

Chapter 387 Hiding Beasts

Other than some downright ancient pickaxes and mining gear, the group found nothing in the resting hall withing the 7th layer of the Descent.

Granted, the search did not consume much time with the various perception skills of the high level group.

“What kind of metal do you think is found around here?” Ilea asked as they progressed further down the tunnels, illuminated by spheres of light moving ahead and behind. She remained the only one walking on the ground, accompanied by two skeletons and an undead Pure Blooded.

Nobody replied, keeping themselves hidden to anything that might listen. They had decided not to rest, knowing there had been beasts around even when the hall was discovered.

“My bet is on gold.” Ilea said and peeked around a corner. Only a dark mining shaft looked back, the same one she had seen for the past hour.

Ilas continued to decide where to go. His ability to keep track could of course be questioned but Catelyn trusted him. That was enough for Ilea.

Neither did she see a reason for him to lead them astray, other than perhaps getting them into a trap or close to a dangerous monster for whatever reason. Both seemed acceptable outcomes to Ilea, needing high level creatures to further level up.

Getting trapped alone would be even better. She smirked, moving her hand over a mine cart that likely hadn't been moved in a thousand years. The squeaking noise it made upon movement certainly spoke for that.

Ilea felt a familiar pressure a while later, stronger and coming from a less focused point. “More mimics.” She said, glancing back at the group.

“Follow?” She asked, getting a nod from Catelyn.

The fox was their de facto leader in this dungeon expedition. It didn't seem like anybody had a problem with that.

Elfie was still testing some of his skills, a little absent as he read through invisible descriptions and messages.

Maro hadn't spoken a word in a while, hiding himself under his helmet. He didn't particularly want to be there, that much was clear.

Ilea was somewhat sure the necromancer would at least not abandon them, his promise and pride overshadowing whatever else he was feeling. She was genuinely surprised at his evident suffering, the man supposedly someone who enjoyed dangerous dungeons and fighting beasts.

So far it had proven true enough. *Maybe his visit to the human cities have changed his views somewhat.* Ilea wondered.

She could tell that Lucas still felt bad, even though what had happened was one hundred percent expected. He hadn't killed anybody and Ilea felt confident in dealing with him whenever it

happened again. She did inform the others about how to approach the elder in case she herself wasn't available.

Ilas barely knew any of the group which left Ilea and Catelyn, the former most certainly not willing to take a leadership position when a council member of Hallowfort was present, willing and capable enough to fill the role.

The mind magic increased in intensity before it ceased entirely. A more spacious cavern opened up a couple minutes later, in the direction of the attack.

This one looked natural, stretching high and far as well as lacking any wooden beams or sockets for lanterns. It did look that whoever had once mined down here had dug into sections of the walls. Rubble and stones littered the ground, the cave itself uneven. Lacking the flattened nature of the shafts.

"Smells in here." Ilea said, sniffing the air. "Decay."

"Perhaps something recent." She added and followed the smell around several boulders.

Ilea found a dead Blighter Stone, burnt and showing various piercing wounds. She crouched down and checked the area with her skills, intending to find a clue about the expedition.

"It injured someone. Heavily. There's a ton of dried blood here, most of it not from the creature." She surmised.

Maro moved closer and landed next to her, examining the blood as well. "It's pretty old." He said and floated upwards again. "Could be the expedition we're looking for, could be a random scavenger."

Elfie smelled on it too, brushing a finger over the blood and tasting it, his mask quickly lifted and put back in place. "Dwarf." He said with certainty.

"Their blood tastes different?" Ilea asked. She had eaten her fair share of animals as well as beasts at this point but tasting a difference in blood alone. *Granted, I we don't use blood in dishes normally. And if we do, it's cooked or baked.*

"It does." The elf said simply. He paused and looked at her. "Many I have killed in my years. Their bodies I didn't waste."

"Hey, cultural differences." Ilea said with a smirk. "We like to bury or burn our dead. As long as you don't hunt sapient creatures for food alone."

"Not anymore." the elf said, looking at her. His words were meant for Ilea alone, that much was clear from his attitude.

Eating corpses as a way to prevent waste. Ilea could see how it could become normal in a much more violent society with less emotional awareness or an aversion to it.

She wouldn't ever think about it, not with humans or really any creature that once talked and thought. Mostly because it was ingrained in her from her life on Earth.

"Any trace of them?" Catelyn asked.

"Only one way leads out of here." Ilas said and pointed towards the other end of the cavern, barely visible in the dim light of Lucas' spells.

Ilea nodded and checked the cavern, finding four hiding Blighter Stones, responsible for the previous mind magic.

It seemed the creatures shared her disposition about cannibalism, having left the corpse to rot.

They had led the group here at the very least but she wasn't about to leave mind magic creatures alive near their escape route. Not when she was working with a team.

If she had been alone, half the creatures they had killed would likely still be alive, feeding her spells.

