

Chapter 403 Layers

Ilea spent an hour inside the Halian corpse, until little of the acid remained. She checked her progress and activated her armor again, her bone set had regenerated again too at this point.

'ding' 'Blood Manipulation Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 5'

'ding' 'Blood Manipulation Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 6'

'ding' 'Blood Manipulation Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 7'

'ding' 'Corrosion Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 11'

'ding' 'Corrosion Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 12'

She spent another hour walking around in the ice mirror covered corridors but other than two Blade Lurkers, she didn't encounter anything. Neither had been corrupted.

Ilea assumed that those that were had been killed in the layer above by the Cyclopes or they might have gone further below.

There it is, she thought, spotting the stone separating this layer from the next. *Not exactly very profitable that one.*

She decided not to dwell on it, using her ash to form a drill before she dug down into the ground. Ilea wasn't about to lose another hour to find an exit when she could just make her own.

The lines of crystal continued down through the stone, into the thirteenth floor of the Descent. Even Ilea's little tunnel was illuminated by them. The sound of rushing streams of water was audible as she broke through.

She spread her wings as she came out below, taking in the sight of a dozen rivers, creeks as well as still ponds spreading through the area. A slight decline let her know where the next layer could likely be found.

Rocks jutted out from both the rushing as well as the still waters, separating the streams.

Water layer..., Ilea shuddered at the thought as well as the sight before her. At least it wasn't an unending ocean like back in the demon realm. *I never thanked Trian for going with me. Would have been terrifying alone.*

Ilea clapped her hands together to motivate herself and moved down, flying low over the water. She found herself enjoying the sound at least, most of the layers before devoid of much audible ambience.

A sudden tug pulled her down, powerful enough to counter her wings nearly fully. Ilea used her ashen limbs to grab onto anything solid she could find as soon as she reached the water. The stone groaned before it cracked.

Her wings wet and submerged, there was nothing that kept her from going down. Ilea focused and breathed in deeply, putting on her Drowning Bear Ring.

Sharp stones jutted from the bottom, as well as pillars and formations of rock that lined the whole area underwater. Ilea was pulled down and wedged between two walls, their sharp edges digging into her armor.

Meditation activated and she calmed down a little. *What are you dealing with? What do you need to do?*

She asked herself those two questions, realizing that she knew the sensation. *Gravity magic. Something is trying to drown me.*

I need to get out or kill whatever is causing this, she thought and started smashing at the stone around her. Her arms felt sluggish, pulled down and heavy. She was sure it wasn't just the water.

You can survive underwater for at least half an hour, probably longer. Your Gravity Magic Resistance is pretty fucking low and you can't fight it right now. Might as well go all out.

She deactivated her resistance and waited, trying to locate whatever was causing the magic through her various abilities.

'ding' 'Gravity Magic Resistance reaches lvl 3'

Her ash crashed through the stone around her, Ilea now free to move around as the pressure still put her down.

The level up had no effect, the skill's bonus still deactivated.

Ilea moved slowly, pushing hard against the magic as she scanned through her sphere, trying to find something out of the norm. The flowing water made it hard to find anything that stood out.

Ten minutes passed, her search so far fruitless. *At least I'll have some more resistance levels before I die.*

'ding' 'Gravity Magic Resistance reaches lvl 4'

'ding' 'Gravity Magic Resistance reaches lvl 5'

Whatever it was, the magic it used was strong. Like most things down at these depths of the Descent.

There you are, she thought, spotting a small part on a rock where the water flow was slightly different.

An ashen lance formed and shot out.

Sudden movement revealed a gray octopus the size of a house cat, the creature scurrying around the rock and vanishing again.

Fuck.

No interruption in the magic was noticeable. *I'll find you little octopus.*

Ilea used her ashen limbs to pull herself against the powerful gravity magic, the water around her pushing down much more weight than air and her body alone would provide, coming from a beast likely above her level.

She smiled, finding the monster behind the rock once again. *Now, let's not be stupid*, she thought and activated her blink.

Her perspective changed and a hand rushed out as fast as she could, uninterrupted by gravity magic that was still focused on where she had stood previously.

The creature was squishy, several arms in her grasp.

[Vile Varass Drowner – lvl ???]

She squeezed and slammed her ashen limbs down into the small form of the monster.

It slithered out of the way, dodging most of her blows before something spread out from its body. A murky substance that sizzled as soon as it touched her ash.

Good, even more resistance training you can provide, she thought, feeling the gravity around her once more increasing.

She held tight, pushing destructive mana into the octopus, its eyes frantically looking for an escape within the cloud of acid or whatever substance it was.

Ilea's ashen limbs slowly pushed towards the creature, fighting against the increased weight as they wrung around it, small blades forming before they cut along the beast's body.

It struggled hard, making the wounds even worse before it went limp.

What? Ilea asked herself, the magic around her gone. *Not very tough for something of your level.*

She stored the body in her necklace and checked the messages.

