

## Chapter 401 Ice Valley

Ilea watched them move, flying high above as she thought about her next steps.

The Cyclops were hulking creatures, aggressive and quite certainly lacking higher intelligence. She hesitated a little because they were humanoid. Unlike the Nazarks that had attacked her caravan in the first place, these creatures wouldn't exactly bother anyone.

*They would if literally anyone came across them*, she crossed her arms. Killing them was somewhat simple at this point and they were an insanely high level, unable to damage her even as much as the Wyverns had.

*Plus I can level Veteran off them*, she cracked her neck and flew closer, watching the various groups go about their business, mostly just walking around, looking for food or fighting each other. Certainly monsters, impossible to be reasoned with and still it didn't exactly feel like survival at this point. It felt like she was about to slaughter them for personal gains alone. Even the challenge didn't seem worth it, like with the Wyverns or the Elemental.

*And yet they're here and I need to be as powerful as I can be before going further down. Sorry Lucas, I'd be an idiot not to take all I can get*, she thought and formed a massive spear, flying close to a Cyclops moving alone.

It was running after a rabbit, slamming down its stone with a fury.

Ilea didn't make a noise as she approached from behind, her drill like spear hovering next to her as it started to spin. A second spear formed, this one small and smooth.

The Cyclops closed in on the fast moving rabbit when a small impact on its back made it stop and turn, an angry growl leaving its mouth. When it didn't find anything, the creature looked up, the last thing it saw were the black wings of an unknown creature, sending a spinning object right at its eye.

Ilea watched as it collapsed, killed in a single hit to its weak spot. This one hadn't been quick enough to protect it, hadn't realized how potent the attack would be. She saw the rabbit stop and watch as the creature fell down into the snow with a heavy thud.

***'ding' 'You have defeated [Stone Cyclops – lvl 607]'***

*I don't see how Catelyn or anybody else couldn't manage this. I suppose it's a risk, in case they do manage to defend themselves... you could still just fly away again.*

She figured it was a compatibility thing, finding monsters of a high enough level with a weakness against ones abilities or simply a weakness easily exploited. Perhaps ash was an especially strong element to use against Stone Cyclops, or the torque was necessary to penetrate their eye, something only creators could usually do, not all of them either.

*How would Kyrian do against these? He could just curse them and fly backwards until they died, or am I missing something? The reverse thing they do with their eye I suppose, hmm*, Ilea mused, thinking about getting some of her friends to certain places in the north, just to train them up.

The Cyclops were certainly a step down compared to the Wyverns, that much was clear. Their levels however were similar. She'd be interested to see the two face each other, pretty sure the

Wyverns could just teleport and continuously use their fire breath. Even if the eye reverse thing was enhanced, they should be able to withstand their own flames.

She had only seen about fifteen of the creatures either way, scattered around the snow covered valley. They were easily spotted and likely the strongest in this layer.

“I won’t hurt you, little rabbit,” she said, hovering next to the dead cyclops. Storing them in her necklace was impossible, their bodies likely too large.

Ilea thought about ripping off an arm or something but even their defenses didn’t seem as impressive as the Wyvern’s. *All brawn, no finesse or speed with these.*

She could certainly see them as barely a threat, tough enough to withstand even their direct blows. Many others might not want to take the risk of getting close however.

She watched the rabbit walk closer, jumping onto the monster’s head before it started ripping at the exposed skin near its destroyed eye, exposing its sharp teeth.

*Circle of life and all that,* Ilea smiled and ascended once more.

The next hours were spent hunting Stone Cyclops. Only a few were taken out with the first ash drill, most deflecting or stopping the missile with relative ease, forcing her to get in close.

Ilea killed twelve of them all in all, getting bashed from time to time, grabbed only once when she fought two at the same time. The worst damage was a near completely squashed torso, including broken bones. A testament to their strength at least.

Their roars and time magic led to some unfortunate circumstances but she made the best of it, only a little annoyed that no resistance was leveling through the ordeal, their magic used on themselves instead of her.

***‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Stone Cyclops – lvl 621]’***

...

***‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Stone Cyclops – lvl 613]’***

***‘ding’ ‘The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 325 – Five stat points awarded’***

***‘ding’ ‘The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 326 – Five stat points awarded’***

***‘ding’ ‘The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 327 – Five stat points awarded’***

***‘ding’ ‘Kin of Ash has reached lvl 324 – Five stat points awarded’***

***‘ding’ ‘Kin of Ash has reached lvl 325 – Five stat points awarded’***

***‘ding’ ‘Kin of Ash has reached lvl 326 – Five stat points awarded’***

The levels were really good for the time spent fighting, reminding her of the time before reaching level two hundred. Her opinion on the Cyclops changed a little too. While she still believed them to be much easier targets than the Wyverns, they certainly weren’t any less dangerous.