They continued on through the small tunnel at the end of the cavern, much less refined than the corridors from before, either made at a later time or perhaps a first effort to go deeper.

Another cavern opened up after Ilea had passed the tight tunnel, barely enough space for herself to get through.

Orbs of light spread into the wide expanding space, revealing more sections were digging had started. It was also a possibility that all the metal had already been excavated.

The others floated in the air behind her, Ilea starting to walk into the middle of the room.

Again, the smell of rot couldn't be mistaken. Soon, the light revealed scattered bodies. Ripped apart, both their gear as well as the flesh and bone below.

Ilea couldn't tell how many there had been but counted at least three, according to the bone remains showing pieces both humans and most dark ones only had one of.

Three remains of spines, one barely recognizable.

"Cuts." Ilea said, examining the pieces in her sphere.

A slight vibration suddenly ran through the ground. Her sphere picked up movement, coming in quickly from below.

There was no time to speak, to warn the others. A Shredder shot out the very moment she had recognized the disturbance.

Ilea jumped back, dodging the beast as it rushed out of the ground, orange pulsing lines visible on its elongated body.

[Corrupted Shade Shredder – lvl ???]

Her ashen limbs immediately slashed into it, using the grip to dodge a second monster coming out of the ground behind her.

Maro's skeletons were ripped apart in mere instants, chunks of flesh and bones falling to the ground with wet sounds.

The cavern exploded into motion, spells raining down on the corrupted creatures as they frantically sought out their targets.

Ilea tried to get to all of them, using her ashen limbs to injure each one as she ducked and weaved through the fast moving corrupted.

Five of them were focusing on her already, pushing each other as they rushed to trap her in their fangs.

Barriers of bright white light were visible in the corner of her eye, floating at the highest point of the cavern. Beams of red and purple came down and injured the creatures, however failing to reduce their momentum.

There were seven in total, one focused on the teleporting Ilas, trying to entwine him with its long body as his swords slashed at the wounds seeping with corruption.

Ilea followed suit, her ashen limbs slashing at the Shredders behind her, focusing on their eyes and wounds. A difficult task in the limited space, both her and the creatures moving at high speeds.

She was tackled and blinked away, Heart of Cinder released in a cone to engulf four of them, burning away at their protective shell and corruption. They barely slowed down, screeching in anger and blind fury.

Explosions of fire both purple and red slammed into them from above, shards of white appearing around the monsters before they slashed into them.

Lucas seemed to still be in the room, the lights having spread, now illuminating most of the area.

Ilea's limbs still delivered Storm of Cinders when two more creatures burrowed towards her from below, her sphere giving her just enough time to jump away.

Blink activated before she landed, three lunging Shredders crashing into each other and the stone ground where she had jumped to.

"We have more coming!" She shouted, sending ten ashen spears into the oncoming swarm of thoughtless monsters.

Some of them pierced, others glanced off their defenses. All it did was agitate them more, if such a thing was at all possible.

Ilea separated her limbs in the last moment, blinking above as the creatures rushed past. Her area spell activated again, releasing the stored heat from the last couple seconds.

Her ashen limbs rushed down and slashed the monsters apart, their defenses much less durable than those of the uncorrupted beasts. The reaction of course was quite different, the frenzied monsters not concerned with their survival as they thrashed and turned, looking for their vanished prey.

"There's too many!" Maro shouted, making her turn and look his way.

Two corrupted Shredders had burrowed in from above, biting at the white barriers that kept them at bay as fire and death engulfed them.

"Find a way out of here!" Catelyn shouted, her massive form slamming down as her tails swept away two of the creatures, a cone of bright fire engulfing the swarm below Ilea.

Ilea kept her focus on the beasts. If anybody had a chance to survive this, then it was her. Ashen armor clad, she blinked towards the beast closest to the edge of the group and the cavern, slashing all her limbs into it as her fists punched into its corrupted form, all her offensive potential used.

Walls of ash formed close to her as the monster wrung itself around her defenses, reversed healing mana as well as all her spells slamming into it as its life burned away.

It moved quickly, shredding through her ash as its name suggested. Still, it was overwhelmed by the damage before it could get to her, suddenly sliding away with its lasting momentum.

Ilea heard the noise in her mind but simply focused on the next, the beast already wrung pretty much around the previous Shredder, waiting for its turn to rip the healer apart.

“A way leads out, on me! Teleport through the wall. Metal-” He paused and reappeared after dodging one of the creatures. “Metal they will find hard to burrow through! There are too many!”

He vanished once more, barely noticeable in the edge of Ilea’s vision.

There hadn’t been enough time to reform her ashen defenses, the monster now digging into her armor with frightening speed. She heard a roar then, coming from Catelyn a couple meters to her right.

She couldn’t see anything other than teeth and claws, orange pus and black blood smearing onto her rebuilding ash as her punches and limbs ripped apart the flesh around her.

