

She wasn't sure. He was strong and even now he would have beaten each of them individually. Did they win together? Or was he simply satisfied with their performance?

It didn't matter. They had received their next objective. The six initial hours were still running. They had to return to Aki or perhaps even Ravenhall before that time had passed.

"Should we assist him?" Chana asked.

"No. Let go of your spell once we have reached the dungeon entrance," Vienna said and motioned for them to continue without delay.

Elias checked his arm, making sure there hadn't been any issues with the reattachment, fist closing and opening.

Chana could regrow his arm had he lost it but it would've taken considerably more time and mana.

"It's dark," Chana said.

The entrance lead into a cavern that went nearly straight down.

***'ding' 'You have entered the Veiled Abyss dungeon'***

"Unfamiliar," she said.

The others confirmed.

"Torch," she said, watching Chana retrieve one.

A touch by Vienna ignited the tool before it was placed into the stone armor of Chana, a socket having formed.

Vienna didn't need the additional light but the others would benefit, at least until they knew what they were dealing with. Visual cues and information was important, with an unfamiliar dungeon and the monsters within.

She motioned downwards, the three of them jumping after one another, with Chana going first.

The woman had the highest chance surviving a powerful blow from a monster beyond their capabilities.

The group landed on near black rock, within a tight crevice.

Chana led the way with her stone spear in hand, the flames of her torch reflected on the shimmering runes glowing on her stone armor.

"Mana? Thirty five," Vienna said.

"Fifty," Chana said.

"Sixty five," Elias added.

Vienna had a way to gauge their resources but it was always better to be precise.

"We rest for ten minutes," she said.

They continued, knowing that the group would only rest in a space where a battle could take place. A tight crevice was no such place.

Luckily the cavern opened up after a few minutes of careful teleports and climbing, letting the group take a short breather to regain their lost mana.

“More crevices ahead,” Chana said, on one knee with her spear at the ready.

“Noise?” Elias asked.

“What about our retreat?” Vienna asked.

“It’s all stone,” Chana said.

It was a risk. The monsters here could have a way to manipulate stone too, or to move through it unimpeded. But they had a solid position here, with enough space to fight mostly efficiently. The way forward looked similarly difficult to handle. And they had to move forward.

“Noisy,” Vienna confirmed.

Chana cupped her mouth and shouted.

The group didn’t have to wait long for the response, the question if the dungeon could perhaps be uninhabited answered immediately.

Weird slushing sounds came from the crevice ahead, stone spikes forming along the exit.

Chana added a simple wall in front of Vienna, the latter taking a position at the back of their group.

A horse like skull slid out of the crevice, blackened and covered in dripping black sludge. Tendrils of the muddy liquid pushed past, slithering behind the form as it pushed itself forwards through the narrow passage.

### ***[Veiled Praenar – lvl 242]***

Ashen projectiles impacted the creature immediately, followed by stone spikes pushing into it from the very corridor it had pushed through.

The Praenar pushed ahead, not showing a reaction to the attacks in the slightest.

More monsters were slithering through the passage, trying to push past the sludge of the first.

Chana extended her earth magic use as Vienna shot arrow after arrow into the approaching creatures.

Their last member stayed put for now, preserving his mana not to get in the way of the others. He had taken a position close to the crevice, ready to join the fray when the first monster managed to push itself through.

The first three died before managing such, the sludge sliding down on the walls.

A fourth monster managed to exit without receiving enough damage, the black sludge expanding as it took the form of a horse, tendrils of dripping sludge slithering outwards.

Projectiles impacted it immediately, Elias now attacking the monster directly.

His armor was instantly damaged by dozens of hardened tendrils that lashed out at him, a few drawing blood as he continued his assault, intruding mana eating up the creature from the inside.

The creature fell, Elias retreating to heal his wounds as the others continued their ranged attacks.

Only three more of the monsters showed themselves, unable to break through the stone obstacles Chana had prepared for them.

“All of them?” Elias asked after he had finished the last creature with a punch, its skull just about to pop out.

“We’re done, yes,” Vienna confirmed, not using a sign this time as additional confirmation that it was safe.

The trio explored the dungeon for the better part of an hour, fighting a few more of the creatures that now only came at them individually.

It didn’t take them long to map out the main tunnels and crevices, quickly finding the cavern they were looking for.

“What do you think?” Elias asked, looking into the dark cave as he squinted his eyes.

“There’s something at the center. A sphere. Magical,” Vienna said.

“Nothing has reacted to our approach,” Chana said.

“Something is in there... there’s more of the black ooze the Praenar were made of,” Vienna said.

“Set up traps Chana, in case we have to retreat. I expect the most powerful monster in this dungeon to reside here.”

“Should we fight it?” Elias asked.

“That depends,” Vienna said, squinting as she used all her perception abilities to pierce through the veil of darkness.

The sphere shimmered lightly, placed atop a simple stone altar. Around it there was only darkness. She smelled and heard the black ooze dripping to the ground, unsure where it came from exactly.