Without her instant recovery, even Ilea with her sphere perception, high speed, quick teleport, precognition and all her other buffs would have been killed ten times over.

When she had tried to use only her spears and reverse reconstruction, she found the monsters had a way to hunker down and regenerate quickly, their defense rising ten times over as well. Going in close was really the only option, or getting lucky with a powerful spell to their eye.

The beasts were somewhat slow, that much was true but combined with their paralyzing roars and time magic, a single hit was enough to injure even her. Anyone with less resilience would be squashed like a fly.

She was standing next to the latest group she had killed. Two of them, having eaten up nearly all her mana before going down. Ilea was happy with her decision now, to kill every last one of them. And she was glad there weren't any groups of three. Even with her high affinity for risk taking, she'd want to separate them or only engage after one was taken out by a drill.

*Every single beast down here could dismantle a whole village or town back in the south. Even the rabbits are level thirty.*

With every battle, she was more impressed that humanity was still around, glad these creatures remained in the deep and didn't desire the death of all life. None of the Cyclops had been corrupted, nor had she found corpses of any being affected by the blood manipulation in this valley.

The Elemental could surely kill the Cyclops, perhaps even did so already at the bottom of its layer. *Thanks, lightning bird*, she thought, looking up. Many would have died, had these monsters moved up to the first layer, as unlikely as that was.

*Thirty stat points... hmm*, she looked through the rest of her gains before making a decision.

***'ding' 'Absolute Destruction reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 20'***

***'ding' 'Sentinel Reconstruction reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 20'***

***'ding' 'Sentinel Core reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 12'***

***'ding' 'Azarinth Reversal reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 13'***

***'ding' 'Armor of Ash reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 20'***

***'ding' 'Aspect of Ash reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 15'***

***'ding' 'True Ash Creation reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 16'***

***'ding' 'Storm of Cinders reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 11'***

***'ding' 'Storm of Cinders reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 12'***

***'ding' 'Ash and Ember Unity reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 13'***

***'ding' 'Avatar of Ash reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 4'***

***'ding' 'Keeper of Ash reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 13'***

**'ding' 'Veteran reaches lvl 19'**

**'ding' 'Veteran reaches lvl 20'**

Compared to the Wyvern battles, her skills didn't level quite as fast. She assumed the routine she quickly developed in battling the creatures was responsible.

In general, it seemed the only skills that really benefited more from a prolonged battle were her resistance skills. Even a quick kill against a high level creature rewarded similar levels as a longer fight did.

Fighting the unknown and responding to new skills, magic and weapons would be more beneficial of course, even if skills and levels didn't exist at all. Ilea was sure it applied to skills themselves, as well as class levels for that matter.

If she fought only Cyclopes for another year, she doubted any of her skills would rise significantly. Her classes of course would, to an extent at least. Simply for the fact that she was killing creatures above level six hundred.

Veteran had stopped leveling after twenty, preventing their roars from having an effect against her. The creatures still got hits in from time to time, due to their time manipulation.

Ilea was glad at least that they couldn't turn back time to heal their wounds or get her stuck in a loop or something. *I still need another time mage to level my resistance. Just in case I ever face something that could freeze me like that.*

Her Fear Resistance hadn't leveled anymore either. A weird phenomenon really, as she hadn't been afraid of them in the first place. Nothing had changed between the first kills and the ones after. So far the only way to level her resistance had been to actually face something she was terrified of. Like drowning.

She decided it was likely something their magic did. Perhaps her decision to hunt them negated whatever effect it previously had on her. A bummer, really. She would have liked some more resistance levels, even if fear resistance was a little hard to define.

*Then again, isn't it just some instinct level thing? A benefit really, a warning for us to get the fuck away or hide. I suppose it's similar to pain tolerance.*

Ilea put fifteen stat points into both Vitality and Wisdom, reaching eight hundred in the latter.

She sighed and ascended, her wings carrying her away from the corpses before she landed a couple hundred meters down the frozen river, next to a couple of white trees.

*Might as well relax for a little while. It's been days since my last real rest.*

Camping in such a place was pretty much suicide. Not for her probably but certainly for anyone below level three hundred without some long range warning spell. *Wait, that's why you have someone do watch.*

She chuckled and summoned some wood, setting it ablaze with a focused Heart of Cinder, charged for a second only and aimed to only graze the wood.

Ilea didn't get to enjoy the bonfire for very long, the hairs on her neck standing up as she suddenly blinked away, her wings spreading and carrying her up and away.

*What?* she tried to figure out what had happened. The fire was snuffed out, smoke rising from the fireplace. Ice started to form on her wings, making her unable to ascend any further.

She tumbled down and caught herself in the white tree branches, her ashen limbs moving her closer to the trunk.

Something was visible in her sphere, moving below the snow and the ground. It was blurry, lacking a form and wreathed in a confusing illusion.

