

Guess they're like nukes here. Ilea thought as another roar rolled through, closer now.

The paralyzing effect only lasted four seconds now.

'ding' 'Veteran reaches lvl 13'

"I have never truly understood the fear of dragons myself," Lucas started. "However their tales have survived over the millennia, mhm. Unlike other beasts that too destroyed whole cities."

"It is bad luck. We should not engage a Wyvern, its presence an omen of death," Ilas murmured from behind Catelyn.

"It's just a monster. Died and was corrupted even," Ilea said, touching its partially exposed skull. "You can leave anytime."

The Dark One was silent for a moment but shook his head. "I shall remain in the shadows. My power... is not sufficient anymore. If you wish me to leave, I shall do so."

"I don't care," Ilea said and tried removing the skull, finding it a challenging endeavor. "Oh hey... Maro, can you raise it?"

The necromancer sighed as he approached. "An omen of death... oh well," he lifted his hand, a pulse of magic rushing into the creature.

Maro seemed to struggle, more and more mana flowing into it.

Ilea was about to speak when she saw purple wisps come to life within the mangled skull.

Muscles rippled as the beast stood up once more. Two meters tall, it's wings each easily three meters wide.

Ilea took a step back. She had to lift her head up to stare at its skull. "Hmm," she mused with a grin. "Any idea what they can do? I asked before but has anyone fought one?"

"I have," Lucas said, his hesitation apparent. "A long time ago. They... teleport, quickly. Mhm... several times in a row. Their talons easily cut through my armor. Fire was however the most dangerous part. More powerful I think... than even you," he glanced towards Catelyn with the last mention.

"Sounds pretty straight forward," Ilea said and cracked her knuckles. "Maybe I can get my Heat Resistance up to level twenty."

"I will wait with Ilas. Perhaps we can build a small camp here," Lucas said as he looked around. "Mhm, yes. It is much friendlier than the previous layers. The vegetation too... speaks to me."

Ilea leaned over, her eyes widening. "Do the plants literally speak?"

Lucas just winked at her with a smile.

"They can fly... and if they're really as quick and powerful as Lucas suggests... maybe I should wait this one out too... if those we find remain free of corruption," Maro suggested. "Are you sure

you want to face them? Even if they can fight off their own corrupted?” his gaze was on Ilea, the man scratching the back of his helmet.

“You faced Soul Rippers... why stop at this?” Ilea was genuinely confused at that. These were just overgrown Drakes.

He offered no justification.

“My fire will be of little help,” Catelyn mused. “We should move farther down, explore more of the islands. Perhaps we can find out if they remain without corruption.”

What a fucking bummer. Ilea rolled her eyes, glancing at her last hope.

“I shall support you,” Elfie said. “Should you be able to fight them alone, I shall leave you to it.”

Bloody legend. Ilea thought and smiled brightly, blinking over and hugging the elf.

A powerful curse immediately spread within her as barriers snapped to existence between them.

“Please, respect my... personal space,” the elf said.

Ilea nodded. “Apologies,” she did feel a little bad, not getting the expected reaction out of him this time. “I meant well.”

“Noted,” he simply replied.

“Should we check the top of these islands first or move farther down this one? I can see some cracks leading down,” Ilea asked, looking over the group.

“It should be safer... to move above the mists,” Ilas said.

“Agreed,” Catelyn confirmed, waiting a moment for any objections. “Let’s hope they’re not all corrupted.”

Might be easier to fight if they’re frenzied, Ilea thought but she had a feeling the corrupted corpse suggested it wouldn’t exactly be that simple.

The closest islands were smaller than the one they had landed on before. Little to no inner workings compared to the cave with the dead creature.

Ilas and Catelyn checked the space between them and their next target and signaled the group.

All teleporting through the gap quickly, they reached a rather large island. This one even had small palm tree like fauna growing on it. Ferns and grass covered large sections of the nearly hundred meter wide plateau.

