

## Chapter 384 Drawn to the Flame

“Why were there so many squirrels left and only so few spirits and bears?” Ilea asked as Catelyn was cleaning up with her fire.

The flames licked the trees surrounding them but none actually went alight.

“Maybe they hid and were infected later, found by one of the corrupted.” Maro suggested. “Otherwise they would have followed the Veramath up. I’m pretty sure about that.”

“Possibly.” Catelyn said. “It is good they are dealt with.”

Ilea checked through the notifications but found only kill messages, no skill or class levels rising. There had simply been too few enemies to face.

Again, she thought she saw something in her sphere. This time she blinked and spread her wings, seeing a flying forest spirit facing her as it drifted away.

**[Night Forest Spirit – lvl ??]**

*Not corrupted.*

“Hey! Wait, what are you doing?” Ilea shouted after it as she slowed down, not about to lose her group on a wild goose chase.

No answer came as the spirit vanished into the darkness. *Not worth the experience. Seems like it’s just observing? Or is it a trap?*

“Ilea?” Catelyn asked when she landed once more. “What did you see?”

“A spirit, uncorrupted. It’s following us, observing.” She replied and crossed her arms.

“Hunting?” Niivalyr asked. “It would have struck amidst our battle.”

“Maybe. We know little of these creatures. Perhaps they understand that we are purging the corrupted.” Ilea suggested, looking up.

“Could some of them be Dark Ones?” Maro asked. Three damaged wood spirits were floating behind him, controlled by his necromancy. It seemed he had stored the demonic skeleton again or it had been destroyed in one of the battles.

“Surely.” Catelyn said. “Yet if they do not initiate communication, I won’t offer it either. Come on, we are here with a purpose.” She walked on, her form small once more.

It had already been well over ten hours since they ventured down the Veramath tunnel, none of them showing signs of exhaustion.

Lucas grabbed a couple of branches and pieces of splintered bark, turning it over in his hands. Magic lit up from time to time as he muttered to himself.

Ilea smiled and focused forward again. “Know anything about the next one?” She asked, the question directed at Ilea.

“An abyss. The moths are likely from there. Let us hope we do not get swarmed.” He said, apprehension in his voice.

Ilea nodded and followed in silence. No sign of a following spirit showed itself until they reached the lowest part of the pitch black forest, if Ilas could be believed.

Earth made way for stone as the constructed separation became visible.

Light traveled easier once more, Ilea's eyes watering slightly at the sudden brightness of everything.

"Marvelous." Lucas said, still staring at his little collection of bark.

Ilas led them to cracks in the stone, crevices as wide as two meters. Nothing was visible beyond, just darkness.

Catelyn looked down and started floating. "Lucas. I doubt sealing more pathways will benefit us much from now on. Already there is too much area for us to cover alone. If you don't desire to delve deeper, you might want to leave now. Protecting you will become a liability soon."

The man looked up from his bark and nodded. "I would like to continue. There is no need for protection however. I will defend myself or escape if necessary."

"What if you lose control?" Maro asked. "Like you did in Lisburg?"

The elder hesitated. "Just leave me behind. Or use me to lure the corrupted."

"Dangerous... but a distraction could be worth the trouble." Niivalyr said and nodded.

"All of you can fly?" Ilas asked as he looked down into one of the cracks.

Nobody answered with a no, the dark one grunting approvingly before he started floating down the opening.

Ilea followed down, her wings moving silently through the air as she came out into open air.

Immediately, she felt lighter, less cramped in somewhere. *Fucky forest*. She looked up and watched Lucas float down.

Balls of bright light formed out of nowhere, floating through the air and into the distance.

Catelyn kept her fire close, the brightness not reaching far enough to really make a difference.

A strong wind brushed past the group, coming from below. They braced themselves against it, their success depending on each of their individual flying skills.

Ilas had a hard time against the wind, as did Elfie.

Perhaps it was simply because they were not yet above level three hundred. Maybe their flying magic just wasn't as good or at the same skill level as the others.

"Hey." Ilea started and looked into the distance, squinting her eyes. "Didn't moths really like light?"

"They do." Maro said and chuckled.

"We're going to get swarmed. Some of them are close to level four hundred. Note the exits and run if they overwhelm you." Catelyn said and floated a little farther ahead.

"I'll try to draw them to me but I doubt it'll be as easy as with beasts on the ground." Ilea said and followed Catelyn.

Another strong gust of wind brushed over them, this time coming from the side. *Is this natural?* Ilea wondered as she looked towards the source, not seeing far in the darkness.

The hum of moving wings became audible then, each of them preparing as Lucas flew back up to the cracks leading into the fifth layer and its forest.

Ilea smiled and waited, her wings slowly moving in the wind as her Heart of Cinder charged. An aerial battle was something new to experience and she was ready to rip out some wings.

*Would be cooler if they weren't overgrown moths.* She sighed at the thought and saw them approach.

A blink brought her into the masses, at least a dozen of the massive creatures visible in her sphere.

