

The entrance didn't offer any insight into what this place was, just made of crude stone.

Ilea had seen enough magic and construction to know that the entrance had been built for efficiency, not aesthetics.

Someone had opened it at one point or another, likely releasing the Specters that had been waiting within. The bones she saw through her sphere suggested both that it had happened quite some time ago and that the intruders hadn't been quite as prepared as she was.

Within the entrance loomed a long hallway shrouded in dust and darkness. It hardly mattered to her eyes. *All that resistance leveling wasn't for nothing.*

She smiled and floated inside, using her wings to navigate the rather spacious hallway of stone.

A single closed door of stone loomed at the end. Runes etched both into the surface and within the stone itself suggested enchantments had once protected this place, now ancient and without anything to fuel them.

Ilea decided to drill into the entrance with a few ashen tendrils, just in case the place acted as a trap with enchantments activating as soon as she stepped through. Both the Ascended and Meadow had proven without a doubt that there may always be a way to get trapped, no matter how many bullshit skills and abilities one possessed.

She worked as quietly as possible, taking her time to rip the entrance apart.

When most of it was gone, she stepped through, entering a round hall with a dozen exits. Her sphere had showed no creatures within. The walls were lined with sockets filled with burnt out torches, the wood rotten and decayed.

Ilea floated into the dark chamber, the ceiling quite low. Skeletons of humanoid beings had remained, some holding weapons.

She went farther in and turned when she felt the presence of a monster manifest behind her.

The Specter looked the same as those she had fought outside, its lifeless eyes set in the malformed skull of an abomination, twisted into the malevolent creature of death and bone it had become. Or perhaps it was summoned here, much like the Demons had been.

This could've been Ravenhall, if we hadn't retaken the city.

"Been a while. You're not sapient, are you?" Ilea asked, relaxed as she stared at the floating creature.

[Specter of Rot – lvl ???]

Its answer was near immediate, the being vanishing before it appeared next to her. Two swords of bone rushed out to impale the intruder to this ancient chamber.

Ilea remained where she stood, bursting into flame before she caught both blades with her hands.

The Specter was stronger than her but its weapons no longer cut through her defenses.

She felt the blood magic come but simply let it happen, a slight rupture exploding within her chest, quickly healed as the being was ravaged by the recoil.

Ilea held on to its swords, her ashen limbs curling around the two weapons as a mist of ash swallowed the massive being. The room lit up when the mist burst into flames, reverse healing coupled with the Flame of Creation burning away at the monster's regeneration and health.

She ripped through its body with her remaining limbs, Storm of Cinders bursting into it with waves of heat and cinders.

The Specter never let go of its blades, dying where it had first attacked the woman.

Ilea watched its lifeless remains burn, leaving a monstrous skeleton and ash.

'ding' 'You have defeated [Specter of Rot – lvl 630]'

'ding' 'The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 378 – One stat point awarded'

Ilea smiled at the notification. *I'll need about five thousand more of you guys.*

Her body tensed when she felt a wave of rot. Just a slight change in the atmosphere and only for a moment.

Hmm.

She chose the exit opposite the entrance and continued onward.

Another hall, this time accommodating a dozen rooms filled with simple furniture, mostly formed of stone or perhaps carved into the walls themselves. A few skeletons remained still, lying in their beds with the remains of decayed blankets.

No cobwebs, insects, or anything. Just magical rot.

Ilea went onward until she reached a staircase leading down. Her sphere however made her pause.

A Specter had moved into its range, unaware of her presence as of yet.

As if they weren't creepy enough, she thought, watching it float through the solid rock of this underground settlement. It left just as suddenly as it had come.

Appropriate name, I suppose, Ilea thought and walked down the stairs, her wings a little too bulky by now to reasonably fly in the tight stairwell.

She already saw the many tight corridors below, fanning out in a haphazard way with tiny rooms connected to each and every hallway. The walls looked as simple as possible, the space just enough for a person to walk through, just high enough for someone like Ilea.

Can't imagine someone at two meters. The endless duck. All that neck pain. Maybe that's what finally ended this place.

"Back issues," she murmured, looking at the lonely skull of a man sitting at the bottom of the stairs. Forgotten and half covered in dust.

The spine below seemed somewhat normal but she wasn't a chiropractor.

Ilea found the next set of stairs and went down once again.

Four more floors of labyrinthine corridors and rooms followed, each suggesting minimum accommodations for a person or two. Many skeletons had remained and her sightings of Specters grew more frequent.

Ilea didn't make noise or try to get the creatures to come to her. For now, she was content in exploration.

The intensity of the rot marginally increased the further down she went, suggesting a source of some kind or at least a core of the natural phenomenon. A place where she could perhaps level her resistance if nothing else.