'ding' 'You have defeated [Vile Varass Drowner – lvl 539]

'ding' 'Blink reaches 3rd lvl 14'

'ding' 'Gravity Magic Resistance reaches lvl 6'

'ding' 'Gravity Magic Resistance reaches lvl 7'

'ding' 'Corrosion Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 13'

Damn, a level in corrosion too? Despite only being affected for a couple seconds?

Ilea had her suspicions already but now she was pretty sure her Avatar of Ash bonus didn't just increase the damage taken from resistances. Something inherent was making the leveling more effective. She assumed the skills were deactivated and the leveling speed went closer to the first tier again, despite their actual levels.

Compared to the weeks she spent with her team back in the Hand as well as her time with the Miststalkers, she was getting levels left and right. The ridiculously high damage helped of course. With her resistances deactivated it wasn't a trade off many would take or even could, really.

Ilea blinked up twice, coming to the surface and landing on a nearby stone. *Could have just done that to get out. Fucking idiot.*

Drowning was one of her major fears, perhaps having made her a little bit irrational. Maybe she simply focused on getting the enemy instead of bringing herself to safety.

She didn't want to admit that perhaps her training with William made her fear worse instead of better.

I'll be able to experience all the intricacies of drowning however, before I die. Not that I don't know everything there is to know already.

She sighed and stopped herself from just flying through the whole layer. The creatures were at a good level and getting her Gravity Magic Resistance to the second tier would be easy.

Might as well deactivate my armor, I didn't come close to dying there.

Her eyes focused on the ring on her finger. *Maybe should refrain from punching too hard with that hand*, she thought. She didn't know if all magic items were subject to the same benefits her necklace and bracelet had.

"You're sighing a lot lately. Come on, good progress, levels and resistances," she tried to psych herself. "Also drowning, seeing your own body melt and being eaten by various monsters."

A fifty fifty endeavor really. *I still enjoy it most of the time*, she justified and stood up on her wet rock. *Might as well start instead of wasting anymore time.*

Catelyn held her breath, waiting for the elf to signal the passing of the corrupted beast. Her sight was blurred by the veil of shadows hiding their group.

Ilas' presence had been invaluable, both his hiding ability as well as his path finding. Most of the creatures they could outright avoid, seeing only glimpses of them, if even that.

Few of the beasts so far down had succumbed to the corruption that seemed to have spread throughout a large part of the dungeon. Maro had accidentally discovered one of the mechanisms that had spread it.

A simple cylinder built into a wall and filled with the orange ooze, having sprayed its contents into the nearby waters.

They had refrained from engaging most of the denizens, powerful magic emanating from them. Dangerous creatures on their own, adding to their abilities with the supporting terrain. The drowning creatures especially had nearly taken them by surprise.

The elf's barriers hadn't been affected much by the gravity magic, saving them from falling into the waters. Luckily, the layer right after had a way to completely circumvent the deep waters lying within. The complete stillness had unnerved her. She hoped Ilea would see the message, not that she would necessarily listen either way.

Now they had another problem. The pale blue light shining from above was further reduced by the veil of shadows but Catelyn could see them still, the corrupted creatures prowling this layer. They wouldn't find a way up but their numbers were worrying.

If the expedition had really passed here, she had a hard time seeing them make their way back up. *We will have to dig another way*, something she had wanted to avoid. Their supplies would be down already, their numbers as well.

Catelyn ignored the possibility of them all being dead, convinced that somehow they had found a way to hide.

“It has passed,” the elf said finally. “We may not be able to avoid them all.”

“Then we just fight, or fly away,” Maro commented.

“The way down lies ahead, let us press forward,” Ilas said.

She remained quiet, the tension high since they split. Before even, if she was being honest. Lucas refused to fight and Ilea was more focused on her own growth and excitement than finding the expedition.

Catelyn understood of course but she doubted Ilea could take out the monsters in the last couple layers, even if she took time to level. *You doomed her*, she ground her teeth and focused on the task at hand. *It was her decision, she is young but an adult nonetheless.*

She hoped it hadn't been the wrong decision. Perhaps she should have pushed more, could have prevented her from going. *It is done now. The strong will survive. Let her be forged, as you have been. And let the lost fools be lucky, before they unleash even more destruction upon these lands.*

She looked at the others and kept her magic at a low burn. Maro and the elf could hold their own but without a more powerful healer than herself, Catelyn doubted a prolonged battle would be victorious. *We don't even know what these creatures can do*, she thought and walked on, deeper into the unknown from whence there may be no escape.

Niivalyr glanced at the fox, feeling her concern. Like a stench, she doused their whole group in uncertainty. Quite the contrast to the others. The human had surprised him, showing fear deep below his uncaring attitude. He could not be relied on, not now that Ilea was gone, left behind.

He should have stayed at her side. It would have been more beneficial than scouring these caverns, hidden and shrouded like thieves. Her idiotic confidence would have been a more favorable companion than this sorry bunch. Alone she would thrive, he knew as much. He on the other hand had learned to rely on others, to see the benefits of a group.

