

Ilea saw the thought in her mind, a barren wasteland with nothing but skeletons sticking out of the frozen sand.

She understood the emotions better now. Whoever sent them was warning them, both her and the mantis before her.

*I think she's beyond reason,* Ilea thought.

*Too late,* she tried to send back but wasn't sure if her own thought could be carried over such a long distance.

The mantis seemed to agree as it watched them with its spear at the ready.

Movements became visible in the distance, creatures called here by the loud screech of the mantis warrior.

Ilea thought they wouldn't arrive for a few minutes but she was wrong.

A powerful aura exploded from below as all three fighters moved away.

She found her blink didn't work and instead displaced both herself and Hector away as far as she could.

The ground shook and split, ice cracking before frozen chunks of sand exploded upwards and an armored black worm broke through the surface. The diameter of the creature reached at least ten meters.

***[Spirit of Death – lvl ???]***

*Close to eight hundred,* Ilea thought, trusting her Veteran assessment.

It opened its massive four part maw before a spray of purple flames rushed upwards, coming down again as they enveloped the whole vicinity.

The flames spread out and followed all three living targets.

Ilea didn't try to dodge, instead facing the energy head on as soon as she felt the mana and confirmed the damage with her precognition.

True to the name, the spirit used death magic. The spell decayed parts of Ilea's armor and skin but she was back in top form a moment later. It would have to keep up the flames for much longer than that to create an actual problem for her.

Hector flowed away from the fires, creating water that slowly neutralized the incoming barrage.

The mantis on the other hand simply used her spear to cut through the approaching flames before she charged the worm.

"She wants to gain health from them!" Hector shouted as he finished off the last flames.

Ilea rushed at the mantis. She didn't think Hector's assessment was true, not after the long battle with the creature. Her powers however remained and she could certainly regain her health from wild creatures.

*What life is there to get from a Spirit of Death?* she wondered.

A blink brought her close when a powerful surge of death magic expanded out from the worm. The energy slammed into all three of them.

The mantis dug its spear into the ground and held on, the steel scraping against the frozen sand as she was pushed away.

Ilea dug deeper with her ashen limbs, her armor withstanding the powerful area attack.

*Wouldn't she have recovered just from our flight here? With all that blood magic, her regeneration should be better than normal at least,* Ilea thought, trying to make out obvious injuries on the mantis but finding nothing.

She held up a hand against an incoming beam of purple energy. Four more projectiles followed in quick succession, her precognition letting her know about the enemy power.

The mantis was targeted too, deflecting two of the blasts before she turned and rushed the worm again.

She glanced at Ilea but kept her focus on the worm.

*I should use this soon,* Ilea thought, seeing the deformed vultures flying towards them. Dozens of them, all brimming with power and shooting their death projectiles from kilometers away.

She saw hundreds of creatures move on the ground, some of them jumping through the frozen ground as if it was made of water, others running or slithering.

*Some kind of corruption?*

Ilea was interrupted when another death spirit broke out from below, a second worm creature with similar power as the first.

*Eight hundred and such a big mouth,* she thought and looked at the mantis cutting into the worm before she teleported back, the warrior's assault continuing as she cut away decayed flesh with her devouring spear. Her movements were fast, erratic, furious.

*That's not the same warrior I faced. No, Hector, you're wrong. She's not here to get health.*

Ilea found the pirate moving through the desert in the distance, his beams of water cutting into ten approaching vultures.

*I can't risk leaving now,* she thought, seeing the mantis continue her battle.

Not until she was sure. She just had to trust the others to finish their opponents, or to escape should they find no way to win.

The worm had spewed out its purple flames and now turned towards her, its ten meter mouth opening up to show thousands of serrated teeth and a stench that would warrant a resistance on its own.

Ilea watched the glow of its building death magic and charged.

Her health was restored with a third tier heal, the flames coming out from the beast's body displaced in chunks or burning into her defenses.

She pushed on and flew into the beast's maw, her sphere providing vision as the worm's large mouth closed behind her.

Ilea held her breath and sacrificed three thousand points of health, the flames of death burning around her.

Heart of Cinder activated, flashing out with brilliant light and fire deep within the creature's body.

The vulnerable flesh and organs were burned away by the powerful energy. Splatters of rotted blood and flesh were ripped outwards, dim light and cold air coming in through several open holes.

Ilea charged her wings and formed an ashen drill in front of her. She pushed her control and density to the limit as the worm reeled to the side.

A deafening roar resounded as more flames formed, the first creatures clawing their way into the massive beast's throat from the many holes that led inside.

*Small fry*, Ilea thought with a smirk, crossing her arms in front of her as she sped up.

The drill dug deep, cutting through the blackened flesh with all the momentum Ilea could build. She had aimed for the head and kept pushing. As she slowed down due to the sheer mass of the worm, the drill started spinning faster, her reverse healing and a few limbs behind her cutting through everything in their way.

She screamed and finally punched through on the other side, flying a few hundred meters before she slowed down and turned around in the air.