Ilea teleported through the next few layers, finding little that she hadn't seen before. However as time went on, she realized that this wasn't just a random crypt or underground hideout. It was a city in its own, spanning far and wide into the deep rock of the Kroll mountain.

Who would build like this?

There were toilets, storage rooms, and the occasional larger room with stone tables and the like, but most of it was just filled with simple stone cubes. There weren't even doors.

All inside, no visible ventilation system... though there had to be one, otherwise everyone would've died pretty quickly. Probably little hygiene. Maybe a plague or something killed everyone? Or the Specters came... would be an absolute massacre with them moving through the walls. At least if these were normal humans.

The larger common rooms didn't offer much either, any decoration or writing long faded or eaten through by the rot.

Ilea found the first piece of usable evidence in a room about twenty floors down. Though her counting wasn't exactly accurate due to the liberal construction of said floors. Some weren't exactly level, blending into those above or below.

Ancient wax had remained where once candle light had illuminated the spacious chamber. Rotten bindings and paper long faded were still clutched in the arms of a few bony residents. Carvings however had survived.

And for once in Ilea's dungeon explorations, she didn't need a scholar to translate them.

She brushed away the dust and dirt with her ash, revealing the writing chiseled into the small altar.

'We remain in the depths, where we are safe.

Queen Lumian will guide us. To freedom and light.

The time will come.'

"Did it though?" Ilea murmured, glancing back at the skeletons. A small carved statue sat atop the altar, a woman clad in a flowing dress, a smile on her otherwise featureless face.

Not the best carver eh, she thought. The location and atmosphere lent the small statue at least some factor of reverence.

She went deeper into the complex until she reached the lowest level.

Here it seemed the builders hadn't been quite as conservative in their application of magic.

The stairs broadened up until they lead up to a set of large double doors made of stone. Carvings and symbols decorated it, added with care and obvious artistic talent.

Ilea couldn't discern any meaning, stepping through the opened gates to find herself on a stone platform in the form of a half circle, three steps leading to the ground floor.

A spacious dome like hall opened up before her, pillars of stone reaching up to the ceiling, houses built with care and adorned with the rotten remains of flags on stone poles were visible at the edges of the dark and forgotten hall.

She saw a spacious court at the center, behind what looked like a palace of stone. Towers reached up to the ceiling about sixty meters above, adorned by stone gargoyles. Gray vegetation had been carved into the walls and towers.

The court had perhaps once held flowers, grass, and hedges, all dried up and gone by now. The rotten remains of a few trees had remained, hollow and black like the rest of this place.

Ilea counted the Specters floating through the area, stopping at a few dozen.

The creatures came and went, sometimes vanishing into the walls above and to the side, often just floating in place without so much as a twitch. She watched a few of them vanish entirely, either teleporting or perhaps using another spell she couldn't discern from the distance.

None had seen her, or they simply chose to leave her alone at the only visible entrance to this man made cavern.

Ilea glanced at the entrance to the palace a few hundred meters ahead. It was closed, another large double door made of stone.

Let's save that for last.

Instead she started charging Heart of Cinders, waiting for the heat to damage her before she activated Phaseshift. *Surprise attack bitches.*

Tens of thousands of health fueled her coming auras before she blinked into the midst of the Specters.

Her spell deactivated, a bright white flame flaring out immediately. Ilea smiled at the near instant reaction of the monsters, two thirds teleporting towards her.

Yes my children, come to me, she thought with an exaggerated voice as the first blood magic spells ripped into her body, little damage done.

She focused on the Specters that remained outside her range and activated Displacement, their forms quivering slightly as they were gripped by the powerful space magic before they vanished and joined the monsters close to their enemy.

The first bone swords crashed into Ilea when a fiery sphere of bright energy expanded outward, disintegrating most of the Specters instantly. Those who were covered by several of their brethren were quickly dispatched by swaths of ash fanning out from Ilea at the center.

She twirled as her wings moved her upward, deflecting the few blades that came for her, answering with punches and burning ash in return.

The battle ended quickly, Ilea's ashen limbs stabbing through the remaining two Specters before she flung their lifeless bodies away, pale white flames mixing with fiery wisps and cinders, all clinging to the still remains.

The blemishes on her armor reformed and her resources started to recover when she heard a muffled shriek resound from within the palace.

A wave of power washed over her, a taste of rotten blood in her mouth. She wiped away at her nose and found blood sticking to her ash.

This just got interesting, she thought with a smile.

'ding' 'You heard the mourning shriek of a vengeful being. You resist its effects'

Not quite actually. Or was that a separate spell?

Ilea remained in the courtyard, flames still moving below her, the only light source in the whole dungeon.

Vengeful being. Who might you be?

She waited for a minute outside the palace, mostly just letting her mana recover.

"Not coming out, are you?" she said, squinting her eyes at the door.

Question is, can you not come out or do you just not want to?