“Hide,” Maro whispered, vanishing farther into the ferns.

The rest followed, Ilea lying prone twenty meters further back right after she appeared.

A whooshing sound reached her ears. Familiar red wings were barely visible as they moved past nearly on the same height as the plateau.

[Cliff Wyvern - ???]

A roar resounded, the paralyzing effect passing once more. No sign of the creature remained.

Ilea waited a minute before she blinked closer to the edge, seeing only mist below.

She found the others in her sphere and blinked to Catelyn. "It left. Not corrupted," she whispered.

"Good," Catelyn said and sighed. "Do you see a way down?"

Ilea shook her head, her sphere not offering anything. "Let me check the whole area."

One blink followed the next as she moved over the plateau, remaining prone. The least she would do was make sure the others were somewhat safe before she engaged one of those creatures. *Should level Veteran until I can ignore their damn roars as well.*

She took a sip of poison and returned to Catelyn. "Found it. This way," she pointed and subsequently informed the others.

Maro and Ilas were already waiting near the crude stairs leading down into the stone.

"Probably not natural," Ilea said with a smile. "Oh, Lucas. Before we get into a fight, did you manage to win against the Wyvern you fought?"

The wood creator shook his head. "I have escaped with my life. Barely and not without help. Its level too remained hidden," he paused and gave her another look. "Even with all I have seen of you. I would suggest you wait... until you get stronger."

Ilea nodded and turned back towards the descending stairs. *Not the way to get stronger*, a near manic grin was on her face, hidden below her armor. The fights so far had been challenging but she always had a team behind her.

Even with the Shredders, she could trust Elfie and the others to intervene in case it became too dangerous. Perhaps they were reaching depths now, where them trying to help would only inconvenience her. What they lacked wasn't spell power or mobility, merely her durability and regeneration.

And if I can't beat one, I can use Elfie to get his curse. Sounds like an ok compromise. Ilea was brought back from her thoughts with the stench of blood and corruption in the air.

"Another corpse down here," she said.

"Several dozen," Maro supplied from behind.

The stairs opened up into a cavern similar in shape to the one they had found within the smaller island.

"There are runes here," Elfie said. "Deterrents, fear and pain,"

"I don't feel any of that," Ilea said as she turned to look at him.

The smell of blood and rot only got stronger as she moved through.

Elfie pointed to one of the cavern walls. "I do not believe these enchantments are meant for creatures of higher intellect. Something is hidden."

"Wyverns are rather Intelligent," Lucas said. "Yet I suppose they did not talk."

"Starting to believe you're on their side," Ilea said jokingly, walking to the indicated wall and brushing her ash over it.

“Mighty creatures, born of mana. Shaped to be perfect predators, their movements precise and deadly. They hunt and fight all they find. Mhm...,” Lucas said, smiling ever so slightly as he winked her way.

Ilea rolled her eyes. *Even odds then from him.* “I should at least get a species sympathy bonus,” she said, tapping the wall. “Anyone able to break the spell? I’d smash it otherwise.”

“If I had taken species into account, they would come out on top,” Lucas said.

“I’ll give it a shot,” Maro replied and stepped up to the wall. “The smell is different by the way, to the Wyvern that is.”

Ilea gave the creature a nod when it stepped up a little. *How did he manage to keep that thing hidden from the one flying past?*

A pulse of mana came from the wall before the illusion vanished.

Instantly, the smell intensified ten fold. Catelyn gagged and Ilas took several steps back. The rest remained untouched.

Says a lot about you mad fuckers, calling me a murder machine, she specifically glanced at Lucas.

She walked onward, another stairwell leading down. Her sphere had expanded as soon as Maro had broken the illusion.

Metal cages holding dead beasts, some simply sprawled on the ground while others had literally been ripped apart, from within or externally. It was hard to tell at this point.