When the creature died, she noticed some cuts on her body, an invading force pulsing with orange light as pain shot through her body.

Three cuts in her arm. She blinked when the creature died, flying as high as she could as two of her limbs slashed into her own skin, ripping out the corrupted flesh. Her healing pushed against it but wasn’t able to overcome whatever substance it was.

It felt different, a mixture of the known and something new. Poison, curses, acid, pain itself. A cool feeling of inevitable doom.

As fast as it had spread into her, it was ripped out again. Muscle and skin reformed once more.

Catelyn was hovering with a Shredder moving around her tails, cutting deep as she roared and burned it.

Maro was gone already, as was Lucas and Ilas. The lights however remained, indicating that he was close.

Niivalyr hovered close by, barriers protecting him against the lunging beasts that were deflected, not finding purchase on his magic.

“I’ll get her out, move to where they are!” Ilea shouted to the elf as she blinked into the flames, her offensive skills slashing in and through the creature holding on to Catelyn.

More of them were coming from below, barely deflected by Ilea’s and Catelyn’s spells and attacks.

Heart of Cinder released into the writhing mass below, the creatures using each other’s bodies to get higher. To reach the floating fox.

Flashes of white appeared, blocking the lunging worms, now coming from above as well.

“Teleport as soon as this one is off.” Ilea shouted, the flames burning away at her armor as they finally killed the creature.

Both of them vanished, appearing close to the wall Ilas had indicated, three flying orbs of light pulsing to mark the exit.

One of the Shredders shot out of the ground the moment they appeared, Ilea shoving the fox away with her limbs, her fist slamming into the creature’s head. Limbs followed as well as a surge of ash to engulf it.

Again, she was entwined, blades of bone shredding through her defenses, some of them brimming with the magic of wind and others merely drenched in corruption.

She staggered back, her mana slowly draining as she used all her spells in quick succession. The wind attacks brought some of it back.

Her attacks killed the injured creature, the ash around her condensing into thick walls before three more Shredders slammed into her and the stone walls of the cavern.

She could see beyond now, five meters of thick stone followed by something else, more durable, harder to penetrate for her Sphere.

Her ash was still connected to her body and the beasts, her attacks keeping them at bay but preventing a teleport at the same time.

Catelyn had shrunk and lay collapsed on the ground beyond, Maro resting on the side of the wall with his head turned towards the cavern. Ilas paced around while Lucas watched on with a worried expression, torn and unsure.

Just fucking stay there. Ilea thought, finishing another one. Her defenses were eaten through from three sides now, all her spells only giving momentary pause to the creatures as she delivered more destructive mana into them.

Elfie was still in the cavern, preventing more of the worms to get closer to her as he floated around, teleporting to avoid the creatures as they scratched past his barriers.

Time passed, Ilea's bone armor now barely hanging onto her body as various orange lines showed on her skin. Her ashen limbs were diverted into attacking the Shredders and cutting out the corruption on herself.

Meditation and their contributions made sure she could keep up her powerful attacks. She staggered back with a smile, hitting the wall before Heart of Cinder was released, burning away the corruption on herself as well as pushing back the creatures. The stone behind her was reduced to ash, her spell stopping on the steel that protected her allies.

Her ash was banished when Elfie appeared in front of her, a set of barriers appearing as the Shredders slammed into them, cracks forming after a moment.

"Get out of here." He said, the barriers flaring up with light.

Her ashen armor was reforming, blood dripping onto the stone as she stepped towards him. "My knight in shining barriers." She grinned and glared at the creatures with fury in her eyes.

"Not here, not now. Catelyn is injured." Elfie said, focused on the monsters.

"You first." Ilea said, sighing as she watched dozens of frenzied Shredders cut and bang against the elf's magic.

"Why are you so much like us?" He asked, tired but with a hint of pride.

Niivalyr vanished, Ilea following right before the corrupted beasts reached her once more.

She stepped into the room, her ashen armor closing around her chest as a last portion of blood splashed to the floor with her appearing momentum.

The wounds had already closed, only blood and orange goo remaining on her body.

“Ilea!” Lucas exclaimed as he moved closer, stopping a meter away. “Are you alright?” He seemed hesitant.

“Yea, of course.” She said, spreading her limbs to check on the others.

Catelyn was low, her wounds slowly closing however.

The limbs retracted once more, her damaged bone armor vanishing into her necklace as her ash scrubbed off the remaining blood off herself. Both black and red alike.

New ash formed as a tainted portion hovered to the ground. Steel now instead of stone, a metallic sheen reflecting the light from the group’s spells.

Ilea proceeded to walk to the wall that separated them from the Shredders. Her limbs once more spread out and started healing the others.

She watched in amusement as the monsters tried to burrow through the thick reinforced steel. A smile spread on her face as she knocked on the wall with her fist. *They’re not getting through that.*