When her mana reached full capacity again, Ilea decided to find out herself.

She blinked to the double doors and checked for enchantments. She found nothing with her limited detection abilities. *Still a smaller risk if I open it.*

A firm kick sent one of the two stone doors rumbling inward, flipping once before it slid to a stop.

Ilea squinted her eyes and walked in, finding a large throne room with a stone seat at the very back. It was larger than every room she had visited in the dungeon, besides the courtyard. And yet it had no decorations. No windows adorned the walls, no flags, be they torn or decayed, were visible.

No other seats than the throne itself, which was small, almost like a chair, but made of stone. If she had seen it anywhere but this hall, she would've never imagined it to be the seat of a ruler.

The rot here felt stronger to her, more dense in a way, if only to her magic perception. Her resistance and general resilience managed to counter the effects but it was starting to eat into her natural health regeneration.

Ilea felt the source by now. A menacing force, something chaotic, constantly pulsing. Limitless in a way. It wasn't like the sheer overwhelming power of an Elemental, or the weight of an ocean like Meadow.

She couldn't help but investigate of course, feeling the hairs on her neck stand up as she tasted his challenge.

A single door led towards this source, at the back of the long hall. It looked just as simple as the chair.

Ilea went and checked for enchantments, ripping the thing out of the wall with a quick motion before she placed it next to the open entrance.

The smell hit her instantly, like a wave. It wasn't physical, not something she had experienced before. This was magic.

She turned away and puked, her armor opening up to allow the motion to take place.

'ding' 'Rot Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 6'

Yeah, I'd rather not.

Ilea gave herself a minute to get used to the sensation, only puking three more times. The dry retching was quite a bit more uncomfortable than actual puking.

Her sphere was distorted by the raw magic coming from within.

What don't I do for the job.

She wiped away the grease with an ash covered arm and stepped inside.

The room was circular, similar to the very first hall she had entered back in the caverns. What looked like tombs to her lined the rounded wall, closed but her sphere could penetrate the stone. Skeletons had been stacked within and when the space hadn't been enough, the corpses had been placed outside, mounds of bones littering the space.

Ilea realized that wasn't quite true. The mounds had been carefully stacked, each corpse retaining every bone, put there with meticulous intent and caution.

A silver haired woman sat at the center of everything, only a few meters around her free of bones. A simple dress now left in tatters covered her porcelain skin, her body thin and malnourished. She wasn't tall, her arms almost incapable of reaching around the skeleton she held within her frail limbs.

She was the source.

[Howling Queen of Rot – lvl ????]

"I don't suppose you're up for a chat?" Ilea asked.

The woman looked up at the noise, her eyes clouded and dead. She opened her mouth to show sharp canine teeth before a high pitched howl sounded through the small room.

Ilea didn't feel magic from the cry itself but four Specters formed as if stepping from the tombs, each immediately attacking her.

She blinked out into the throne room and formed ash around herself, the monsters following after her instantaneously.

Ilea used Flare of Creation, ripping through the four beings with various abilities to overwhelm their regeneration. Their own efforts she simply tanked to get more time and opportunities for offense.

She finished the last of them with Absolute Destruction and twirled to face the small door again.

Will you enga-

A surge of magic slammed into her, Ilea wobbling slightly in the air as she started to wretch. Her sight blurred as her eyes watered.

Healing flowed through her, quickly stabilizing her body.

The Queen had entered the hall, her slender form floating a meter from the ground. She no longer held the skeleton, her dead eyes focused on the intruder to her palace.

Ilea felt the power, like waves washing over her. Not an ocean, or an insurmountable mountain. Just waves.

Let's see what you can do, she thought and waited.

The Howling Queen lifted one hand, pointing at Ilea.

She saw the connection in her sphere, shifting to the left right before the spell manifested.

Her shoulder exploded in a rupture of blood and rot, both seeping into her near instantly.

Ilea barely flinched, her ashen armor containing the localized damage that already began to heal. She smiled at the Queen whose shoulder had burst out, blood and tissue falling to the ground and staining her tattered dress.

Strands of flesh reached out from the undamaged sections, growing as they closed the wound. Her shoulder was reformed at the same time as Ilea's.

Why can everybody regenerate?

A battle of attrition then, between a level four forty and a four mark.

Her Veteran skill let her know that the Queen was just barely above level one thousand and not quite as ridiculous as the beasts she had fought in Erendar.

Let's prove Meadow wrong, shall we?

Ilea vanished, appearing in a wave of magic that immediately overwhelmed her. She tumbled in the air, about to retch before a dozen spells ruptured her insides.

Bones formed on the ground below, shooting up to impale her as flying blades of blood slashed through her wings.

She displaced herself, flopping to the ground when her lack of knees prevented a more graceful landing.

Ilea activated her third tier healing and smirked as soon as her lips had regenerated. *This is fine.*