

Chapter 380 Taking Stock

Ilea could finally sit down and eat something. Days had passed according to the people she had quickly talked to.

She was sitting on top of a stone structure near the tunnel like hole the Veramath had left behind, leading down in a steep angle.

Little was visible but an abyss and the creatures that were still coming up, frenzied and taken by the corruption stemming from farther down.

Fewer now, far apart and taken out by the rangers and rogues as well as the mages who could attack at such a distance.

Walls had been put up around the tunnel entrance, as well as several layers of defense. Spikes and obstacles of various elements were still rising within the tunnel as well as on the battlefield around the entrance.

Various structures had been put up, all with the intent to be defensible should another massive creature break through the ground. So far, the Goliath Veramath had been the only thing who had managed such a feat.

Ilea enjoyed the vegetable soup, not quite in the mood for meat after the endless slaughter. The smells didn't exactly add to the experience but she didn't want to go too far from the entrance, just in case.

Various mages were scouring the air, looking for cracks and crevices that were then closed by Lucas or Neiphato as well as a dozen other creators with their various elements. Wood and stone was best however.

The tunnel entrance was to her left, a hundred meters away perhaps. Some of the dark ones had started piling corpses into holes before setting them ablaze but with their own numbers, the task was monumental. Even with powerful magic at their disposal.

Ilea was resting on the wall of a dome like structure, elevated and grown out of a natural boulder and not closed off at the top. It was possibly the most secure structure they currently had on the first layer.

She assumed Hallowfort had improved further in the meantime as well. Some of the mages were rotating between the first layer and the town above. Always in groups to make sure the creatures lurking between could be taken care of or at least avoided.

A blue reaper was perhaps more dangerous than any of the corrupted that had spilled out so far, excluding of course the Veramath.

Maro was discussing the effects of the corruption with Catelyn and Niivalyr, the three joined by a couple of Dark Ones and two dwarfs were standing inside the dome structure and below where Ilea was eating.

"The curse has an effect but I have to learn more about its nature. It is the first time I have come across such a potent corrupting force." Elfie commented, looking down on the corpse they were standing around.

“It latches on to wounds, to blood.” Maro said. “It kills slowly, depending on how aware a being is to the circumstances.”

“I don’t feel blood magic resonance however. It is alchemical in nature, a substance. Released further down in the Descent.” One of the Dark Ones said.

Ilea gave him a glance, dark red armor and a reddish glow emanating from him through her sphere.

“The blood containers found within the fourth layer have properties unlike anything found elsewhere, to our knowledge at least.” Catelyn said. “Someone might have experimented with them.”

“The expedition caused this. It must’ve been them.” One of the dwarfs grumbled. “The Descent has been quiet for a hundred years and now suddenly, when they go down, it changes.”

Maro nodded. “Not the only thing that would be released in the depths of the north.”

Catelyn gave him a knowing look, back in her small fox form but standing on an elevated rock. “One corrupted beast powerful enough to kill others would be enough or a trap releasing the substance itself. The goal of the expedition was to delve as deep as they could, uncover artifacts and resources, unlike most of the previous endeavors where less... grand goals were the target.”

“I say we seal it all off and forget about it. Collapse the whole damn thing.” The dwarf said.

Protesting words immediately came from some of the Dark Ones, their species hidden behind cloaks and armor.

“Eighty of our own went down there. Do you suggest leaving them to die?” One of them said, a gravely deep voice with a near ethereal quality to it.

“What else should we do? The monsters are corrupted, frenzied and looking for blood. Sneaking past won’t be possible, not for the best of us.” The dwarf said and glanced at one of them, Ilas, the Dark One wreathed in shadow.

They started bickering until Catelyn cut in, silencing the group immediately. “This... corruption cannot be allowed to exist. The Descent is vast. Ancient. We have no idea how many ways lead out of it, back to the surface or into other dungeons further away.”

“Let them kill each other and die to the storms and blizzards.” The dwarf said.

“They retain their level, mostly.” Ilas said as he stepped up. “The longer we let this corruption run free, the higher the chance it will infect things like the Veramath. Creatures we cannot defeat.”

“We already can’t defeat them.” The dwarf hissed.

“You certainly can’t.” Ilas spat. “I have studied the Descent for decades. The monsters that have emerged so far, are not those I fear. Should the corruption run deeper, this very continent may fall.”

“What do you suggest?” Catelyn asked, looking at the four armed shadow creature.

“We go down. A small group, best suited for survival within the dungeon, its traps and the monsters within. Those able to destroy the corruption, to seal off exits.” Ilas explained, looking at Catelyn.

The fox thought about it for a moment. “It seems like the most reasonable choice. Leaving with too many could cause a disaster, should our own be taken over. The first layer and Hallowfort must be further fortified, those finding their way up must be destroyed.”

“That much we can do.” The dwarf said and chuckled. “If the strongest leave however, we may not be able to stand against high level creatures.”

