

## Chapter 580 Mapping

At least seven of the machines had lost their shields from the arcane blast, singed and damaged from the impact.

Ilea didn't wait a second, close to them and spreading fiery ash before they could recover. Ash cut through steel, mana invaded each and every one of them, the enemy fueled by their own spells.

A cascade of explosions soon followed as she dealt with each Praetorian in turn. She blinked away from the spreading energies and displaced an arcane arrow in the last moment. A few normal variants were left, in case she needed the shields for her own protection.

The second Hunter had clung to the opposite wall, their range and speed impressive but not enough to compete with Ilea's double teleportation and wings.

She reached the retreating creature a few moments later, displacing arrows as they came, their power not enough anymore to resist her high level Displacement. Burning ash flared out, covering the creature and clinging to its powerful shields.

Heart of Cinder wasn't charged enough, Ilea instead relying on her fists and ashen limbs. The arrows coming at her from the second archer were quite welcome, fueling her with mana that she instantly channeled into her offensive spells. The arrows were more effective against ash they had already targeted but with her quickly reforming armor, it didn't pose a major problem.

Each punch and use of Storm of Cinders pushed against the straining shield, its close range attacks dodged or simply ignored.

Ilea kept an eye on the remaining four normal variants, their long range attacks painfully slow and ineffective, especially at the range they were using them at.

It took her several hundred attacks to shatter the Hunter's shields, any effort to keep her off, she dodged or healed. This time she used a slower approach, whittling away at the creature as she kept an eye on its core. When it cracked and light spread out, she was already gone, teleporting twice before she twirled in the air to see the massive blue sphere expanding outwards. It left a dent in the cavern wall and added to the smell of heated steel and fire in the air.

*One remaining*, she thought and looked at the moving archer, aiming at her once more.

She decided to deal with the normal versions first, her defense enough to ignore one Hunter's attacks. The level six hundred Praetorians didn't stand a chance. All they had was their shields and strong plating, each quickly worked through by the unrelenting Sentinel, her constant attacks fueled by her high mana regeneration and the barrage of arcane spells coming from the Hunter.

She let the last explosion move over her, the energies ripping away half her ash and damaging her skin. Ilea watched the shrapnel and molten pieces of Taleen steel as her body healed once again. *I won't go down, no matter how many arrows you shoot at me*, she thought and watched the next one blink into existence close to her, shrouded in a hiding spell after leaving its overly large bow.

The projectile exploded in a bright flash of blue energy, so large that a part of it rushed past the small form of Ilea, burning away at her wings and the ground close by. Her armor resisted the direct hit, a large part of the energy flowing through however, damaging her muscles and organs below.

***'ding' 'Arcane Magic Resistance reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 18'***

"Would you look at that?" Ilea said as her wings moved, taking her upwards. She floated towards the creature, each arrow and barrage punching into her with incredible force. But she didn't stop. "You weren't entirely useless after all," she added, using her teleportation spells to catch the now retreating machine.

They were made for ranged combat, thus trying to keep the distance.

Ilea herself was quite the opposite. She was made to stand close to her enemies. Appearing next to its head, she kicked three times, delivering Destruction and Cinders into its shield. An arcane sphere formed that she simply ignored, the damage not substantial enough to push her away, weaker even than what the Astral Spirits could conjure up. Or perhaps she had gotten stronger since facing them.

Ilea punched six times into its shield, blinking behind it when its arcane covered arms rushed out at her. Another five punches and a plethora of limb attacks worked away at its defenses, her mana slowly overwhelming its powerful shield. Ash formed in a cone ahead, set alight with the flame of creation before it clung to the flailing Praetorian, the creature now jumping off from the wall to get some distance between them.

Ilea kept pace, her wings letting her maneuver around the jumping creature as she continued her constant barrage of attacks.

She watched its shield shatter when she landed, pushing off the ground to deliver an uppercut to its massive head, her limbs cutting into the steel carapace near its neck while the burning ash closed in from all around.

