

Chapter 394 Break

“I would prefer her to be with us,” Catelyn said as she looked at Ilea.

The healer had summoned the pack for Lucas.

“You’ve known her for a while too,” Maro said. “Her time alone will make a difference. We might very well be stuck in this place for a while. Let her do what she does best.”

“And what is that exactly?” Ilea asked with a smirk.

“Fight monsters others would avoid, even with a whole team backing them up,” the necromancer replied.

Ilas had been silent up to now, contemplating their talk. “I will not retreat. Not now... that I have come so far,” he said.

He held up a hand before Maro could talk. “I do not ask for protection, nor even to accompany you.” he looked towards Ilea. “I will train, as you have. And when you are ready, I will follow. If you would have me.”

Ilea could tell he was anxious, his voice however was steady, unwavering.

“Why?” she asked.

He looked at her. “Because this may be my last chance. To find what I have lost,” he paused. “If I leave now... I will never forgive myself.”

“What are you looking for then?” Ilea asked. “You don’t want to go with them? I’ll need longer to get wherever you need to go.”

The dark one glanced at the others. “A long time ago, me and my team of scavengers... we were reckless, young. With illusions of grandeur, our goal was to go farther than anyone had dared go. Deeper into the Descent than those before.”

“We succeeded, with illusions and powerful items to hide our passing to the creatures below,” he continued.

“So you knew about these layers? And chose not to inform us?” Catelyn asked, showing her teeth.

“No,” Ilas said immediately. “We were wreathed in shadow, an ability of my own, coupled with many spells of those with us. Few beasts came close, none of them I even saw with my own eyes. We were not explorers. Reckless fools, blinded by treasure.”

“I knew you were looking for someone here... to think you were a scavenger yourself,” Catelyn said, fire swirling in her eyes. “Why did you never tell me?”

The Dark One remained silent for a while. Finally, he looked to the ground and spoke, “Because I knew you would offer help.”

“So what’s the problem?” Ilea asked. “You want to go down but not with them?”

“There is a monster. And a gate. That which I have lost remains within, protected by what I cannot challenge,” Ilas added. “I have seen you fight and I have waited, had hoped my suspicions would

prove true. You are not here merely to protect the world against corruption, to find and rescue those lost in the deep. You are here to find a challenge.”

“I offer you all I have and ask you, will thou face the challenge?” Ilas asked and went on one knee, holding out both arms and lowering his head.

Well, this is kind of awkward, Ilea thought, glad her face was covered by her armors. “How do I know you’re not using me to get some treasure?”

“It is a beast... a monster of blood and bone. It took that which I love. I am a coward... and I have waited. For someone... that might be able to fell it. I tried... to find the strength, to kill, to find power. Yet I have failed. Time and time again I have failed. I offer you my life, to do with what you please. If only you could rid me of this curse,” Ilas said, less in control of his voice now.

“Stop speaking in this convoluted mess... what do you want?” Ilea asked once more.

Ilas reached for his face, taking off the mask that had covered it for all this time. He revealed the scarred and deformed skin below, only one of his eyes visible, yellow and feline. The right side of his face looked as if molten. Brown scales showed where his skin wasn’t deformed, a remainder of whatever creature he had been before finding sapience.

“I wish to bury her,” he spoke. “Cynthia.”

“And with it the failures of my past. It is all I have left, all I long for. An impossible task. This corruption... your coming...,” he gestured to all of them, “... it must be fate. Destiny, cruel as it is, finally presenting an end.”

“That’s pretty heavy mate,” Ilea said and sighed. “But I’m not one to turn down a good fight. Know... that if you’re deceiving me and you’ve lied about any of this, I will come back from the dead and rip off your head.”

His one eye seemed to light up at that. “I swear, on all that I hold dear, on Cynthia herself... that I have not lied to you.”

Ilea felt bad for the guy, the deformed face telling enough of a story. He seemed sincere, with all she knew about people, the feeling she got from her Sphere. *Just can’t help yourself, can you?*

She smiled and shook her head. “We will focus on the initial plan first. The expedition and the corruption. You mentioned a shadow skill to shroud your group?”

His one eye opened wide. “Yes... yes, I could help in hiding you.”

“You could help hiding them,” Ilea said and pointed at the others. “And as soon as we’re done with the reasons why we’ve come, I’ll help you with yours.”

Ilas nodded. “If they agree to have me, I will be honored to help.”

“I want to see the skill first,” Maro said, looking at him.

“Of course,” Ilas said and put on his metal mask again.

Catelyn sighed but didn’t say anything.

“You’re ok, going with them?” Ilea asked, looking at Elfie.

“We will find the source. It will be most beneficial for you to face the Wyverns alone, without potential help,” he chuckled, his eyes sparkling. “How very Elvish you are. It amuses me,” he hissed.

Ilea hissed back, trying to imitate the sound as well as she could, a broad grin on her face.