She dodged the wind blades clearly discernible within her sphere, letting those impact that her Azarinth Fighting skill made out to be harmless as her ashen limbs cut into their thin wings and bodies.

Eyes and wings were cut through, the corrupted beasts having little sense of self preservation other than attacking from a distance.

Not a problem for the healer who simply moved closer with her teleport. Heart of Cinder released into a cluster, disintegrating a group and clipping at least four wings of those that managed to avoid the cone like beam.

One of the monsters tackled her from the side, its sharp teeth and claws digging into the ash as its body was perforated by sharp dark gray tendrils.

A punch with Storm of Cinders and her destruction spell sent a wave of mana into and through its head. The course suddenly changed as a volley of wind blades slammed into the dead creature, some of them cutting into Ilea's wings.

A blink brought her up once more, the corpse slowly falling into the darkness below. Ashen wings reformed before she sped up once more, focused on where the attacks had come from.

The beam and fire attacks of her team flashed up, already hundreds of meters away. She wasn't too concerned with them, flying towards the attacks still aimed at her.

Some of them hit, digging into her defenses. Ilea smirked and pushed on, moving in a straight line as dozens of wind spells cut and slashed into her, pushing her back down.

She used her healing spell to make her wings and armor regenerate near instantly, keeping it active as the cost was more than covered by her mana recovery coupled with whatever she absorbed from the enemy attacks.

*There is no stopping me.* The thought made her smirk broaden as she pushed on, blinking from time to time to at least make some distance.

Heart of Cinder started damaging her, eight of her limbs moving ahead before she released the heat, trying to focus it into a smaller cone.

To her surprise, it worked somewhat. It wasn't comparable to one of Catelyn's or even Maro's attacks but the cone was considerably smaller and more focused.

The range in turn was increased, the beam reaching the attacking group of Corrupted Moth Divers. Only two were killed but otherwise the spell would have been completely wasted.

*Could just charge it more at this point.* She blinked again and finally reached the beasts again.

Ashen spears maimed the beasts, those closer ripped through by her ten meter ranged limbs. Every four to six seconds, a bright cone of fire and heat burnt whatever was in its path.

Their wind spells came from various directions now, Ilea moving her body in the slightest way not to get thrown off her course.

Azarinth Fighting not only informed her about how much and what kind of damage an enemy attack would do, it also simply let her know that an attack was coming at all.

With her speed and perception, she could easily adjust her stance and wings to make most attacks simply slash into her armor.

Normally, someone would prefer to lose balance over severe damage but to Ilea it was of course the exact other way around.

She watched as one of the moths was impacted by another, a faint glow of necromantic mana visible when the two passed in her sphere.

*He's fucking reviving them up here.* Ilea smiled and blinked up, a sphere of heat exuding before she twirled, ashen limbs cutting into the heavily burnt beasts.

They weren't very durable considering their rather high level. Her ashen limbs and spears still injured them heavily.

*Maybe their wind magic is supposed to be damaging.* She chuckled to herself as another four blasts impacted, not even cutting through her ash.

Not seeing any more of them nearby, Ilea made her way back to the far away group, their spells still impacting the moths flying around them.

She blinked a couple times and focused on Elfie who had blood dripping down from one of his legs.

"Did you get hit?" She asked as an ashen limb extended and started healing him. A nasty cut going nearly to the bone was clearly discernible to her skill.

"The barrier broke." The elf replied and moved his hands to shield the others.

Maro avoided most of the strikes but his armor showed shallow cuts as well.

She moved on and appeared near Catelyn, her massive form an easy target despite her speed. Compared to Maro and Elfie, she at least had a higher level.

Dozens of cuts were visible to Ilea as she got closer, most of them already closing again. Her own healing mana helped speed up the process as the fox released several beams onto the moths.

"Where's Ilas?" She asked, looking around.

Catelyn pointed one of her tails towards a cluster of moths that seemed to focus on themselves. She released two small fast flying spheres of fire that exploded in blinding light mere moments later.

Ilea squinted her eyes but couldn't make out the dark one. She did however see one of the moths suddenly losing a wing before it started to fall.

"There." Catelyn pointed again, a group of seven flying beasts approaching.

Ilea nodded and shot off, blinking thrice to reach the creatures. A cone of heat killed three, her limbs killing another one before her spears burrowed through two more.

The last moth was burnt through by a purple beam, its head decaying quickly before it fell.

She looked for more but found the last couple scattering into blood and bits by fiery explosions.

*Level three to four hundred creatures.* Ilea thought and shook her head. *Traveling with some pretty terrifying people here.*

“All of them?” She asked when she arrived back with the group.

Ilas showed up then, a little unsteady as he floated closer.

An ashen limb extended and healed the damage. Deep cuts into his back and one of his legs. His armor was slowly repairing itself.

“Timeless armor?” She asked and smiled when he perked up.

“I thank thee.” The dark one said with an exhausted voice.

**[Warrior – lvl 266]**

*Another six levels since we were in the first layer.* Ilea envied him a little. On the other hand, the monsters would only get stronger.

“My chest piece is indeed of timeless quality. A gift from my... benefactor.” Ilas replied as he sighed, in control of his flight once more as his wounds had been healed.