The first beams and flames were already hitting her, ashen shields forming to slow the projectiles as she watched the worm slowly fall to the side.

**'ding' 'You have defeated [Spirit of Death – lvl 782]'**

She ignored the rest of the messages for now, enjoying the view of the creature falling, crushing a few critters in the process.

Ilea was only a little annoyed about how easy it was to kill this one compared to her last solo seven fifty kill.

She flew back into the fray with her limbs lashing out around her.

There were scorpion like creatures, mantises, ants, even squid like beings, all spirits of death.

Some were as low as level two hundred, many at five hundred or even beyond. They all rushed at the three living beings.

The living mantis had turned the worm into mincemeat but the creature still remained alive, spreading its purple flames through hundreds of pores. Pulses of magic pushed at both the mantis and the many monsters now present.

Ilea made sure to keep an eye on the warrior but mainly focused on making a few hundred meters of distance between them. She was busy herself, cutting through the many beasts that kept on coming, trampling over each other to get to her.

Whatever had taken these creatures had made their bodies decay and rot, leaving only husks of what they were before.

All color and individuality were gone from the dark sea of monstrosities. Their screeches and roars came without a sense of tone nor purpose, their eyes remained lifeless and cold.

Ilea ascended, watching the dozens of monsters below, many of them burning with her pale fire.

*Corrupted, cursed, death spirits, it all seems to lead to the same all devouring instinct, she thought and sent down Heart of Cinder.*

Many of the creatures were killed instantly, the others fought to climb the corpses for a chance to face the living one among them.

The second worm had fallen but a third had taken its place.

She displaced a few projectiles and beams, finding Hector's water sphere flying in the distance. A horde of creatures followed him, corpses left behind creating a line of rotten flesh in his path.

The mantis was surrounded by hundreds of creatures, her spear cutting through flesh with each move, her movements broad and aggressive.

Ilea watched her suddenly run through the air, upwards to meet one of the many flying creatures.

This one was different.

It's body looked pale blue and smooth, more humanoid than nearly all the other creatures. Six limbs without hands extended from its back as it floated in the air.

Ilea couldn't see any discernible features on its head or body. It had two legs but no feet.

Another major difference was the fact that the death spirits attacked this creature too.

Those who could attack at range shot their death magic at the creature, all projectiles hitting a multicolored shield.

*Astral*

Ilea recognized the element immediately.

Beams formed at the tips of its six limbs, the energy hitting various approaching creatures, disintegrating them near instantly.

The mantis dodged the attack as expected. She drew the creature's attention and soon had to dodge six beams at a time, some even moving while active.

She reached the being and vanished, a pulse of astral energy extending outwards in a sphere. The mantis appeared at the edge of the spell's range and pushed forward, her spear cleaving through several shields before it was stopped.

Ilea couldn't help but be intrigued. She didn't exactly want to join the mantis but there were two more of the pale blue creatures in the vicinity.

Her ash slashed through a few flying Death Spirits before one of them managed to claw into her ash, taking her down into the waiting horde.

Force pushed at the creatures before a sphere of fire burned some of them. Ashen limbs punched through heads and bodies alike.

She refrained from using Absolute Destruction for now, even reserving Storm of Cinders for the creatures that survived her ashen constructs.

A blink brought her up, her ash slashing through four vultures before she displaced herself. The pale blue being was her goal.

She didn't have to think about communicating first, the creature happy to attack her as soon as she was in range.

Ilea's Astral Resistance was at level one and compared to the mantis, she didn't really care about getting hit.

The energy washed over her as her speed was reduced but not stopped.

She saw the silhouette of the creature move more of its limbs towards her as the power intensified.

Ilea felt her ash burn away, then her skin and muscle in turn.

The power subsided and her body reformed.

*Not even enough to force a blink!* she thought with a broad grin.

The being was already charging its attacks again but the short lull was enough for Ilea to recover her health and armor fully.

She blinked closer and identified the floating creature.

Its body really was perfectly smooth. This one was pale blue too, the same six limbs seamlessly flowing out of its back. They were the only part of its body that actually turned towards her.

***[Astral Spirit – lvl ???]***

This one was close to seven hundred according to her Veteran based intuition.

*Just a bunch of spirits,* she thought and attacked.

The astral power rushing out as a defense crashed into her armor.

Ilea was already close enough to touch it with her limbs, pushing reversed healing into it.

She teleported around, avoiding the many beams shot at her as she attacked with her mana intrusion.

Another push brought her directly next to the creature, her fist rushing out before it was intercepted by one of the limbs. Instead of a beam, the creature used a manifested blade of astral energy.

Ilea blinked away and noted that another set of powers was revealed.

A powerful mana drain.

It was stronger than what a few Miststalkers managed together but nowhere near the combined efforts of dozens of the creatures.

Ilea watched in fascination as the few blemishes she had managed to inflict returned to the smooth pale blue skin from before.

She wanted to engage again but noticed that there were dozens of the creatures floating around already.

Purple and astral beams clashed together in the frozen desert. She disengaged, trying to find both Hector and the mantis.

