hurt anyway, trying to bite through our armor.”

“Exactly. So where to?” Kyrian said.

They had entered the Calys mine and Ilea teleported them through parts of it, looking for a way down. She used monster hunter to look for a powerful being but so far there were no signs of anything. A few more teleports and she saw a deeper cavern within her dominion. They reappeared a moment later.

I suppose we’re out of the Calys mines, Ilea thought as she looked at the more natural cavern. Large bat creatures hissed and scattered.

‘ding’ ‘You have entered the Lower Karth caverns’

“Already lower. Where’s Iz at then?” she wondered.

“The even lower Karth dungeon,” Kyrian suggested.

“Sounds about right,” Ilea said and jumped down into the darkness. She hit the side of a cliff and rolled off, crashing into a few stalagmites at the bottom. Her weight and momentum won out.

“We could just drill down,” the metal mage suggested when he landed next to her.

Feyrair created a few specks of white flame, the magic bits floating out to illuminate their surroundings.

Ilea watched as the cavern expanded. She had her dominion but it wasn’t endless. “We could. But where’s the fun in that?”

“Exactly,” Feyrair said and started walking.

They continued at a slow pace for about half an hour, neither running or teleporting as they searched for ways down.

“The creatures here are weak,” the elf complained.

“We’re not exactly low,” Ilea said. “Let’s speed it up a little.” She spent the next few minutes teleporting the others through the darkness, simply ignoring the lower level cavern dwellers or the layout, appearing in front of a wall a few times. She mostly used her dominion for guidance but her spells were quick. They traveled quite a long way in the short time, her marks suggesting they had descended close to a kilometer. Iz was still a long way off but Ilea could tell the mana density was higher already.

She stopped and burst into flames, Feyrair doing the same. Kyrian's armor showed signs of curse magic flowing through.

The ground shook ever so slightly, the group in darkness other than their own sources of light. The cavern was small but not exactly claustrophobic. Ilea turned her head to the side when the first creatures entered her dominion.

"Ah, it's just Shredders," she informed the others.

Her ashen limbs fanned out behind her, moving through the darkness covered in flame. The elf extended white flowing claws from his fingers, a set of blades with no handles appeared around the metal mage in turn.

Seven of the large armored monsters broke out of the stone walls, floor, and ceiling, converging on them with high speed and open maws. Their momentum pushed them forward, at an angle that would allow the creatures to surround and attack the group. They reached the group's range where dense ashen limbs ripped through their carapace. Cursed blades of steel dissected the entire length of one Shredder.

Ilea remained where she had stood, chunks of meat and armor raining to the ground around her, her dominion showing the carnage behind her where Kyrian minced through a group of the monsters. Feyrair jumped off the walls, his claws extending before he rushed past one of the beings. The blades on its side hit his armor, unable to penetrate as his hand left a burning gash on its entire length. The creature stopped moving when it had passed him, bleeding out on the stone floor as silence returned to the cavern.

Ilea deactivated her flames, all the dark blood that had reached her already burnt away. She watched as Feyrair sent a burst of flame over the dripping metal mage.

"Thank you," said Kyrian, his blades reforming into spheres before they vanished.

'ding' 'Your group has defeated [Deep Shredder – lvl 413]

...

'ding' 'Your group has defeated [Deep Shredder – lvl 384]

"Bad move," Ilea mused.

"They're not particularly smart," Feyrair remarked, shaking his hand, the claws vanishing in turn.

They moved on until Ilea spotted light in the distance. A dull blue glow. She stopped teleporting the group before they walked onward, the decline leading them farther downwards. She jumped off a ledge, landing about ten meters farther down with a heavy impact. *Hmm.*

"Poison," Feyrair said.

"Looks like it," Ilea answered. The glow came from mushrooms sprouting from the cavern walls, a thin mist visible to her eyes and dominion. "I'll test it. Retrieve me if I pass out."

"Impossible," Kyrian said.