Their goals were not the same, no longer. He could not risk his life anymore, not for excitement and power alone.

He repressed a sigh, a human gesture he had adapted from his prolonged exposure. *Friends*, he thought and nearly hissed, his teeth opening slightly as he smelled the corruption, the blood of the monsters walking these lands.

Unnatural and foreign they smelled, wielding the magic of time itself. He had something in common with them too, he knew. The curses were so tangible he had mistaken them for his own magic at first.

Their utter inability to face most of these creatures without danger to their very lives infuriated him, only quenched by the fact that the corruption had not tainted all of them.

Yet these had been taken, overwhelmed and broken, he saw them move in the distance, the magic powerful and potent, like so many things here, beyond the forest.

He hated it here, hated everything about it. The stench, the creatures, the mana. Yet still he knew the weight on him had lessened. His hatred was raw, his emotions free. *Exiled, cursed. How dare they force their will upon me?*

He hissed then, quietly and stopping immediately. The fear in his eyes stemmed not from the beasts of this place of creation and yet he felt it and he hated it. Hated them.

“What’s gotten into you again?” Maro asked in a quiet voice, glancing back at him.

The others ignored him mostly but the human had used every opportunity to mock him, belittle him. *One plagued by such immense turmoil should not roar so loudly at those set free.*

“Their magic is quite powerful. Be wary of curses,” Niivalyr said, ignoring the taunt, misplaced in both location and time. *Foolish, like so many.*

I will not succumb to my nature. The corruption will be destroyed, as will the Taleen and the... he couldn’t bring himself to finish, not even in his mind. Like claws gripping him, the fear remained. He pictured them then, the young elves fighting against impossible odds, losing of course but their spirit unbroken. Amidst them the only human he truly respected, the one he owed his life to.

“Stop daydreaming,” Maro whispered his way.

Niivalyr held up a finger, indicating silence. A moment later he pointed to the west, one of the monsters standing atop a boulder set in the ground, ears raised and snarling.

Ilas too pointed, towards the layer’s wall and the entrance to a tunnel.

Hana carefully set down the injured warrior, finally in relative safety. It was a wonder that he was still alive, the wounds on him would have killed even her five times over.

A dark one. Powerful.

“Did you find someone?” Jonna whispered, walking out from the hall’s shadows. She stopped and looked at the creature. “What is that?”

Hana turned and closed the steel gate, checking one last time if nothing was behind. She would leave the warrior here in case something had followed. “He was part of the expedition. I saw him before, never exposed like this,” she said. “Can you heal him?”

Jonna appeared closer, her magic activating with the familiar warmth. “What are those scales? They’re blue.”

His armor lay damaged and exposed, most of his chest free as well as half of his helmet and his left arm. The previously full plate armor had been ripped through by one beast or the other. Cuts went to his very bone.

“Wow, he’s still alive,” Jonna murmured, taking care of his wounds.

“I was surprised as well. He was alone too but the room suggested a struggle. A dead scorpion was there too, its flesh cooked from within,” Hana said quietly.

“Corruption?” Jonna asked in a worried tone.

“I checked, he took care of it. Use your identification, he shows as a warrior,” Hana replied.

“We cannot trust that alone,” Jonna said, “He is eating up a lot of my mana.”

“With his size, no wonder. He’s even taller than me,” she said, the dark one nearly three meters in height. She hoped he wasn’t inexperienced, easy to panic. Or worse, dangerous and foolish.

Eyelids slowly opened as he woke, “That is enough...,” he said in a soft voice, quiet and alert.

“Reserve your mana for now, healer.”

“We should be safe, I can finish the job,” Jonna replied, continuing her spell.

“It is...,” the warrior said and sat up, careful not to disturb any of the partially healed wounds. “... of no matter... focus on... the others.”

Hana looked at Jonna and back to the creature, his gear in shreds, “There are no others, I carried you here.”

His eyes opened wide, a dark blue color reflecting the bright magical light from above, “I failed then,” he murmured and looked down on himself before a small smile spread on his mouth, revealing sharp teeth. “And yet I survived. Tell me warrior, did I slay the beast?”

Hana chuckled and clasped his shoulder, “You did. I found no other corpses. Perhaps they found safety.”

“Or,” he coughed, “Corruption has taken them. We will see. I thank you, Hana, brave warrior and... Jonna, healing hand.”

“You know us?” Hana asked, a little surprised.

“I have taken the time to learn what I can of those partaking in the expedition. Enthusiasm has clouded my judgment it seems. We have unleashed something terrible,” he said, a little more focused as the rest of his wounds healed.

He grabbed the heavy steel chains around his arms and tightened them before he removed the loose remains of his chest plate. “My name is Relly by the way. Tell me, how much of this facility have you searched already?”

“You want to look for survivors?” Jonna asked, apprehension showing on her face.

“It may be a fool’s errand but yes. More importantly, we cannot allow this corruption to reach the surface, lest we doom these lands and all that lies beyond,” he said. “Do you have water?” Relly asked and held out his scaled hand, liquid forming in his palm.