“Our mission is to retrieve the orb but if we can kill whatever is in there, we do that too. Same priorities as always. If we fail here, we can try again some other time. Take adequate risks,” she said, trusting her companions to make the right choices.

If the monster was beyond them or if there were too many, they would assess if taking the orb was a possibility. If it wasn’t, they’d retreat and regroup, or flee if nothing else was possible.

She signaled them to go forward, Chana taking the lead with her skin turned to stone to make sure an unexpected initial strike wouldn’t be quite as devastating.

“Ash,” Elias said after a few steps into the cavern.

The torch now illuminated most of the area.

Vienna saw the orb more clearly now, and something large lying behind the altar. An oozing blob of dark matter. The ground nearby was covered in ash.

“There’s a skull he-” Chana said, pointing at a large horse like skull, one side entirely shattered.

Vienna looked around the room, not finding anything but feeling the use of magic. Something was definitely here, staying just out of her spherical perception.

“Smoke out,” she said, the group preparing spells to find the hidden being.

Vienna saw the ash on the ground suddenly move, going up behind Chana before it wrapped around the torch.

The woman reacted in time, jumping away before a black tendril lashed out from behind her, cutting the torch from her shoulder before it was covered in ash, the light going out instantly.

She heard the sound of various spells, shifting ash and stone, a breeze from Elias' magic.

Her own arrows were prepared as well. "Together."

The others joined her position, back to back as a circular wall of ash formed around them. Vienna had moved away the ash below. She saw the sphere shift, the top of the altar broken off and now carrying the relic through the air.

A sudden low growl reverberated through the cavern.

***'ding' 'You have heard the growl of a dangerous predator – You resist its effects'***

Vienna tried to make out where the sound had come from, feeling an aura expand from her right.

She could feel the fear take root in her mind. A panic tried to take over her mind, one that came from a deep instinctual realization that this creature was the hunter. And they were its prey.

Meditation activated immediately, a soothing power emanating from Chana to her left.

"Fear not the dark," she said, giving her spell form as the walls around them flared up with runic light.

The illumination didn't last long, showing the ash that surrounded them. An all encompassing mist.

They had trained often with ash. At the beginning with Lilith but later on with their own abilities, or meditating in a room covered in it. Each Sentinel had their own connection to it, positive or not.

Vienna tried to take over, tried to move the mist to reveal their enemy but she couldn't.

*It's her.*

She didn't have time asking herself more questions.

Lances of ash came from within the mist, breaking through the defensive walls with explosive power.

"Retreat!" she shouted, still unable to pierce the ash with her abilities. Something lit up to her right.

*Magic.*

She saw it now, amidst the darkness floated a winged creature with sixteen limbs, heat and magic now flowing freely from its core.

And then it was gone.

Vienna vanished at the same time as the others did, appearing outside of the cavern with the orb in hand.

She was about to gesture to the others when the sights in front of her changed once more.

Vienna was back in the cave, upside down nonetheless.

*She teleported us back? How?*

There was no time to think, the woman using air step once to reach the ground in a crouch.

She made a clicking sound, two others resounding nearby. The ash didn't hinder her perception but it seemed Elias was out of her limited range.

Vienna saw the attack coming before it happened, ducking under the fist before she used her elbow to strike back.

To her surprise, her arm connected. Her eyes opened wide, already comprehending what would happen next.

Something grabbed her arm and twisted it in an unnatural way.

Air step activated and pushed against the being, ripping herself free at the cost of a broken arm and shoulder. Her pain had already been deactivated. There was no need for it here.

She used her teleportation again once it became available, the order to retreat still very much active.

This time the three appeared in the open tunnel outside without disappearing again immediately. The problem however was that someone else had joined them.

They split up immediately, Elias weaving himself through the ashen tendrils as she herself tried to avoid them with air step.

Her stomach was pierced, the ash moving through entirely before it flung her to the side, her back hitting the stone wall with a slight crunch.

She coughed up blood, assessing her injuries as her healing activated.

Elias had somehow avoided the strikes, still in the process of dodging the fast moving limbs.

Vienna could only watch as Lilith deflected each of Chana's spear thrusts with expert moves, closing the distance with three quick steps before her fist snapped out and cracked her teammate's armor.

Chana slid back on the ground, staying on her feet before she coughed out blood.

Vienna held up her arm and formed as many projectiles as she could, aiming them not at Lilith but the tendrils moving out on her back.

The monster glanced at her, moving her wing lazily to the side to catch the ash, a few of her limbs swaying towards Vienna.

Elias didn't waste the moment, appearing in front of Lilith to allow the others time to heal. He attacked with a few fainty before Lilith struck back.

He managed to deflect the blow, twirling to keep his balance as he expected to dodge the ashen limbs.

They weren't there anymore however, both wings and tendrils gone as the founder charged.

Vienna had fixed her back by now, the bleeding stopped but the wound still regenerating. She formed her bow nonetheless, charging a volley as she watched Elias desperately dodge and deflect the woman's attacks.