"Agreed. I wouldn't even bet on it," the elf added.

Ilea smiled. She hoped they were wrong. Another step and she breathed in with closed eyes. *Disgusting.*

'ding' 'You have been poisoned by Necriha Mist -0.048 health per second for four seconds'

“Oh no. It’s really powerful,” she said as she turned around and fell to her knees.

“She’s lying,” Feyrair said.

“Ilea, we know you would be overjoyed if it actually did that to you,” Kyrian added.

‘ding’ ‘You have been poisoned by Necriha Mist -0.128 health per second for seven seconds’

She ignored their remarks and raised a hand. “Hold on, it might actually be good.” Ilea continued breathing. She tried to ignore the rotten taste but it didn’t exactly help.

“Should I test if it can be ignited?” Feyrair asked.

‘ding’ ‘You have been poisoned by Necriha Mist -0.83 health per second for eighteen seconds’

“Come on, speed it up poison,” Ilea mused as she stood back up and walked deeper into the mist.

‘ding’ ‘You have been poisoned by Necriha Mist -2.48 health per second for thirty seconds’

‘ding’ ‘You have been poisoned by Necriha Mist -2.32 health per second for twenty six seconds’

“Disappointing. And here I thought this could be interesting. Yeah, go ahead Fey,” Ilea said, standing amidst the poison spores.

A flame lit up behind her, the entire cavern lit up a moment later. Her ears rang for one second, her mantle covered in blue flame as debris hit her form. Chunks of rock fell on her, the larger bits vanishing to another section of the tunnel. “It’s ignitable!” she shouted back through the chunks now in her way.

A steel plow moved away the rocks, Kyrian waving at her with Feyrair in tow.

“Indeed,” the elf mused.

Ilea smiled and tried to teleport them through the debris, the group however appearing in front of everything. *Not enough space in there.* “Well go ahead, plow man.”

Kyrian moved past her, their travel speed considerably slowed. “One might think we’re on our first expedition.”

“Not easy to find a reasonable challenge these days,” Ilea commented. “The dungeons need all the help they can get. Let’s hope for some four marks.”

“They will be there,” Feyrair said.

Another half hour passed as they moved through the darkness, Ilea once more stopping as she felt the presence of powerful magic.

She gestured to the others and walked onward. Her eyes failed to penetrate the darkness unlike before. White flame erupted before her and moved ahead. It too failed to illuminate the dark cavern walls. “Looks like shadow magic,” she said, not quite certain with her dominion alone. The magic changed and shifted. It lashed out as she spoke the words, gripping her form with an invisible force. She gasped, restricted as she felt the spell push into her ash. “Quite... strong,” she said to the two others standing a few meters farther back.

“Do you need help?” Kyrian asked.

Ilea moved away some of her mantle, the shadow magic instantly reaching her skin, blood already dripping to the ground. “No.. this... is perfect.”

“I will train as well,” Feyrain said and stepped next to her, invisible magic ripping into his armor a moment later.

Kyrian joined as well.

Ilea kept an eye on them through her healing but so far the damage wasn't massive. She watched as dark beings made of shadow stepped out of the walls and advanced with incredible speed. One raised its arm and grabbed her face, a pulse of dark magic slamming into her system a moment later. She felt another pulse, more of the monsters stepping out and advancing on what they surely perceived as their prey.

[Shade of Varuhn – lvl ???]

Just above six hundred.

The beings had no eyes nor any other discerning features other than their vaguely humanoid shapes, most of them elongated and partially melding into the dark walls. Their attacks continued for half a minute before the creature in front of her let go, its dark head moving closer to her bleeding face.

Ilea's eyes reformed as she smiled. “Why did you stop?”

The creature moved its head back, more of the others retreating slightly as well.

“Should we kill them too?” Feyrain asked, a burning hand of his pulling away the shadowy limb that had gripped his head.

“Don't think it's worth the experience,” Ilea mused. “Maybe for the two of you. You should start, they're not exactly smart but I think they're starting to understand their mistake.”

