

The book of Ilea grows, she thought as she scrolled up to see her stat points. She hid the General skills again on the way there.

303 points available, she thought and spent five to get Vitality to 1000.

'ding' 'You have reached 1000 Vitality. One Core skill point awarded'

Ah fuck it.

A hundred points went into Intelligence.

'ding' 'You have reached 1000 Intelligence. One Core skill point awarded'

There was an argument to be made for spending her stat points during her battles as soon as they became available but if anything, the already questionable level of danger would be even further reduced.

Plus she enjoyed actually seeing the progress of several weeks of training compared to the incremental and barely noticeable changes each level up provided.

Endurance isn't exactly necessary... the regeneration is insane with my third tier Meditation. Strength and Dexterity... they're all falling behind but isn't that the point? I do need a certain level to move efficiently, to make use of the various multipliers but in the end my spells use mana, my life depends on health, and my damage comes from Intelligence.

She liked the idea of at least getting her lower stats to five hundred but for now she focused on her main attributes. *The bonus from Reversal for both Destruction and Reconstruction is also something to consider but is it really worth it? I get a one percent increase for four points. Or even eight, once Endurance catches up with Dexterity.*

Each point of Intelligence adds ten points with all the buffs. It's still kind of intangible. Wisdom and Vitality just straight up increase my resources.

She decided to put a hundred points into Wisdom and ninety points into Vitality. Five points went into Endurance and three points she kept. *Just in case I really need a sudden incredible power boost.*

The suns were still high on the horizon, so she quickly checked on the Dark Ones.

Air good, health good, distress... acceptable, she thought and looked through the group. They tensed up a little whenever she was close. Ilea didn't know if it was an instinct thing, the fact that she had killed Zaiked, or something to do with her contact to Meadow.

It might've also been a result of her Veteran bonuses. The creatures were definitely more experienced than most humans when it came to high level monster exposure.

She left again to take a walk on the surface of the abused northern landscape.

Ilea displaced a bunch of stones, throwing them at larger rocks until the sky darkened, the familiar growl of an arcane storm moving closer.

Hmm

She formed a ten by ten meter field of distorted space above her, facing upwards. A second distorted space came to be around fifty meters away, aiming at a particularly large boulder.

The first few bolts of arcane lightning missed her unfortunately. The sixth strike came and vanished through space, cracking sideways into the boulder.

A loud explosion of rock and arcane resounded before a shower of stone chunks hit everything in a large circle.

Ilea dispelled her third tier displacement, using the normal version of the spell at the same time to make a few larger chunks of rock appear somewhere else.

“Not so strong now, are you?” she asked, looking up at the storm.

The storm didn’t answer her. Ilea assumed it simply didn’t speak Standard.

A few strikes cracked the stone close by, the shock waves managing to push her away but not enough to damage her body anymore. Her armor coupled with all the shock absorption and resistances proved enough to resist it.

She felt the strike come, holding up her hand before the bright snake of arcane energy slashed down at her with incredible speed.

Ilea found it too fast to displace, or perhaps just too powerful.

Her third tier Azarinth Perception didn’t activate, the spell going through her in an instant. A part of the energy was deflected or pushed through entirely, slamming into the stone around her.

Resilience bonuses were supported by Arcane Resistance, a large chunk of mana fed back to her by Sentinel Core with a potential help of Lightning Resistance. The shock itself was reduced, as was the bright light, the loud noise, the heat the energy produced.

She looked at her hand, sparks and wisps of purple energy exuding outwards where her ash had been pierced, the burnt flesh below regrowing as her armor reformed above.

The damage had been nearly entirely reduced to pure health, similar to the arcane beams when she had Phaseshift active. The spell wouldn’t help her in this case, using up too much mana to keep up, its activation time too long to use as a counter.

She could however just use it while flying through the storms. The few seconds she would need to cover the distance would turn from slightly problematic to a complete breeze.

Could you do that? Ascended?

She looked up again, spreading her arms as the volatile energy dissipated into the land around her.

Could you face the wrath of the north without consequence?

The creature was a space and void mage, so she assumed it could deflect some of the strikes but to stand and take them? That required a little more than a few portal tricks.

She had her resistances in the third tier, against all the magic she had felt from the Ascended. And now she knew with reasonable certainty that fourth tier spells weren’t exactly common.

Ilea wasn’t sure how much damage the Ascended dealt but whatever it was, it would be significantly reduced.

She still wondered if she could escape the situation she had been in before, the way she was now and without the Baron’s help.

Her answer was a confident maybe.

Another set of evolutions and that would become even more confident, she thought and grinned when a strike slammed into her chest. The sheer force slammed her down to her knees but she was up and standing before the energy even fully dissipated.

'ding' 'Okay. You can pretty much ignore chaotic Arcane Storms – One Core skill point awarded'

Hmm... I wonder if I would have gotten this one in retrospect if I had unlocked them at a later time?

The achievements were somewhat unpredictable anyway. Why did it now only appear after the second strike she tanked? Was it her own conclusion? Her behavior? Or did the magic need confirmation?