Another sphere of arcane energy flared out, Ilea barely noticing with her increasing Valkyrie bonuses and lack of other incoming spells. Heart of Cinder released in a sphere, stunning the massive being but failing to cause significant damage. She blinked to its chest and slammed her fist inside, finally breaking through the layer of steel before she ripped out what she could.

Her ashen limbs followed, digging into the breach and tearing inwards, cutting through whatever machinery kept the creature working. The core cracked a moment later, exploding as Ilea landed on the ground.

She held up an arm, the blast tearing away the armor covering her front, ripping away flesh to expose muscle and bone in certain parts. Her left eye was gone but already reformed, blood dripping to the ground as new skin formed on her body.

*You'd need a core grenade launcher to even remotely stand a chance*, she thought, looking at the remaining shrapnel. The hall had turned from a production facility to nothing but burning scraps.

She sighed, her ash slowly covering her body once again.

It felt good, to know that Praetorians were nothing to her anymore, just another creature she had moved past, able to take on an entire group without much trouble.

***'ding' 'You have defeated [Taleen Praetorian – lvl 600]***

...

***'ding' 'You have defeated [Hunter Praetorian – lvl 751]***

***'ding' 'The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 462 – Five stat points awarded'***

***'ding' 'Kin of Ash has reached lvl 457 – Five stat points awarded'***

***'ding' 'The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 408 – One stat point awarded'***

***'ding' 'Space Shift reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 11'***

***'ding' 'Deviant of Humanity reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 19'***

Ilea smiled at the lack of Veteran levels. *That would have been worth ten of them half a year ago,* she thought, seeing two more exits in the hall, other than to the one she had come from.

*How long did I fight?* she wondered. *Fifteen minutes maybe? Or was it less?*

However long it was, she assumed she had a little more time on her hands, choosing one of the exits at random where she continued her sketching. She occasionally twirled in the corridor, the smile on her face not easily wiped away. She hoped there were many more battles to come.

The lights above flickered sometimes as Ilea reached the end of the corridor. She coughed, realizing that the air had gotten much worse than in the large hall before. Her oxygen repository and general resilience would however surely prevent any danger.

*That would be something. Dying from some toxic cloud down in a dungeon.*

She came into a rough looking cavern, this one not cut in a rectangular way but quite natural. The purpose of this cave revealed itself to her immediately. It was a mine with a massive central hole, reaching far into the dark depths of the land, even her eyes unable to see to the bottom of the vast tunnel. She watched the thousands of Guardians work, their blades cutting into stone. Localized explosions occasionally flared up in the distance, punching through especially hard stone or perhaps metals they didn't need.

Complex systems of mechanical elevators brought up the collected ore, most of it reflecting the dull light in a shimmering green. A few Praetorians guarded the uppermost levels of the structure, their green eyes focused down into the depths, none of them taking note of her.

*Did they not hear the explosions from before? Well I suppose they would've come already if they noticed or cared in any way.*

A howl came up from the depths, making her try and find the source immediately.

***'ding' 'You have heard the call of an ancient being – You resist its effects'***

*No shit.*

She glanced up again, two Hunter Praetorians rushing out from a large tunnel exit on her level, their bows ready before they aimed down into the depths. Their arcane arrows rushed out without ceremony, like flares into the darkness of the ocean. Neither bothered to hide their spells.

Ilea saw something writhe in the dark before another howl resounded, this time from deeper down in the hole. She glanced at the Praetorians, their bows at the ready, neither of them forming another arrow.

*Let's just say that I won't go down into those depths,* she thought and focused her attention back to the Guardians and Praetorians. The Hunters returned through the exit, their job of dissuading whatever lurked in the darkness done. They hadn't even looked her way.

*Taking care of all this would take hours. If only there were some kind of magic users with large area spells nearby,* she thought, taking a last look at the expansive mine before she left back to the manufacturing hall she had destroyed.