Fey rushed past her with flames erupting all around, green glowing blades flying at the creatures from the other side.

Ilea checked her notifications while the others cut into the stone walls to get at the retreating monsters.

‘ding’ ‘Shadow Magic Resistance reaches lvl 7’

...

‘ding’ ‘Shadow Magic Resistance reaches lvl 12’

‘ding’ ‘Dark Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 8’

‘ding’ ‘Dark Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 9’

Wonderful. The others were already done, the cavern back to regular darkness with the last signs of shadow magic leaving her dominion. “Well done my minions. The way is clear yet again.”

“I think that's the first time someone has called me an underling,” Fey commented with an amused hiss.

“I didn't expect you to like it,” Kyrian mused.

“I would kill her for it, if she were mortal,” the elf said.

“How very insecure,” Ilea said. “That difficult to accept that a human a tenth of your age is more powerful than you?”

“Most events have been easier to comprehend, yes. Though it's a motivation more than an annoyance,” he said with a hiss.

Ilea grinned.

“I can give you two some time if you need it,” Kyrian said.

“You’re welcome to join, metal mage,” Fey said. “Though we should have invited the Dragonslayer.”

“I’m quite comfortable without, thank you,” Kyrian said.

“Things going well with Aliana then?” Ilea asked.

“Oh? You have chosen a lover?” Fey said.

Kyrian didn’t reply, to their amusement.

They teased him for a little while as they flew through the darkness, descending further.

Ilea formed a small flame and sent it out, the others following her gaze. One of the adjacent tunnels showed a somewhat rectangular entrance. Shaped by something more intelligent than most monsters. “Awakened maybe?” Ilea wondered.

“Dwarves more likely, in these parts of the land. The Taleen weren’t the only ones digging into the depths, forming settlements where none would reach them,” Feyrair suggested. “Though this is particularly simple. No runes either.”

“Is that weird?” Ilea asked. “The Taleen don’t have runes on their entrances either.”

“The Taleen were not exactly welcoming. Many other dwarves would lead their allies or those seeking shelter to safe places in the deep. Especially smaller factions,” the elf said.

“You know a lot about dwarfs,” Kyrian commented.

“Before this ridiculous woman came along, we had to actually scour the caverns of this world for the ruins left behind by our enemies. We fought more Taleen machines in the past year than I did in the last century,” the elf said.

“So let’s see what this place is about,” Ilea said and started towards it. She stopped when a whisper reached her mind. Words she didn’t understand, some slowed, others sped up. Everything was laced with curse magic, far more potent than anything her present companion could conjure. It went as sudden as it had come. “Did you get that too?”

“Yes. I’d like to see that curse,” Kyrian said. “Expect this not to be an easy fight. If it’s a moving creature creating the magic.”

“If felt the power too,” Ilea said.

“Come. Flesh. Thine awakening awaits,” Feyrair said.

“Have you been compromised?” Ilea asked.

“It’s the translation. The dialect is strange, not something I’ve heard before but the words themselves are clear. It’s a language I don’t think is still spoken,” Fey said.

Ilea smiled. “I suppose someone has to be the scholar in the party. I’m certainly not it.”

The elf hissed and joined her side. "Go on then. If I'm the scholar, you're the front line."

"Gladly," Ilea said and walked into the tunnel. She noted the simple rooms that had been carved into the stone walls. No furniture showed within, the ground uneven and the walls chipped. Scratches showed on the stone. Dried blood started to show up as they went deeper into the underground complex. Not drawings exactly but it seemed there was some kind of intent. "*There is a flow to this blood.*"

"*It's been dried for ages,*" Feyrair said. "*But I agree. It leads inward.*"

"*I can feel the curse,*" Kyrian sent to her.

Ilea continued until they came into a broadening cavern, the blood now both on the walls and the ground. The only light was their own. Her eyes widened as she took in the surroundings through her dominion but it was really the smell and humidity that made the experience unpleasant. Corpses she had seen before, though perhaps not quite as putrid and mutilated as the piles gathered at the back of the large cavern. Blood and puss still seeped from the bodies.