Elfie veered back and tilted his head to the side. “What?”

She laughed and saw a shroud of shadow envelop the rest of them.

They suddenly became blurry in her sphere, her eyes having a hard time focusing on the group.

“Seems pretty effective,” Ilea said, taking a couple steps back to look at them.

“Yes... but it’s the same for us,” Maro said, sounding a little unsure.

Elfie appeared within the area of the spell. “Ah... yes. It appears my magic sight is not affected.”

“Then we take you with us,” Catelyn said. “We lack any other hiding skills. I will try to protect you, Ilas. We are getting into territory now where I will have to protect myself, just be aware of that.”

“Of course. Thank you, Catelyn. I’m sorry that... I have kept this from you,” Ilas said.

Catelyn waved him off. “We should wait here until the elf has read through the whole journal. There might be information in there in regards to the next layers and the beasts within as well as potentially about what caused the corruption. Or the activation of the true blood.”

“I’d like to have a look at the machine... the tuner,” Maro said and nodded to Ilea. “Maybe we can test it on you.”

“I’d rather keep myself to a corrupted arm,” Ilea said. “I’ll have to take care of that too, Elfie,” she glanced his way.

The elf revealed his arm, the corruption pulsing in the small wound. A barrier formed and slashed into his skin, ripping out a sizable chunk. He inspected it and nodded, using his curse to drain some Health from Ilea.

He glared at the wound as it healed. “I will have to consider this. Fighting someone with a high health drain resistance is... problematic.”

“Self healing is always the better option. Or just having an actual healer,” Catelyn said. “We will have to be more careful from now on, with Ilea staying back. My healing is limited and slow.”

“Compared to hers, yes. As a general healer however, you will do fine,” Maro said as he walked to the hut holding the tuner.

“I’ll check in again here. Leave me a note in case you find something detrimental that I should know. Otherwise, good luck,” Ilea said, cracking her neck and fists.

“To you as well,” Catelyn said and bowed lightly. “We shall await your coming.”

“A race then. Who shall first stop the corruption,” Elfie said.

“Don’t die!” Maro shouted from within the hut.

“You too. I shall see you again, sooner rather than later,” Ilea said and gave them a last nod before she blinked up.

One more she blinked, appearing on the plateau overlooking the sea of mists. She knew that if she had remained any longer, she would have decided to stay with them, to protect them on the way down. *To die, likely. Or to return without taking care of the corruption.*

There was a deadline, depending on how quickly they progressed down the layers. *Marginal power increases won't do?* Ilea smiled to herself, taking a deep breath of the surprisingly fresh air considering the location.

Then I guess I'll have to do more than that, she heard a distant roar and spread her own wings, following the noise.

The search didn't take particularly long, the Wyverns very much aware of their superiority.

Ilea noted now that they occasionally flew over the mists, their focus however mostly on the plateaus themselves instead of the air above. *Not a lot of birds up here.*

A positive to their apparent high self esteem was the fact that they hunted alone. *I wonder if that was the case with the corrupted corpse we found. And if they would interfere when one of their own was getting killed.*

Only one way to find out, Ilea thought and dived down, quickly reaching her full speed.

The Wyvern was flying casually, suddenly turning its head upwards before a small and heavy frame impacted it.

It roared, tumbling down as ashen limbs entangled its wings and body.

Ilea felt the paralyzing effect wane after a mere second. She had still been in touch, the Wyvern unable to teleport.

[Cliff Wyvern – lvl ???]

The two tumbled down and slammed hard into one of the plateaus, neither impaired by the blow.

A low growl came from the creature as it stood up, easily pushing against the limbs trying to hold it down. Its eyes glinted golden, a wild fury apparent.

“Nice to meet you,” Ilea said as she too got up, ashen spears forming around her as she crouched into a defensive stance, looking at the monster towering before her.

She felt the heat rise around her, sudden and instantaneously. Ilea waited with her move, a wide grin on her face as she felt the hairs on her neck and back stand up. An instinctual reaction, not based on her Azarinth Fighting.

This is what you came for, isn't it? she heard herself think, seeing the glow of fire from within the Wyvern's mouth.

Its maw opened wide, the massive teeth parting to reveal its throat.

Ashen spears rushed out, aimed at the opening. They were pushed aside, a cone of fire enveloping all that stood before the creature.

Ilea moved her wings in front of her, creating a thin barrier of ash right behind. Her precognition informed her about the damage she would sustain and despite the bells going off in her mind, she couldn't be happier.

She spread her arms and smiled, seeing the flames wash through her ash as if it was mere sand, standing against the tide. Her armor was next and finally the bone.

The flames settled and Ilea stood, the molten skin on her chest and legs reforming. Her face was burnt, skin hanging down and eyes charred.

All of it was healing, no sign of pain shown as she simply stood, waiting for the Wyvern's next move.

Heat once more surged and enveloped her, ashen armor only partially reformed, her bone armor reduced to uselessness.