Some of the fires were still burning when she arrived but no additional machines had shown up. She wondered if whoever was in charge of them was watching. Could they? Or were the machines here acting on some simple set of orders? Maybe they could act independently too to an extent.

*The first Praetorians I met even talked, something about the Throne room being breached. None here did anything like that.*

She went through the second exit, planning to take a peek before returning to her group. Ilea felt her mark on Elfie in the distance, quite a few kilometers away and much higher up than she was.

Her map grew steadily as she floated through the corridor. She stopped, her sphere unable to penetrate through the walls anymore. Ash formed and moved ahead, enough to trigger any motion or weight based trap.

Green flame suddenly flared up all around, throughout the whole corridor.

Ilea felt the heat but remained floating where she was, the fires washing over her without any visible damage to her armor. *Useless,* she thought, feeling the familiar curse magic flow through her. The spell hampered her health regeneration somewhat but she knew it wouldn't last particularly long. A few minutes at most.

She moved ahead, passing the corridor where she found a small room with three more tunnels leading away, including a central platform that served as an elevator leading down.

Ilea quickly sketched down what she had found and decided to take the corridor to the left, which should've led her back to their starting point in the dungeon, or somewhere close enough.

She activated a few more traps on the way, nothing quite enough to leave a lasting impression. Especially considering the Hunters she had fought, their power vastly superior.

*I hope Feyrair didn't find an army of machines to fight through. How many did I destroy?*

A quick check and calculation brought her to fourteen points from Praetorians and fifteen points for special variants. Twenty nine seemed respectable to her for half an hour, even though she hadn't fought anything in half that time.

Every aisle here was large enough to accommodate a Taleen Praetorian, untold work going into their creation. A lack of sleeping quarters, kitchens, and armories led Ilea to believe that this place hadn't been constructed by the dwarfs themselves, but by whomever controlled the machines. For machines didn't need anything but empty halls to move through.

*I don't think this will lead back,* Ilea thought when she came up on another large elevator platform leading down. *Time's up.*

She used her teleportation spells to quickly retract her steps, appearing less than a minute later in the gate room where their group had arrived in.

"You have returned early," Asay said, standing next to Isalthar.

Farthorn sat on a stone bench nearby, looking over a piece of green scrap metal.

“Success?” Seithir asked, a slight smile forming on his lips after the tension in his body had relaxed a little.

“Were you worried?” Ilea asked, smiling at the elf who turned his head away, perhaps a little embarrassed. “Asay, here check out my map,” she said instead, showing the creation to the elf who recoiled and covered his eyes immediately.

Ilea laughed and showed it to Isalthar, giving a quick summary of what she had found and fought.

Elfie and his group arrived soon after, looking battered and injured but still alive. Most of Heranuur’s right arm was missing, the elf looking more than a little annoyed.

“We are back now, let me heal you,” Neiphato said.

Heranuur glanced between the wood mage and Isalthar before he relented with a gesture.

“We have encountered a group of three Praetorians,” Elfie reported, summoning a beautifully painted and detailed map, gesturing to a section clearly showing an elevator leading up. Numbers declared the distance between the start and end, as well as the dimensions of the hall above. He glanced at Ilea and her map, taking a step towards her so that she couldn’t see his creation anymore.

He leaned closer and whispered. “I’m sure you will improve, friend. Do not lose hope.” He clasped her shoulder and nodded to her.

“I’m human. It’s okay to be shit at things,” Ilea said, unsure if he was being sarcastic or not.

“Of course it is,” Elfie said in a reassuring voice, squeezing her shoulder a little tighter before he let go.

*Still unsure*, Ilea thought, squinting her eyes. The important thing was that she could terrify Asay.

“The hall was otherwise empty, three exits leading away but we thought it unwise to move past the Praetorians without defeating them. One we could bring down, the two others will have recovered their shields by now,” Elfie finished.