“They have not emerged so far.” Ilas spoke. “And we will attract them. I suspect only a portion of the higher layers has been corrupted, otherwise we would have already seen more catastrophic results.”

“You want to go too?” Catelyn asked with an uncertain voice.

The dark one looked her way, no eyes visible but the tension was obvious.

“Are you acting with our interest in mind, or your own?” The fox asked.

Ilas was silent for a moment.

“Both.” He finally spoke. “Nothing I said was a lie. I do believe it is our best option.”

“So do I.” Catelyn replied.

“Then who is to join this group?” The dwarf asked.

“Word has been sent to the Dark Protector yet I won’t hope for assistance. The council will manage Hallowfort and you will manage the first layer.” Catelyn spoke, addressing the group of dark ones and dwarfs. “I will join this delve, to vanquish this... corruption.” She spat the word as if it had a vile taste to it.

“Maro? Will you join us?” Catelyn asked. “Your power and necromancy will be a boon I don’t want to miss.”

The man sighed below his helmet, the antlers moving down a little. He glanced towards Ilea. “The last mission.” He spoke with a tired voice.

Ilea was still eating, smiling down on him.

“Will you join us?” Catelyn asked, now looking at her as well.

Heads turned to face Ilea, sitting at the top of the wall.

“Of course.” She said after swallowing, taking another bite.

“And you, we don’t each other but you have joined our battle.” Catelyn said, looking at Elfie.

He hissed. “We came on her behalf, not yours.” The elf looked up at Ilea and back to Catelyn. “However. I agree with your assessment of the threat. Should the northern creatures fall prey to this influence, our kind will suffer as much as yours.”

He paused and nodded. “I shall join you. The young ones however, will stay here.”

“Thank you.” Catelyn spoke. “I had hoped to have the wood creator with us.”

“Too few here have healing capabilities as it is. She will suffice.” Niivalyr spoke, nodding towards the eating healer.

“There is another one, you know.” Maro said. “And he is perhaps more powerful than myself even.”

“The human? He has refused to fight. What use is he?” Elfie asked with a hiss.

“He can close the exits. And he is formidable when needed.” Maro said.

Ilea jumped down, putting away her empty box. “Lucas can’t differentiate between friend and foe. I don’t think he’s suitable for the job.”

“He won’t fight, not unless we are overwhelmed. In which case I’d rather have him down there than any of the mages I saw in the past days.” Maro said.

“Even so, he has no reason to come. I’m surprised you could even convince him to join the battle here.” Ilea said. She assumed it had something to do with his charisma or he simply asked him to pay back the help they had provided.

Maro didn’t say anything in response, his face hidden by the helmet.

“I will talk to him.” Catelyn said. “His level alone is higher than most.”

Ilea rolled her eyes but didn’t stop her. Lucas could decide on his own, even if she thought it was unwise. Especially considering his pacifism and lack of control.

It wasn’t necessarily a consideration for her own or her party’s safety but more for his own. All of them had ridiculous defenses and health, except for Ilas, him she barely knew.

The shadows wreathing around him at least made her suspect he could escape, should worse come to worst.

“In the meantime, prepare yourselves. I suggest we leave later today.” Catelyn said and looked over the group. “Ilas, prepare plans for the first layer. We will discuss it as soon as I have talked to the human.”

“As you wish.” Ilas replied and bowed lightly.

Ilea cracked her neck and blinked back up to the wall, appearing with her legs dangling down the side and with a view over the expansive cavern, the tunnel now nearly enveloped with stone, crystal, and wood.

Fires were still burning over the distant fields, thousands of corpses still littering the ground as far as she could see. As high up as she was, the smell wasn’t that bad anymore at least.

She summoned another meal and started eating, enjoying the light breeze of somewhat fresh air coming from the lake, ignoring the physics of this underground dungeon. Finally, she had some time to look over her gains.

The kill notifications were too numerous, quickly skipped as she moved on to the more interesting bits.

‘ding’ ‘The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 314 – Five stat points awarded’

‘ding’ ‘The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 315 – Five stat points awarded’

‘ding’ ‘Kin of Ash has reached lvl 313 – Five stat points awarded’

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The stats she quickly invested into Intelligence, bringing it to 686. Each point would give her the same boost as around ten would provide normally, thanks to the multiplication from her auras.

'ding' 'Azarinth Awakening reaches 3rd lvl 15'

'ding' 'Sentinel Core reaches 3rd lvl 3'

'ding' 'Sentinel Core reaches 3rd lvl 4'

'ding' 'Armor of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 17'

'ding' 'True Ash Creation reaches 3rd lvl 11'

'ding' 'Heart of Cinder reaches 3rd lvl 4'

'ding' 'Heart of Cinder reaches 3rd lvl 5'

'ding' 'Storm of Cinder reaches 3rd lvl 4'

'ding' 'Ash and Ember Unity reaches 3rd lvl 10'

'ding' 'Keeper of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 9'

'ding' 'Blast Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 9'

'ding' 'Blast Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 10'

'ding' 'Corrosion Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 8'

'ding' 'Crystal Resistance reaches 19'

'ding' 'Crystal Resistance reaches 20'

'ding' 'Dark Magic Resistance reaches 14'

'ding' 'Dark Magic Resistance reaches 15'

'ding' 'Earth Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 2'

'ding' 'Ice Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 7'

'ding' 'Lightning Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 8'

'ding' 'Wind Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 7'

'ding' 'Wood Magic Resistance reaches lvl 2'

...