Some of the beasts had been corrupted it seemed, the orange ooze still dripping from a few of them. Ilea saw some similarities but couldn’t tell if there were even two of the same species.

The space was circular, one more exit leading down, more cave like. A tunnel burrowed into the stone. With the size of the plateau above, Ilea was nearly certain the island expanded as it went further down, or it connected to the wall of the cavern.

Magical light was brimming above, not of the same nature as the technology they had found in the seventh layer.

“Most of them should be the same species. A bear like creature,” Maro supplied and looked up at the lights.

“These are lights similar to what I have seen before,” Elfie said. “They should require a manual mana supply. Be vigilant.”

“Not like the Wyverns are any less dangerous than whatever is in here,” Ilea commented.

Catelyn shook her head as she glanced over the scene.

The lack of tables and other utensils made it seem more like a boxroom instead of anything else.

Lucas closed his eyes and murmured something to himself.

“We will burn all this as soon as we are done,” Catelyn said, a glint of fury visible in her eyes.

Ilea nodded and went down the tunnel.

A couple minutes of walking later, it opened up into a somewhat vast cavern. Too expansive to reasonably be within the island or the pillar leading down.

The smell never really left.

Vegetation was abundant here too, more controlled it seemed, as well as bushes growing weird yellow fruit.

Most notable however were the buildings made of crude stone, rough and barely holding together. A fireplace, a simple forge as well as many other additions were strewn in the area.

Ilea perked up when she heard a hiss, coming from within one of the houses. The rectangular thing had an entrance but was missing a door.

A man appeared in the middle of the camp, glancing around frantically before his eyes met hers.

He wore tattered robes with fading white, red and golden colors. A once surely expensive garment. The robe was torn near his chest, revealing a straight line of pulsing orange, oozing out of the wound.

His hair was a mess, splatters of blood visible both on his robe as well as any revealed part of his skin.

[Corrupted Vampyr Thrall – lvl ???]

Oh, the thought went through her mind when the man vanished into a mist of red smoke, appearing right in front of her.

The familiar sensations of powerful life drain and mind magic immediately hit her, Ilea still sidestepping the swipe of his hand.

His nails had grown out to form claw like protrusions on his otherwise human hands.

Ilea responded with a kick to his knee, a loud dull noise resounded as her armored boot met his skin and bone, destructive mana flowing into him.

Another swipe came, ripping into her ashen armor as she jumped back.

“Any help?” Ilea shouted as she danced backwards, dodging his attacks by a hair’s length. Her ashen limbs spread behind before they lashed out.

The thrall dodged them with comparable speed to her own, twirling in the air as he continued to attack, each swipe coming a little faster as he cut through her limbs, avoiding the rest.

Ilea noted that Elfie, Catelyn and Ilas were frozen in place. Lucas wasn’t there anymore.

Maro was the only one moving, his hand stretched out to the undead Wyvern, the creature’s purple eyes flashing with energy a moment later as it turned and focused on the enemy.

“Their minds can’t take it,” Maro shouted to her. “I will get them out and come back to help you!”

Claws slashed into her throat, stopped barely by her bone armor as she slammed her fists into the man’s head.

Fucker is tougher than steel.

His eyes were unfocused, frenzied. His mind taken over by the corruption.

A powerful pulse of mind magic made her pause for a moment, the claws that came still dodged however. *He was slowed down too. Second tier resistances definitely have their merit.*

The Wyvern rushed in from behind the man, attacking with its massive claws. The thing could keep up with either of the two.

Ilea kept the thrall busy with her limbs, getting in a couple of punches while he focused on the undead Wyvern.

His claws scratched over the bones, occasional bursts of mind magic freezing the monster.

When he was about to slash through the creature's spine, Ilea blinked behind him and grabbed one of his arms, twisting her body before she slammed him into the stone floor.

His weight coupled with the momentum cracked the stone.