Ilea stored her armor and let the flames wash over her, burn her. She saw her insides getting cooked, only a charred mess remaining. Before her brain was gone, Ilea healed the damage with her third tier reconstruction.

The steam from the vaporized blood and water in her body settled, revealing an undamaged Ilea. Ashen armor formed around her once more.

It seemed like the Wyvern was a little confused, its eyes blinking several times as it took in the sight in front of it.

"Don't worry, happens to everyone," Ilea said and released Heart of Cinder, happy to find that some of the heat from the creature's attacks had actually contributed.

The cone of fire shot out and burned into the stone before it petered out into thin air.

Ilea had seen the Wyvern vanish but it was too late to change the trajectory.

The beast vanished once more and appeared right before her, its maw opened and rushing to slam down on her head.

She ducked out of the way, finding the Wyvern's extended claws in turn. A blink brought her away, only to find the beast followed.

This time, she couldn't dodge all the way. Teeth sank into her shoulder.

Ilea got in a punch to the Wyvern's head as well as several slashes of her limbs before it broke through her ashen armor, digging into her flesh.

Its teeth bit deeper with each passing second as it took her hits in stride.

She slammed her ashen limbs into the Wyvern's eyes, making it stagger back. A wild movement ripped her arm away at the shoulder, blood spraying to the ground before a new arm took its place.

Ilea spat blood to the ground and stared at the creature who ground her arm in its maw before swallowing the thing whole.

Wish it would retain my toughness, Ilea thought, imagining the thing choking on her bones.

Come on, use your fire.

The beast roared, the sound vibrating through her as she instinctively held up her arms.

'ding' 'You have heard the challenge of the Cliff Wyvern – You are paralyzed for one second'

'ding' 'Veteran reaches lvl 14'

She just watched as the creature once more charged up its fire breath. This time took longer. A cone of flame shot out, more deadly than before.

Ilea had to use her instant recovery three times during the breath, lasting three times as long as the previous attacks.

Her body was reformed once more when she saw the beast appear, a gaping maw staring back at her.

Ilea extended her arm and slammed it into the Wyvern's throat. Teeth ground into her flesh.

"Try dodging this one," she said and released her spell right into its mouth.

The Wyvern opened its eyes wide as it thrashed and shook her around, staggering back several steps as its insides were burnt.

Sadly, the creature didn't explode in a rain of guts and scales as Ilea had hoped for. There did seem to be some damage however.

Before she could use the spell again with a reasonable charge, the beast threw her away.

It snarled and hissed at the air, the unfamiliar feeling of its damaged insides disorienting the creature.

Ilea wasn't one to ignore an opportunity, blinking on top of the Wyvern and holding on to its neck with both arms.

Her limbs extended and slashed at the strong scales protecting its wings. Two of them formed a shredder like collar on the base of its neck, scraping against it.

In the meantime, destructive healing mana pulsed into the Wyvern. As well as Storm of Cinders from all the limbs lashing into it.

The beast turned and trashed, slamming Ilea into the stone. Cones of fire were released but nothing reached her.

A sudden sphere of fire extended around the Wyvern, burning away Ilea's ash armor and a chunk of her skin.

She nearly lost her grip due to her muscles getting melted but held on thanks to her third tier recovery. *Found your weakspot, fucker.*

Its eyes were bloodshot already, all the mana slowly damaging its insides.

The heat wave followed again, several times as it attempted to shake the annoying healer off.

Yet she held steady, an iron grip around the Wyvern's neck, her mana recovering with every blast of fire. *You're only making yourself die faster.*

Ilea's own heat wave extended, barely doing any damage to its powerful hide. *Catelyn seemed to be right.* She smirked, feeling the creature panic.

There was nothing it could do however.

Ilea's physical damage as well as her fire damage was shrugged off easily but mana intrusion was another beast entirely. One the Wyvern apparently had no answer against.

It staggered towards the cliff before jumping off, scraping Ilea on the side of it.

They entered the mist together, Ilea simply holding on. By now they were falling instead of flying.

Several seconds went by, Ilea preparing herself for the impact. *Now.*

She moved her wings around herself right before the weight of the creature slammed her into the stone.

All the air was pushed out of her lungs, the grip on its neck loosening for a moment.

Ilea grasped at air, seeing the Wyvern appear next to her. She blinked away from the claws slamming into the stone, the beast once more appearing before her.

It snapped down, dodging her extended arm as several ashen limbs slashed into its bloody jaw and tongue.

Teeth scraped against ashen armor before Ilea blinked again.

She felt claws dig into her back, fast and deep. The ground came to her face as she was pushed down.

Destructive mana flowed into the creature still, making it release her a moment later.

Ilea stood up, the fatal wounds on her back closing quickly. Swaths of blood covered the ground and the Wyvern's claws.

She cracked her knuckles when the beast collapsed.