Her health was full again in seconds, her healing and regeneration easily outpacing the storms.

Individually, the arcane lightning was much more devastating than the Astral Magic used by the level seven to eight hundred spirits in Erendar but the lightning wasn't channeled, nor were there six storms at the same time.

Man, I hope the Ascended didn't go to Hallowfort after I fled.

Ilea fucked around with her abilities for a few hours longer until night finally set over the north.

Miststalkers appeared from the forming lakes of mist, starting their ethereal dance in the apocalyptic terrain.

Ilea made sure the mist didn't seep into the Dark Ones' hideout before she displaced over half of them up and into the air. They had trained this maneuver in Erendar more than a few times, each of the creatures grabbing onto her ashen limbs.

Most of them weren't particularly heavy, except for the Rock Beetle. She'd likely have to do three trips in total, the last one solely for the large creature. Meadow had said it felt bad about its weight so Ilea made sure not to mention it.

She knew the general direction and plenty of landmarks on the way. Famine crows could become a problem but she never saw them fly quite as fast as her current limits.

Okay, let's pray I don't attract some ungodly four mark on the way, she thought and checked behind her.

The creatures were holding on, her ash moving around their bodies to provide even more stability. Both the weight and air resistance would slow her down but her wings had a ridiculous pull.

Ilea didn't quite manage to reach Tremor before the suns rose again, finding a secure location and marking another Dark One to be able to find it again.

She spent most of the day flying back, another two trips necessary until everyone was in the second location.

It took her nearly four hours to find Tremor on the fourth day of their travels, quickly checking the cathedral to find everything untouched from her last visit.

Now that I'm here, she thought, checking the sunlight as her eyes moved over the ancient Rhyvor city.

No more Knights patrolled the sunlit parts and just like before, there were no Soul Rippers visible in the higher parts of the city.

Last time I fought them I wasn't exactly as powerful as I am now, she thought. Was I close to three hundred? Not even everything in the third tier, let alone as highly leveled as I have them now. No third Class and all the related bonuses. No third tier resistances either.

She sat down in one of the broken windows of the cathedral and summoned her notebook. Flipping the pages, she soon found her notes from her level three hundred evolutions.

Oh boy.

No third tier Meditation. 7000 mana and just as much health.

Hmm... well put it on the list, she thought and made a note. Ilea was pretty sure she could kill Soul Rippers now. The question remained about how efficient the process would be and what their levels were actually at.

She refrained from jumping into the fray quite yet, not knowing how they would react to her killing one of them. Already she knew they would flee when they found themselves damaged too much. She wouldn't risk the Dark Ones for something like this. If they swarmed her like a bunch of wasps or even evaded the upper parts of Tremor, it simply wasn't worth it.

Ilea did blink a few times down into the dark zone of the city, quickly finding one of the creatures resting sideways on a wall, not a muscle of it moving.

[Soul Ripper – lvl ???]

Veteran informed her that the creature was at level six hundred.

Manageable, she thought. And barely worth it, really.

A part of her just wanted to explore the dungeon deep in these enormous caverns, to find a clue about who had brought them here, to see the real runes Captain Reyker had found with his team.

Her decision to refrain from killing any of the beings quite yet was only reinforced as time went by. If she somehow drew the perpetrator responsible for their appearance here, she would have another problem to deal with. No matter if it was the Ascended or something entirely different.

She found a few more of the beings, their levels ranging from five fifty to as high as eight hundred. Ilea wondered if the latter had any additional abilities compared to those she had fought previously.

Their movement and offensive potential was downright laughable, especially compared to her. As long as she managed to overwhelm their regeneration, she could kill them.

Can I win when I fight inside their swarm though, she wondered, floating in the darkness of Tremor. She could see them below, a few of them moving in the fields outside of the city walls. With her sight enhancing abilities and Eyes of Ash, she may as well have been outside.

I think they used Void but could only manifest it close to their heads. Which means limited range. Plus my resistance is in the third tier now. Could they even damage me? Even Astral Spirits have to work together to overwhelm my regeneration.

She decided that she couldn't know, not without fighting a few single creatures before.

Ilea explored a little more of the area, finding a broad river in the darkness, the water flowing in from a large opening in the stone. A large group of Soul Rippers signaled the likely location of their dungeon.

She felt a shiver go down her spine, flying upwards until she reached the cavern ceiling. Despite the enhanced sight, this place was still dark. The creatures looked creepy, her enhanced sight not exactly changing that fact.

Ilea doubted she was in much danger here but the darkness coupled with these otherworldly monsters retained their horror. An instinct Ilea doubted she could ever fully shake. *Fighting and killing them would certainly help to take away some of the effect.*

‘ding’ ‘Fear Resistance reaches lvl 12’

Oh, well done there Ilea, she thought and silently flew back to the cathedral.

The dungeon was arguably less creepy with the knights present in its street. Now it was just an eerie ghost town.

How many of these places remain in the north, untouched for thousands of years.

