

## Chapter 390 Don't Fear the Reaper

One last explosion rolled over the area, Ilea lowering her hand as the heat subsided. Ash armor reformed over her shredded skin, the wounds closing quickly below.

Scattered parts of dark worm like creatures covered the vast cavern, flames still clinging to their bodies, bringing a dim light to the area.

They had found what seemed like a central cave, at least a dozen tunnels leading in and out. There was enough space for the mages to hover safely above while Ilea and Ilas cut into the beasts below.

Despite his lower damage, Ilea had to admit that Ilas took more of a risk being here than she herself did. He didn't let the shredders attack him but neither did he have the healing and durability of Ilea.

A good thing that she didn't feel particularly competitive today. Seeing her levels and resistances improve was enough.

Just entering the cave had alerted several corrupted, more coming as the battle raged on.

Ilea had used her Heart of Cinder to push the Shredders back from time to time, allowing her to blink up to regenerate. Either Ilas or some of Maro's undead had occupied the creatures in the meantime.

While most of them remained anyway, glaring at the flying healer, some tried burrowing through the walls to fall down on the group. The undead kept them close and grouped up. Perfect for the powerful area spells raining down while Ilea cut through them from within.

To her annoyance, the creatures protected her against her allies' magic most of the time, reducing the damage she would have taken by a considerable amount.

Maro had sent some undead into the nearby caves, trying to lure out more of the corrupted. A success initially but now it seemed the Shredders were dealt with.

"How far can you make them walk?" Ilea asked as she flew up, her wounds healing as a surge of heat spread around her, getting rid of the remaining corruption clinging to her wounds.

Maro shrugged. "Depends on the caves. I'll just push until I lose them."

"Their detection range is high." Ilas said. "I believe we have covered a significant portion of this layer by now."

"Should we kill the uncorrupted ones too?" Maro asked. "I've lost some undead without any Shredders coming out." He had sent more of his skeletons to the areas where he lost them previously, cautiously leading whatever creatures had killed them closer until they picked up on the sounds of battle.

It seemed the uncorrupted Shade Shredders refused to enter the main cave, likely intelligent enough to understand their disadvantage. Or their instincts simply screamed at open spaces. A more likely scenario.

"Hunting them down would be dangerous." Catelyn said. "They might be able to finish off the remaining corrupted we have missed."

“Or be corrupted themselves.” Ilas said.

“They haven’t been so far. Maybe they’re a higher level or work together?” Ilea asked.

“A higher resistance to the corruption perhaps? Or they have a way to get rid of it.” Catelyn suggested, sounding very unsure.

“Either way, it seems like an unnecessary risk and time investment to hunt them down. We should focused on those already corrupted.” She added, nodding to Ilea.

“I think I hit another wall... one of my skeletons is taking a sharp turn.” Maro informed them and pointed.

“Then we should be mostly done.” Ilas said. “We shall check on this layer once more when we return.”

“If we return.” Maro said in a tired tone. “There are already level five hundred creatures here. What do you think will wait further down?”

“We do not know the extend of this corruption’s spread.” Ilas said. “More powerful creatures means as well that they may be less corruptible.”

“And thus even more dangerous to us.” The necromancer replied.

“You are free to go back, Maro. Nobody is forcing you to stay.” Catelyn said. “I appreciate the help you have already provided.”

The man sighed and shook his head. “No. I’ll see this through.”

“Then stop whining.” Ilea said as she looked through the messages from their battle.

***‘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’ ‘Azarinth Fighting reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 15’***

***‘ding’ ‘Aspect of Ash reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 12’***

***‘ding’ ‘Storm of Cinders reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 6’***

***‘ding’ ‘Keeper of Ash reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 10’***

Progress was at least still present, compared to her adventures in Riverwatch.

***'ding' 'Blood Manipulation Resistance reaches lvl 14'***

...

***'ding' 'Blood Manipulation Resistance reaches lvl 18'***

***'ding' 'Wind Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 12'***

"I thought you wanted dangerous adventures, Maro." she said absentmindedly, focusing back on her surroundings.

"There is a difference between that and a suicide mission." he replied, crossing his arms.

"We're pretty hard to kill. I'm betting my gold on us." Ilea said and glanced at Elfie.

He seemed lost again.

*Finally.* "Second class?" she asked.

"Indeed." The elf spoke a moment later, not really turning his attention away from himself.

A surge of power emanated from him a moment later. He glanced at Ilea with questioning eyes.

"You want to do some testing?" She asked.

"If you would be so kind." Elfie replied.

Ilea nodded and blinked down, landing on the ground of the cavern as the elf followed.

"We will move further down soon." Catelyn said as she floated down next to the elf. "It's good to have another level three hundred class to support us."

Ilea felt the area around her suddenly change, a curse magnitudes stronger than anything the elf had put out before taking effect as she nearly puked right then and there.

Health and mana was drained from her, her eyes growing a little blurry before she healed against the effects. "Not bad." She said, resting her hands on her knees.

Her body felt a little wobbly. The sound of her touching her own knees was barely audible, the vile odor of corruption and blood fading into obscurity.

Sentinel Reconstruction pushed against the effects, coupled with her sense amplifying skills mostly negating the curse after a while. Definitely something that would throw off many a creature if not outright knock them out or kill them.

"Holy fuck." Ilea said as she once again fought against her stomach trying to puke up the food she had eaten earlier. A sacrilegious notion really. She would jam her throat shut with an ashen limb before wasting Keyla's cooking like that.

"Hmm... I had hoped it would have more of an effect. It should be at least ten times stronger." Elfie murmured before he grinned. "Yet you have faced down Praetorians without flinching. I suppose it is a success to cripple you as much as I did."

His magic faded, Ilea looking up at him. "Keep going. Great training really. Did you upgrade it to third tier as well?"