He adjusted his arms before the strikes came but Lilith did the same, finally hitting his chest with a direct blow.

Stone spikes forced her back, Chana catching Elias with one arm.

Vienna appeared next to them, keeping her volley at the ready for now.

They knew Lilith was playing with them. And they didn't waste the chance, Vienna dropping an ash mist bomb as they fled. They kept their teleports at the ready, in case Lilith would use her own ability to move them.

Quick decisive movements brought them up through the dungeon, Vienna at the front now, having memorized the layout. More ashen mist spread out every few seconds, to both divert and mask their retreat.

She noticed that the sphere was gone now but it didn't matter. This was not an enemy they could or should face, no matter the objective. It was simply unreasonable.

"Mana? Fifty," she asked as they climbed, floated, and burrowed out of the dungeon.

"Sixty," Elias said.

"Twenty," Chana said.

They rushed out of the dungeon and onto the frozen plateau where both Aki and Trian were waiting for them.

Vienna gestured to the right, the team moving close together as they circled the two faculty members to bring them between the likely position of their pursuer.

*Failed to retrieve the orb... but we survived without major injuries.*

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Ilea stood in the cave, holding her fire orb before she made it vanish.

"They didn't even test their strength against me," she murmured. "Boring."

The group of students had fled immediately. *As soon as that woman realized who they faced.*

She glanced towards the cavern behind her. "If only you had been a little weaker. Would've been more interesting than fighting them myself."

*Oh well.*

She used her teleportation a few times until she was out of the caverns, appearing on the plateau.

Ilea watched the three students rush to a position behind Trian and Aki.

*Hmm?*

"The test is over, Sentinels," Trian called out.

She saw them relax a little. Just a little. Their eyes were focused on her ash covered form. *Not so unique anymore. Well it doesn't matter much. Maybe people can stop bothering me now that there are other versions of me out there.*

Ilea grinned to herself and joined her friends. "How did they do?"

Trian glanced at her with confusion. “Eh... you were supposed to determine that. Did they fight the highest level monster?”

“No. I fought it for a while and thought it unreasonable. It was at five eighty. Very nasty in that small cavern,” she said.

The man looked at her but didn’t say anything.

*Disappointed? In me, the creature, or the students?*

“Report,” Trian said.

The ash bow woman approached a little closer and started telling him everything that happened as soon as they had entered the dungeon. Each enemy killed, their status throughout, injuries received, and spells cast.

*How diligent.*

“Explain your decision to leave behind the orb,” Trian said after she was done.

“Lilith was our enemy. Any objectives but survival of the team and self were discarded immediately,” the woman said, giving Ilea a quick glance.

*I need to watch out for that one, before she murders me in my sleep for the greater good,* Ilea thought and squinted back.

The woman immediately looked at the ground, her heart rate increasing slightly.

“Well done, Sentinels,” Trian said. “You managed to reach this place in an exceptional time frame, you scouted the area and managed to immobilize a level three hundred Centurion without giving him an opening. You cleared out the dungeon with quick reasonable decisions and decisive strikes. You found the mission objective and evaluated the enemy. You supported each other and kept a cool head despite the obvious danger and gave up the objective based on your evaluation and experience.

“You pass the exam and thus receive the rank of Hunter,” Trian said with a bright smile. “Return to the headquarters and write your reports. Time is still ticking.”

The woman nodded before making a few gestures, the three of them leaving in a wide arc to avoid the three evaluators.

“Holy shit,” Ilea exclaimed as she put both hands behind her head. “What did you create?”

Trian grinned. “We simply gave them the tools. It was clear that this team was ready, but we still needed a test of sorts. To think they didn’t even flinch at your aura.”

“A proud moment, to be bested by my own students,” Aki said, touching his metal face as if he was about to cry.

“It’s alright,” Ilea said, patting his steel back as she floated next to him. He was much taller than her with this new body of his.

“I know you held back considerably,” Trian said with a sigh.

“I did NOT!” Aki said, much like a liar would.

“It doesn’t matter,” Trian said. “They would have passed even if you had taken them apart.”

“I only held back a little,” Aki said, pouting. Somehow.

“Are you convinced about the missions now?” Trian asked.

Ilea glanced over. “Hey it’s been a while since I’ve seen them. Of course I am. Do you remember our first Shadow assignment?”

The man frowned. “Nearly died to those spirits, if it hadn’t been for Eve.”

“Hmm,” Ilea mused.

“It’s a little embarrassing to be honest. Don’t ever tell them about that mission... not after this display,” Trian murmured.

Ilea laughed. “We didn’t die then. Sometimes you just meet a monster you can’t defeat, and that’s okay.”

He grunted.

“I’m proud of you,” she said and touched his shoulder with a smile.

“Shall we then?” Trian asked. “I’d think the others are ready by now.”

Ilea nodded. She had informed Claire and Trian about most of her new information from Erendar and Hallowfort but more apparently needed to be discussed. Ilea just wasn’t entirely sure why she had to be there.