Ilea waited, her heart beating quickly as her instincts screamed at her to get the fuck away. Everything was frozen, a layer of ice on top of her ashen armor. It tried to dig deeper, it really did. She could see the magic intrude into her defenses, failing to leave a lasting mark, likely because of her resistance.

The healer held her breath, watching the thing move past below. It moved around the roots of the tree and didn't detect her.

Terribly long seconds passed before the air was suddenly back to normal, Ilea breathing once more.

***'ding' 'Ice Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 10'***

She waited a little while longer before she moved, finally blinking up and spreading her wings, a wave of heat spreading out from her that splintered the ice instantly.

*Not something I want to fight, for now at least.*

She had learned to trust her instincts and that thing made her danger sense tingle about as much as the lightning elemental, with the added bonus of being shrouded and underground.

Her ice resistance needed to be higher. If it could nearly immobilize her by just moving through, she wasn't ready to face it.

*A mere human, in a world of monsters.*

And yet she wasn't. Not anymore. *A weaker monster. For now.*

She smiled and continued further down the valley, ready to face the next challenge that was waiting for her. Ready to leech every bit of power out of this hostile place and quell the corruption that arose from it.

Ilea found no more Cyclopes in her descent, nor did she encounter the powerful ice magic anymore. Nothing remained in the eleventh layer other than the cave entrance that led further down.

A long frozen tunnel with a steep decline, traversed in flight before she came up on a blown open stone floor.

*Number twelve*, she thought and checked once more for any messages or scraps left behind. This had been one of the most prominent ways down to the next layer so far. Others definitely existed and could be constructed but Ilea assumed most everything would use this tunnel.

There was however nothing scratched into the frozen walls nor was there anything left behind.

She jumped down into the next level and immediately smiled at the sight. *A mirror*, she looked at her ashen form, the small horns jutting forward from behind her temples. The thin limbs of ash moving behind her, much more focused and smooth near their sharp ends.

*Not exactly me in a pajama anymore. I doubt any of those poor Drakes expected me to come this far*, she smiled and focused once more, not about to die in this forgotten ice cave.

The walls were covered in shards of ice, dark stone jutting out here and there. Reflections of her form were visible all over, thousands of them spreading out in each direction, illuminated by the thin lines of crystal embedded in the floor and ceiling.

*This is as far as the priest went. Let's see what made him turn around.*

Ilea walked around for a while, the tunnels forking out into various directions from time to time. She missed the sure guidance of Ilas. With time however, she would find the way.

Sudden laughter resounded behind her, a giggle at most.

A familiar voice.

She kept her eyes peeled, her senses focused. *There it is again*, she sped up and followed the noise into another tunnel with a slight decline.

A figure shrouded in shadow glanced her way and vanished. A woman with blond hair, two daggers in hand, a familiar posture.

"Eve..." Ilea whispered and followed, rushing after the woman before she came up on a dead end. *She's dead... she's dead*, she repeated in her head.

Her eyes opened wide as she blinked back. *And you just entered whatever trap this was.*

The ground below her blurred in her sphere, a dozen eyes turning to focus on her. Two dozen rope like protrusions lashed out to catch her as a vibration went through her.

***'ding' 'You have felt the magic of the Halian – You are paralyzed for two seconds'***

Ilea watched the huge mouth open, teeth as far as she could see, all the eyes on her as she was caught and brought down into the creature that seemed grown into and connected to the icy rock.

***'ding' 'Veteran reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 1'***

***Veteran - 2nd lvl 1***

***You have experienced the shouts and spells of beings completely out of your range of imagination. You will not survive but at least you won't be completely immobilized while you get eaten. Good luck warrior.***

***2nd stage: You are immune to the fear of facing that which you do not understand. Be wary, some might sense your arrogance to power, others might fear it.***

Her eyes were cold, her limbs slashing into the creature's flesh as she watched the teeth close around her. Heart of Cinder was released, charging since she first heard the giggling behind her.

Attacking her was one thing, using her murdered friend to lure her into a trap was something else entirely.

The fire lashed out, singeing the skin of the creature that snapped its mouth shut.

Teeth dug into her from all sides as her ash spread through the gaps, destructive mana flowing into the beast as her limbs scratched and cut into the inside of its mouth.

It thrashed in pain, making the stone around it rumble as it pushed harder to sink its teeth into her ash and bone.

Ilea pushed her hands against the walls of flesh and teeth, her muscles aching as she strained against the powerful creature. *You fucked with the wrong human.*

Her ash lashed out behind her, ripping out chunks of flesh. She felt the teeth penetrate through her armor, digging into her skin as blood started to run down her palms.

Drills started spinning before they dug into the monster, Shredder like layers of her own blades forming before they spun around in the creature's insides.

Tentacles came from all around, trying to pull her out once more but they too were ripped through.

"You misunderstand..." she murmured, her arms nearly buckling as she infused her voice and spoke, "... you're the one being hunted."