*Guess this is the science fantasy realm,* she thought and deliberately let many of the attacks strike her.

Hector might not be able to just let the spells fuel him in the same way that she could, nor were they really here to fight a monster horde.

She very much wanted to remain on this battlefield but Ilea had to make sure the mantis was dead and her allies had survived first.

Dozens of attacks slashed into her side as a flock of vultures swarmed around her, Ilea momentarily busy dealing with them before she could find Hector.

A few dozen blinks were enough to reach him afterwards, her ash mowing into the hordes hounding the pirate.

His beams froze the creatures together and to the ground but many of them remained alive. He didn't use quite as many spells as he had against the mantis.

"How are you doing!?" she shouted, forming several ashen shredders around the largest creatures as her fists and limbs crashed into the relentless monsters.

Her ash dug in deep, spreading out the rotten bits of flesh and bone. A large creature tackled her and broke its teeth on her armor, Ilea's destructive mana flaring into it before it died. She displaced its corpse before blinking up.

"Trying to recover some mana. Can you spare a heal?" the man asked, a dozen death magic spells crashing into his sphere of water.

She obliged and tried to make out the mantis, her ashen spears taking down some of the vultures circling them.

"Why didn't she attack?" he said as his face got back some color. "Thanks."

"I don't think she-" Ilea said, killing three vultures that moved too close. "... intended to fight us here."

"Why come then? She will die!" Hector said, his constantly forming waves taking him away from two approaching astral spirits. "This wasteland will be our death!"

"If you can't take it, then go. Make sure the others survived. I'll come to the temple if the mantis attacks me or is dead," she said as the first astral beams burned into her.

A large chunk of the spirits of death rushed towards the new enemies.

Hector nodded and looked around.

"I should get a healer class," he said and laughed.

"Make sure they survived before you start with your looting. And please don't kill the sapient ones!" Ilea shouted, her armor reforming after the beams subsided.

Hector nodded and turned back towards the distant mountain range. "Make us humans proud!" he shouted and flowed through the flames of death on a wave of freezing water.

Ilea started to get seriously busy, more and more creatures appearing out of seemingly nowhere. Only about ten minutes had passed since they had reached the desert but already she had to wade through hundreds of monsters.

The astral spirits were too numerous for her to face them now, both their combined mana drain and attacks simply overwhelming.

Many of the spirits below had a way to stop her blink somehow. More large creatures had appeared too, some close in size to the worms they had fought initially.

The only reason she could fight for so long in this chaos was Sentinel Core. Her spells and healing were directly supported by the magic that hit her.

If she faced too many at the same time however, even Ilea would be taken down.

She found the mantis thanks to the many astral beams in the distance that seemed focused on a single target.

Ilea killed hundreds of the creatures on her way there, the air becoming crowded too.

Some larger monsters could even revive the dead lumps of flesh, creating more moving mass on its search to devour living creatures. Much of it was on a low level, too slow, or simply bound to the ground but the death magic they all breathed even managed to devour some of the astral beings.

Sheer mass and numbers overtook the powerful spirits, though most of them remained alive.

*A sea of bones and death, as promised,* Ilea thought and finally saw the mantis.

She was in bad shape, her left arm hanging limply to her side. Much of her carapace was cracked and bleeding.

Her spear remained in her clawed hand, the weapon striking at the astral spirits with violent attacks.

Six of them were now focused on her.

*Enough mana drain and astral magic to defeat even me,* she thought, sure of the result should she try the same with her current level and resistances.

The mantis didn't stop when her body slowed.

She didn't stop when the astral spirit she had targeted finally died and fell.

The warrior didn't stop when her weapon was lost, changing to her claws instead.

The concentrated beams of five high level astral spirits burned into the creature and she kept on digging her claws into their bodies.

Ilea kept moving, busy with the vultures herself as she avoided the more powerful spirits in her vicinity, her eyes still focused on the battle taking place a few hundred meters away.

After hundreds of attacks, she saw the mantis fall.

A single notification in her mind stood out as she scrolled through.

**'ding' 'Your group has defeated [Zaiked – The Warrior Queen of Erendar – lvl 418 / The Devourer of Fear – lvl 382]**

Ilea instantly made for the falling corpse, ignoring the many spells and attacks coming from all over.

She teleported past the many beams. The horde of death that followed her soon took the attention of the Astral Spirits, allowing her to reach the body.

Ilea stored the mantis and blinked again, charging her wings before she aimed for the frozen city.

She felt somber.

Ilea knew nothing of this place and its people. The queen had attacked them, had shown no will to negotiate or seek peace. Even when her allies fell one by one.

*Loss.*

The emotion reached her mind as she sped through the desert, her pursuers soon giving up on chasing the fast moving tiny target.

*Gratitude.*

She cried. It wasn't an attack, a curse, or an invasion into her mind.

The being simply shared what it felt. In an unfiltered and vulnerable breath of emotion that came and went in an instant.

Her tears froze and broke away, her mind left with a hollow thought of hopelessness and grief.

She healed against it, taking a deep breath before she landed in the sheltered temple.