“Asay and Farthorn have found a group of five Hunter Praetorians in a deeper layer, protecting what looked to be another mine,” Isalthar supplied.

*And they escaped.* “Did you destroy them?” Ilea asked them.

“No,” Farthorn said and hissed. “But we lost them on the way back.”

Ilea nodded, seeing genuine shame on the Elf’s face. “There’s no shame in retreat,” she said, crossing her arms in front of her.

Seviir shook his head ever so slightly.

Heranuur openly hissed, Farthorn standing up immediately as void magic manifested around him.

Fire magic flared up around the challenger before a powerful wave of mana emanated from Isalthar, his white eyes glowing a little brighter as he stared at Heranuur.

The elf went down to one knee, his teeth showing as he said a few words in elvish.

“Remember why we are here,” Isalthar said. “Learn from your mistakes and do not repeat them.”

Ilea assumed the comment was directed at the fire elf. Farthorn perhaps simply lacked the raw power to deal with a high level Hunter, even with Asay there to support him. Though she doubted the latter was much of a help, probably just studying their arcane magic while Farthorn struggled to survive.

*But survive they did. All of them,* Ilea thought, wondering how several teams of Shadows would fare in this dungeon.

Not quite as well, she surmised. Her Sentinels were far from such a challenge too but she hoped they could at least survive and flee, if they ever found themselves deep underground and surrounded by high level monsters.

“Where is Feyrair?” Elfie asked.

“Late,” Seithir replied.

“Niivalyr, resume your fight. The rest, find and support Feyrair in the challenge he deemed important enough to forego our meeting. Let him struggle alone if there is hope for his success,” Isalthar said. “We shall meet again after the same frame of time has passed.”

The elves confirmed with words or just by getting up.

Farthorn walked to Ilea and glanced at Asay.

“Directions?” Ilea asked, looking at Seithir.

He pointed forward.

“Thanks,” she said and spread her wings, focusing on anything Feyrair with Sentinel Huntress. Each of the elves had distinct enough magic. She could probably find them all if she really tried. Feyrair however was the easiest, his fires constantly burning, the trace he left behind more a marking of his territory than an accidental magical signature.

Asay giggled when he joined her, glancing between Farthorn and her.

They were off into one of the corridors, Ilea following her Huntress spell as she took in the surrounding impressions.

“You didn’t lie?” Farthorn asked after a while.

“About what?” Ilea asked.

“The Hunters. You truly destroyed them?” he asked.

“Why would I lie about that?” Ilea asked. “I fought them before. Their arrows are hardly comparable to the northern storms. And I have skills to counter their increasing damage to my armor, not that it’s needed at this point. You’d need quite a bit of arcane power to overwhelm me,” she said, winking at Asay who seemed delighted with the comment.

“I couldn’t destroy their shields,” he said in a disappointed voice. “They were moving too quickly.”

“I have ways to catch up with most things,” Ilea said with a smile.

The elf hissed, acknowledging her comment.

“He’s close now,” Asay said.

Ilea glanced at him, not surprised the magic scholar had ways of detecting the dragonling.

Their group flew into a large space littered with destroyed and burning tools, machines, and Taleen. Guardians, Centurions, and Praetorians had been fought here. White flames still clung to a large section of the expansive hall.

In the middle flew an elf, avoiding the continued attacks from a silver bodied Praetorian whose head turned for a split second, taking in the newcomers.

“How does it look?” Ilea asked.

The Praetorian sped up, void lighting up as one of the two massive blades cut Feyrair in half.

“Somewhat troubling,” Asay said. “Perhaps we should intervene.”

Ilea rolled her eyes, blinking closer and displacing the elf’s torso into her arms. Her healing revealed that he wasn’t exactly dying. Neither was his condition perfectly well.

“Found your match?” she asked.

“Hardly,” the elf spat, blood splattering to the ground. “Unhand me, woman. I’m not done,” he said, his red eyes glowing as his legs reformed.