Ilea left Tremor again, finding it suitable to hold the Dark Ones. At least for now. She spent the next few hours flying around the immediate surroundings, checking various crevices, caverns, and tunnels for anything interesting.

The map of dungeons Elfie had shown her didn't show anything interesting close by and Ilea didn't want to get too far away from the Dark Ones, just in case they got into danger.

When night fell, she made the three short trips and continued alone to Hallowfort. The Dark Ones had been quite excited to be brought to the ancient city, after several days of mostly hiding in some dark caverns.

Ilea had warned them of the Soul Rippers through Meadow but she doubted the creatures would venture too deep into Tremor in the first place. They had survived in Erendar, their status as veterans just as justified as that of most experienced adventurers.

Ilea was prepared for everything, entering the tunnels leading to Hallowfort as silently as possible. All her senses were strained to their highest capability.

The trip was short and she soon appeared in the large crystal lighted cavern, the high reaching statue that held Hallowfort an unshakable beacon of civilization in these dangerous lands.

She instantly saw the reinforced walls, the armored guards patrolling on them and in the streets beyond. Dark Ones.

Ilea landed near the brittle bridge, already having gained the attention of a few armed warriors.

She smiled at the old wooden contraption, either left as it was due to a sense of sentimentality or perhaps as a trap for intruders that couldn't fly.

Beyond now stood a wall of stone, a shut gate right where the bridge ended.

“Ashen healer, you have returned!” one of the guards said, his whisper like voice traveling far.

“I suppose I have, steadfast warrior,” Ilea said, sadly having no idea who the creature was. The guards mostly wore heavy full plate steel armor, all in various shades of gray and black. Neither did they use names very often.

“Is she trustworthy?” another guard asked.

“She is,” a third one said as it signaled to someone behind the wall.

The gates opened up towards Ilea, a nearly three meter tall dark one built like a stone golem finished opening the gates before its one revealed eye blinked at her.

“I have opened the gates,” it spoke, the deep rumbling voice entirely too loud.

“That you have, strong opener of the gate,” Ilea said and walked towards them.

“The gates are open,” it added.

Ilea nodded. “That they are,” she said.

It was entirely unnecessary for her to even use the gate but she knew that at least many of those who became guardians in Hallowfort felt a deep pride for their profession. She wouldn't make the opener of gates feel obsolete.

After she went through, Ilea blinked up to the guard who had talked to her first.

“Catelyn still around?” she asked.

“The one blessed by fire remains. Shall we inform her of your coming?” the warrior asked.

“No need. Thanks,” Ilea said and blinked towards Catelyn's store. She just wanted to make sure nobody else had taken over in her absence.

How far did Elana push it? she wondered.

The Hunter's Den looked the same on the outside but Ilea noticed the increased magic from various new enchantments.

Not just the walls then, she thought.

A few dark ones bowed when they saw her pass.

She greeted them and went inside. Her sphere couldn't reach past the defenses anymore.

The inside looked much more orderly, about a dozen creatures working in the spacious room. Some were processing herbs, others monster pieces. A few were busy going through documents or books, three Dark Ones discussing a complex array of runes chiseled into a round piece of rock.

Catelyn herself was busy mixing something with both the corruption agent from the Descent and poison from the eight layer.

Ilea displaced herself in front of the large workbench and smiled below her armor.

“I do hope your alchemy skills have grown a little in the meantime,” she said.

Catelyn blinked, her small form looking up to meet Ilea's eyes.

Her left eyelid twitched once.

Ilea laughed when the fox roared and expanded, her arms hugging the monstrous form of fire that pushed her to the ground.

The Dark Ones close by quickly tried to put out the flames immediately spreading to various ingredients and furniture.

“There, there,” Ilea said, rubbing the hard flaming fur as the large claws dug into the ash on her chest.

Catelyn pushed her harder to the ground as she towered over her.

“You,” the fox growled, her head now close to Ilea’s. The large pointy teeth ground together, her breath enough to melt stone.

“Sorry for waiting so long,” Ilea said.

Catelyn removed her claws, lifting Ilea up like a puppy before she hugged her close to her own chest. Her head bumped the ceiling, water mages now present to fight the spreading flames.

Ilea was entirely wreathed in fire. *Warm*, she thought and closed her eyes, hugging the fox as her ash armor scraped against the enhanced fur.

“I was worried,” Catelyn whispered, the sound a low growl.

“Me too,” Ilea said. “I didn’t want to risk coming here.”

They stayed quiet for a minute.

“I know,” Catelyn said finally.

She slowly returned to her small form, her fire retreating.

Ilea’s ash did the same, their roles reversing until she held the fox close to her chest.

“Everyone, leave,” Catelyn said in her normal voice.

“The fires,” one of them said.

One of her tails moved, all the flames dying in the same instant.

The fox sighed when everyone was gone, cuddling closer to Ilea. “You owe me a lot of cake for all those headaches.”

Ilea smiled, petting her head as she sat down on the large workbench. “Of course I do.”