Ilea landed on top of him, her ashen limbs slashing into his arms and keeping them down as her fists crashed into his skull. She felt the vibrations of her powerful attacks run through her bones, neither of them showing much of a reaction to the physical force.

Destructive mana from all her offensive skills continuously flowed into the corrupted man, little resistance to her abilities apparent.

She finally managed to damage his bone too, a crack resounding when one of her punches caved in the right side of his face, squashing one of his eyes.

A surge of mind magic made her pause for a fraction of a second, the man grabbing onto her and turning before he jumped off the ground and crashed her into a nearby wall. Stone cracked as she was embedded.

He followed up with a flurry of strikes, that slowly ripped away her ash and then her bone armor.

Ilea finally caught his arms, an armored headbutt crashing into his skull.

A surge of mana went through him, the man struggling to get his hands away when another attack followed. Ashen limbs were now cutting into his legs and shoulders, slowly ripping away at his skin and muscles below.

Ilea continued to slam her head against his, her mana recovering through meditation. She noted that his eye was reforming, using an ashen limb to crush it again, trying to get the other one as well.

He moved his head to the side to avoid the strike, instead receiving a cut near his temple.

The Wyvern had recovered by now and slashed into the thrall's back with its claws, digging nearly as deep as Ilea managed with her ash.

A wave of mind magic made both her and the Wyvern pause, the thrall turning before a powerful swipe ripped off the creature's head, the purple magic flickering once before it died.

Ilea blinked away as he turned to her, appearing behind the man as a kick sent him staggering back. She saw the cut on his temple was healed already.

Maro appeared in the room once more, quickly glancing at the once more unmoving Wyvern.

"He's got health drain. What's your resistance?" Ilea asked as she closed the distance, dodging his claws by ducking and a followed up sidestep. Her right hook slammed into his chin, sending mana into the creature.

Ashen limbs entangled his right arm, a dozen sharp ends slashing into his shoulder as she continued her assault with her fists. She created ash to wrap around his head, cutting into his eyes and clogging his nose and mouth.

Connected to her, the ash was as strong as her limbs, making it hard for the man to shrug it off as he was held in place.

“You’re being drained, Maro! Let me do this, I’ll call for help if I need it!” Ilea said, seeing the magic extend from the thrall to the necromancer.

Maro nodded and vanished.

She felt her grip on the man loosen, a charged Absolute Destruction crashed into his throat, five hundred mana used up in the strike as his windpipe was crushed inwards.

Ashen limbs were ripped away as he freed himself, unbothered by the injuries, his right arm hanging by a mere thread of muscle and flesh.

Ilea released Heart of Cinder at the same time as he used a mind magic blast, both stationary as the magic washed over them.

His arm was ripped off by the surge, his scarred form staggering back a couple steps before he caught himself. His eyes burned with the same savage frenzy they had since the beginning, unhurt by the flames.

Ilea extended five of her limbs and wrapped them around his remaining arm, imitating the shredders as she formed claws and started moving the ash around.

The thrall stepped closer and tried to slash her, caught by the rest of her limbs around his forearm.

Ilea watched his missing arm slowly grow back, a smirk on her face. *Not quite enough.*

Three fingers extended, she jabbed at his eyes, trying to imitate one of her favorite movies. The result was a bloody mess, the man dodging her attacks, causing skin to be ripped off and one of his eyes being partially squashed.

With his remaining arm in a bind, he focused on mind magic before finally resorting to biting.

Ilea very much welcomed this approach, allowing her to land easy hits on his head with both fists.

At this point she felt like she was back in the gym, slamming her fists into the resilient punching bag as training. Her mana was slowly draining but with each burst of mind magic, some of it returned.

The shredder trick had worked, biting through his skin and muscle before her limbs formed back to the usual design. Not connected anymore, the arm fell to the ground with a wet sound.

Her limbs swiped his legs, bringing him to a fall before she once again landed on top of the corrupted man.

His arms were slowly regrowing as his head was slammed into a pulp.

The fight was over.