"*That doesn't make sense,*" Fey sent through the connection. "*Everything else here hasn't moved in ages but these dwarfs look like they've been killed just yesterday.*"

Ilea sent the words to Kyrian in turn.

"*The source of the curse is within that pile,*" the man said.

Just when he sent it, there was movement. A head emerged from the fleshy bits, its skull split, dead eyes looking into nothing. It was elevated by flesh from below, muscles building and growing as it dissected itself from the corpses. Several arms and too many legs emerged, differing sizes all. Some parts showed healthy skin, others scarred tissue. Most of all however, muscle and slightly bleeding wounds were the prevalent surface area. The creature dragged a war hammer out of the pile, silver and inlaid with gems, held by three large arms. Two heads opened their mouths but produced no sound, the abomination reaching two meters in height, its torso unnaturally thin, the mass of its arms and legs far outweighing its core.

[Silent Malice – lvl ?????]

"*It's not far above one thousand,*" Ilea informed them, rather confident as she stepped forward to meet the horror.

The creature moved at the same time. And it didn't just move. Pulses of magic suggested time and blood manipulation. The entire cavern lit up with a curse that made the dried and wet blood pulse with power.

Ilea saw the attack coming but she failed to react due to the sudden grip of the curse. It closed the distance near instantly, the hammer striking her head with the full force of three muscly arms. Her skull whipped back as she slid on the ground for half a meter, various destructive magics trying to get past her defenses. The damage was healed, Ilea dodging the next strike with a timed teleport. She felt a little groggy from the impact, her limbs and fires spreading over the creature as she struck back, Archon Strike flaring up and into the flesh before she was sent flying with a backhanded hammer strike.

Metal and fire impacted the monster from her companions as she slid to a stop, coughing up blood. Her Mantle held up but the combined kinetic force and intrusion like curse magic and blood manipulation pushed even her highly resilient body to its limits. She teleported behind the burning

creature, this time staying to its left to avoid the hammer. Kyrian and Feyrair did their best to teleport through the hall and keep the distance to the monster as far as possible.

Ilea sent in a few more punches as she gathered more heat, two teleports avoiding a strike each before she dodged the next one. A fourth she blocked with an extended arm, destructive mana flowing into the limb as she felt it go slightly numb. Her bones held but everything else burst, and healed again a moment later.

She raised her other arm and released Embered Heart, the beam of concentrated heat burning through the torso of the creature with ease. Ilea didn't stop to watch its skin pulling itself back together and instead sent waves of Archon Strike into the vaguely humanoid shape, its entire form in flames and skewered by steel.

"Sever the arms. The curse is in the hammer," Kyrian supplied, trying his best with the blades and flails he wielded in the small space.

The creature dodged and blocked as best it could, the hammer remaining firmly in its many hands.

Ilea refocused her ashen limbs on the creature's arms, the change in her approach pushing it to the defensive. She watched as bone started to cover the flesh, more muscle and mass shifting from the main body to the arms. The thing couldn't quite keep up with their combined efforts however, the fires of creation slowing down its healing and regeneration too much. Ilea noted that the curse was weakened too, Kyrian's own magic working against the monster's efforts.

Beams of white flame and ashen limbs finally cut through the first arm, the second and third following quickly thereafter. Ilea healed the damage she had sustained from the few hits she had taken to accomplish the task. Her flames covered the hammer, slowly burning away all the flesh that remained on it. The effort took several minutes, until nothing remained. Ilea kept it on fire for good measure, Feyrair currently setting alight all the flesh in the back while Kyrian crouched down above the piece of curse inducing equipment. No notification had resounded so far.

I wonder if I can wield it to level some resistances. Does that mean it's already in my head? She squinted at the silver hammer, its form largely unaffected by the continuous stream of white flame.