Maro had risen to level three fourteen and Elfie was close to his evolution at two ninety eight.

Ilea smiled at him, hoping he would receive something as cool as she did.

“What?” He hissed as he stared at her, checking his armor for damage and summoning a small glass bottle, lifting his mask to drink from it.

“Why so pissy?” Ilea asked and watched six barriers suddenly appear in front of her, the group slashing into her ashen armor. A puff of ash was raised as her defenses regenerated near instantly.

Ilea chuckled. “Maybe after your evolution you’ll be able to bite a little deeper.” She teased and heard him hiss again.

Catelyn gave her a disapproving look but didn’t say anything, looking around before she watched Lucas hover down again through the crack above.

“Are we clear?” He shouted.

“Yes. For now.” Maro replied, sending out his necromantic moths to scout ahead.

Ilas watched them pass. “Can you see through their eyes, as if they were thine?” The question was directed at the necromancer.

“No.” Maro replied. “But I can tell when one of them dies... well dies again. Tells me what I need to know.”

“Their eyes are good. I doubt there are many more, corrupted that is.” Catelyn said and floated ahead into the open space. “We move down. Ilas, beyond this point we have little information, is that correct?”

Ilea snorted. *Not like we had much before.* She waved off Catelyn’s stare and followed.

“Indeed. Even scavengers dare not move past this point, climbing down and up incredibly difficult without flying skills.” He looked up and pointed at the roots breaking through parts of the ceiling. “I believe some have tried fixing ropes and chains to the roots. Yet I have not heard of someone succeeding.

*Why would anyone go down here without a flying skill?* Ilea wondered. Terok and his then crew had attempted to get into the Penumra dungeon and all they had gotten was poison.

*This expedition is the same I suppose.* People focused more on the riches and artifacts they could find than the monsters they could fight. *Remember, not everyone is out here to collect resistances and levels.*

It was a byproduct of dungeon delving of course but even members of the Hand were usually on missions that paid in gold, not in experience alone.

“We haven’t found shit yet, how can someone justify going down here instead of literally anywhere else?” Ilea asked. None of the monsters had dropped anything and while the meat and parts would probably sell, she was pretty sure the dangers weren’t worth it. Not for someone close to or slightly above two hundred.

“It is a competition as much as it is a business.” Ilas replied to her musings. “Unearthing the mysteries of the past or finding a powerful artifact can change the very life of an individual, perhaps even those of a whole town.”

“Like releasing a corruption that might kill everyone?” Maro asked in a sarcastic tone. “I can see the appeal.” He added and must have rolled his eyes under his helmet.

Ilea saw that one of his antlers was chipped when she glanced his way.

“Not all secrets are boons. Some shall remain hidden and forgotten.” Ilas replied.

“Who hides all this shit?” Ilea asked and squinted down at an imaginary entity hiding cursed gear, poison traps and corruption in the depths of dungeons.

“Ancient civilizations, powerful magic scholars far beyond our understanding. Godlike creatures that have attained intelligence. Priests, hiding away the cursed evil they found or created.” Ilas answered seriously, glancing at Ilea and then Maro before he nodded.

“I see, it was a question asked in jest.” He confirmed his understanding and looked down too.

“Perhaps we shall find the perpetrator of this unholy curse.”

Catelyn started floating downwards, her form shrinking once more now that they were out of battle.

“Unholy?” Ilea asked as she followed, her gaze upon Ilas. “Are you part of a religion?”

“Religion? You mean the school and following of a specific deity or a group thereof?” He paused and floated downwards. “No. I merely see the corruption of beast and thinking creature as an act against the very fabric on which we tread.”

“The balance of magic.” Elfie said.

“A peculiar description but yes, I suppose it is fitting.” Ilas commented.

The elf hissed in turn and just shook his head as he too descended, the whole group now following Catelyn.

Ilea took the moment of quiet to check her few gains. No class levels again, despite many of the kills being her own. At least she was fairly sure the next level up was close.

***‘ding’ ‘Wind Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 8’***

**'ding' 'Blink reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 13'**

“Hey, guys. Can third tier skills level past twenty? Or are there fourth tier skills after that?” Ilea asked suddenly, seeing some of her third tier ones were approaching twenty already.

She knew there was still progress to be had when a skill was capped but seeing the number just sitting there was a little annoying.

It would take considerable time to just reach the third tier in her existing skills. If there was a fourth tier, and she assumed there was, it would take exponentially longer to get there.

“They do move past twenty.” Catelyn supplied. “I have yet to reach another limit with my highest skill.”

“And where are you at with that one?” Ilea asked excitedly, flying around the fox as if she was an annoying fairy.

“You will find out in time, young healer.” Catelyn replied, mischievousness flashing in her eyes.

“Don’t give me that young shit, just tell me.” Ilea said and twirled backwards, ashen tendrils moving through the air.

“It’s at twenty eight.” Catelyn replied with a sigh. “We should focus, the ground is near.”

Ilea chuckled and turned downwards. *That’s good news.*