“I did with the resource drain. Mana is now drained as well and it’s several times stronger. I can also affect various enemies at the same time.” He grinned. “Yet it seems the change wasn’t as impressive as I thought.”

Ilea waved him off. “I have level twenty resistances in the second tier to both so don’t worry. If you get anything out of me at all, it’s pretty good. Speaking of, you should get hurt from the mana drain actually.”

“Ah, I was wondering what it was,” the elf smirked. “Well, I suppose with how little mana I drain from you it is merely a nuisance.”

“It’s supposed to be a help against more powerful drain beasts,” Lucas said as he joined them. “Did you try to fight Miststalkers before, Ilea? It might be worth a try with those defenses, mhm.”

“I started farming them, yes,” Ilea replied and cracked her neck, the curse now more a passive feeling. Her senses were definitely reduced somewhat but by now she was used to it. *Maybe not the best during battle. Impressive then that he can have such an impact on me.*

She imagined Elfie fighting against a horde of demons or humans, all just collapsing due to his curse. *Kind of want to see that now.* She grinned at the elf as her wings spread.

“Farming? I do not understand,” Lucas commented.

“I believe she implies monsters are an agricultural resource she grows and collects?” Elfie said to the elder.

“The experience is,” Ilea said, flying up to them.

Lucas shook his head in disgust. “To quantify the systematic slaughter of a species and call it farming.”

“I’m talking about Miststalkers Lucas. I get that you dislike fighting and killing things of whatever nature but I’d compare this to removing mold from your house,” Ilea said.

“Why would you remove it?” Ilas asked. “It carries valuable nutrients.”

“We should move on,” Catelyn sighed and looked at the group with a tired expression. “You can discuss the intricacies of mushrooms once we return.”

“Oh yes, the corruption,” Ilea commented, winking at the fox before she looked around. “Where to?”

Ilas pointed and led the way, the group descending further through the tunnels.

They reached the next separating stone floor twenty minutes later. Somewhat smaller caverns led down into the eight layer, a vile odor rising from them.

“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 didn’t burrow straight, making it impossible to see what was waiting in the next layer.

“You should expect as much from her,” Elfie said and 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, her nose now already itching as something burnt her airways. Nothing that would inconvenience her majorly but it was there.

Finally, the tunnel opened up into the next layer. Dark once again.

She summoned her staff and had a look, her sphere not offering anything in its range. "Well. It's purple," she surmised, nodding to herself.

**'ding' 'You have been poisoned by Mild Rupture Fetor – You resist the effects'**

"With these unnecessary notifications again. I was just about to get excited," Ilea rolled her eyes and waved her staff 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, her gaze snapping downwards suddenly.

A tentacle like protrusion shot up and tangled itself around the Staff of the Chosen.

"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 and slashed at the limb, separating it after several deep cuts from her ash.

A squeal could be heard from below and within the mist, the bleeding tentacle slithering 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 downwards.

The screams immediately intensified, his curse taking effect before the shards rushed down, wet sounds of cutting audible. It didn't seem to be that far down.

"You seem to enjoy the light," the elf said as he glanced over, a shining barrier in front of him in case the beast changed its target.

"Yea, 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 immediately replied.

"I agree. It would be safer if you stayed up here as we survey," Catelyn confirmed, giving her a look.

"You don't need to come down, just carpet bomb my general direction," she said and started floating towards where the beam was still coming from. "Also, call for me if the poison becomes an issue."

The others seemed to accept the proposal, Catelyn only begrudgingly as she sighed.

The purple mist slowly engulfed her as she floated downwards. 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 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 to the approaching healer. The purple beam had stopped but reformed near one of the bigger eyes, once more slamming into her.

The magic slowed her down a little, dozens of tentacles now slashing through the air as the beast tried to grab or impale her, some of the limbs ending in sharp gnarled spikes.

Ash entangled with the creature, cutting into it as Ilea rushed closer to its body. Heart of Cinder was charging up.

She was yanked to the side when the creature dragged several of her ashen limbs away, forcing her to abandon the ash and reform them.

Ilea landed on the creature’s malformed skin, her armored boots sinking in a little as her ashen limbs cut into it, digging deep to stabilize her on the massive form.

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 blew out her ears.

***‘ding’ ‘You have heard the Tangled Reaper’s frenzy. You are paralyzed for 1 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 vanished.

Heart of Cinder was released but she was already submerged in the thick seething liquid. She closed up her ashen armor completely, feeling it burn away quickly.

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 you fuck.* She thought with a vicious grin, blinking again and appearing once more on top of the main body.

Ashen limbs slashed into the creature as her fists slammed down.

The monster thrashed and sunk into the purple muck, its spells and tentacles still slashing into Ilea.

A couple of Ilea’s limbs slashed the approaching tentacles, her eyes till covered by ash to prevent the purple liquid getting into her eyes.

*I can take this one.* She thought, now 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.

The fluid covered her as the two of them were submerged, the drowning ring appearing on her finger while she held her breath. Blinking was of course still possible, even within the liquid.

Ilea didn't plan to escape however, death magic spells returning 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. The physical damage of course was mostly mitigated through the thick natural shield but a punch was a punch.

All noise was muffled now, Ilea holding 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.

*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.

***'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.

She wasn't worried however, her third tier still available in case her health dipped too low.

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 continuously mangled body.

Many of the tentacles were ripped out already or showed deep cuts from the ashen limbs.

Ilea wasn't sure how much time had passed when the creature finally went limp, a noise resounding 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 tentacles reached out to her. She blinked several times, emerging in the purple haze above before she spread her wings and flew up.

The group was visible in the distance, like a beacon in the darkness.

Her ashen armor was back around her body, the poison still in effect, its duration constantly back at three minutes because of her exposure.