'ding' 'Wood Magic Resistance reaches lvl 8'

Being in the middle of a massive battle against thousands of frenzied monsters was still one of the best ways to level after all.

Ilea could have likely gotten more levels facing down Miststalkers, their levels mostly higher than the beasts she had fought in the past couple days but her resistances certainly benefited.

Most of the damage came from allied mages but considering her state in battle and the added dangers, many of them had leveled quite a bit.

Niivalyr suddenly appeared next to her, landing on the stone wall as he looked over the landscape.

Ilea continued eating.

"You really think this could doom your people?" She asked after a while.

He glanced at her. “Perhaps. There are many things out there, beings of great destructive potential. Magic and beasts we cannot comprehend, even after thousands of years of study.” He paused.

“The reason humanity, elven kind and any other living thing has not yet been wiped of this realm is simply because those creatures stay where they are. This... corruption leads whatever it infects to seek out those not yet in its grasp. An unending hunger. I cannot begin to comprehend the dangers this would cause, should an ancient and powerful creature fall prey to it.”

“If they’re so ancient and powerful, don’t you think they could fight it off?” Ilea asked, taking a bite out of a wrap.

Elfie sat down, to her surprise. “Perhaps they would.”

He glanced at her food.

Ilea handed one of the remaining wraps to him.

Niivalyr took it and nodded. “Thank you.”

“I... understand now that I cannot trust in those with more power than myself, to do what I believe needs to be done. I do not think it is wise to let this infestation run unchecked and to trust in others to solve this problem. Not when we ourselves have the power to change its course.” Elfie spoke.

“Same as with the Taleen?” Ilea asked, finishing her meal.

The elf ate in silence.

He swallowed and nodded. “Perhaps. I had... looked for an answer, a way to convince the o... oracles. The answer however, had been in front of me. All this time.”

“Maybe you weren’t ready to see it yet.” Ilea suggested, leaning back as she looked at the crystals on the far away cavern ceiling.

“You have met more of us then? Cerithil Hunters. The cursed.” He asked, not commenting on her remark.

She could tell he was interested. Seviir and the others were younger than him. The group she had met recently was a different caliber altogether, Ilea knew as much.

“I did. The strongest one was a healer bearing the name Isalhar.” Ilea explained.

His head turned to her instantly. “Isa... the Val Akuun... are you certain that was the name?” He had moved closer, nearly in her face.

Ilea extended her hand and pushed him back a little. “That’s what he said. What does Val Akuun mean?”

“I won’t tell you.” Elfie replied immediately. “Know that he is infamous among the domains, the hunters. He met with you?” His voice sounded unbelieving.

“Why is that so hard to grasp?” Ilea asked and chuckled. “You’re sitting with me right here and you weren’t even a hunter when you first met me.”

“Perhaps you are right. Did you tell him... about me, us? The Centurion facility?”

Ilea wasn’t sure if she heard fear but her sphere at least told her he was nervous. “I told him that I know a group of hunters, nothing more. Didn’t know if I could trust them.”

He sighed and then shook his head, chuckling. "I don't... I don't know why I'm afraid. I'm the same now, a hunter like him." The realization seemed to hit him pretty hard then. As if for the first time he understood the gravity of his actions. "Perhaps... I can still atone... be released of my cur-

Ilea's finger flicked his skull so hard, he had to stabilize himself with his arm.

"What are you...," He exclaimed.

Ilea just held her finger at the ready once more. "You made your choice. Going back will only get you killed. I think what you had with your oracles could be constituted as an abusive relationship. You disagree with them, don't you? You want to fight the Taleen and destroy them?"

He looked at her, a trickle of blood flowing down his hair and over his cheek. "I do." He said, his voice quiet. "I do. And you're right. Thank you, human."

"Just come to me whenever you need a beating. Although you nearly reached my level again. I can't wait to spar with you after the evolution. Five to go." She said with a smile, releasing her loaded finger.

"I don't particularly look forward to that. Your power has increased exponentially." He commented.

"As will yours." Ilea said. "Gonna be interesting to see where it takes you, now that you're a free elf."

He looked at her once again, mouthing a word she couldn't grasp.

"We shall talk again, of these elves you met. Now." He said and stood up, patting down his coat.

"I have an urge, to fight." He said and put up a hand. "Not you."

Ilea rolled her eyes. "Whatever. Get to three hundred already."

She could swear there was a light smirk on his face before he vanished, flying towards the tunnel entrance a moment later.

They probably had a couple hours to go, perhaps enough to get some more resistance training in. Ilea stood up and spread her wings, looking for people she could convince.