

Another storm. Hana looked through the stained glass window, the flying sand soon blocking the view. There wasn't much to see either way. Rocks, sand and distant boulders.

She was tired, not having slept for nearly two weeks. It was straining, just to stand, to hold her blade. *Shameful.*

Her armor lay damaged and in shambles, cut apart as if it had been made of cheap copper. She didn't know why she had held on to the pieces, some of them still hanging from her scaled body. One of the shoulders was fine still but the rest was unusable.

Carefully, she stepped over the gray metal floor, any unnecessary noise had a chance to alert them. *She's still sleeping.*

Her hand moved over the woman's brow. The fever was gone and the wound had healed but it had been taxing on her body. Hana checked where the healer, Jonna, had been pierced by the stinger.

The screams still rung in her ears. She had been sure the woman was dead but somehow she had pushed through, had healed herself through the pain and the corruption.

It hadn't been easy, cutting out the infected part and adding to her torment but Hana knew better than to question a healer at her own profession. *Should have never come back down here.* She sighed and sat down next to the sleeping human, her eyes focused on the steel door.

The noises had calmed down a couple days ago but food was running low, as was water. She would hold out as long as she could but even at level two hundred, they had to eat.

Two days passed, Hana using her time to meditate and think of possible solutions, possible ways out. Nothing made much sense. In hindsight this whole expedition had not made sense. Why bypass monsters you can't fight in the search for riches?

It had never made sense to Hana but it was the way of the scavenger. Krentin hadn't been averse to such tactics. There had been enough opportunities to fight anyway but down here, the beasts were simply beyond her.

The grip on her sword handle tightened at the thought. *Go out there and face them. You are Hana of the Krezjagar, you fear nothing and welcome death.*

The familiar mantra wasn't as effective as usual. Tiredness, thirst and fear. Things she hadn't felt in years, decades perhaps. Never in this capacity.

A slight stir made her focus and grip her blade once more, preparing to unleash her skills and rush at whatever horrible abomination was after her.

"... what... where am I? Hana?" The human smiled, showing her teeth as her hands moved to her stomach. "I was injured. The poison..." tears came to her eyes.

Hana grabbed the woman and held her awkwardly, blade still in hand. “Sssh, we mustn’t make too much noise.” She whispered. “You have healed. I cut out the corruption, as you instructed.”

She seemed to understand, nodding lightly as she took in the words and wiped away the tears. Her body curled up more, her gaze focused on the floor. “How much time has passed?”

“A week. You went unconscious as I cut out the corruption but your healing did the rest.” Hana explained in a quiet voice.

The woman chuckled quietly. “My poison resistance went up by five levels...,”

“The corruption... is. It nearly overwhelmed me, even in that short time. I couldn’t move, only hold it at bay.” Jonna explained, still holding her stomach. The dark blue beast hide armor showed exactly where the Patron of Torment had pierced it.

Overgrown scorpion. Hana thought, remembering the venomous critters from her childhood. Never this large of course or quite as deadly.

“What happened, since we were attacked?” Jonna asked, her blue eyes watery as she looked up at the huge form of the lizard woman. “What did we do?” A whisper, full of regret.

Hana sighed, stopping herself from hissing. “We didn’t do anything. It just seems like whoever built this place really, really didn’t want anybody messing with it. Our only mistake was to agree to come down here.”

“Krentin...,” Jonna said, touching Hana’s arm carefully.

“Probably dead. There were few healers and even he can’t face the beasts down here, let alone frenzied ones.” She replied.

“How do we get out then?” Jonna asked, her lip quivering.

“I had hoped you would have an idea.” Hana said and chuckled.

“What is this?” Ilea looked back at the waiting group, shaking her arm with the attached monster eel that had jumped out of the water immediately when she had gotten closer.

[Corrupted Widow Eel – lvl 242]

The orange veins pulsed along the side of its slippery pale white skin, bite marks visible and filled with the orange pus.

Most of it was still in the shallow water, writhing wildly as it tried to pull Ilea in. Or tried to eat her arm, or come out.

She wasn’t exactly sure what it was trying.

Oh well. Ashen limbs pierced the creature, killing it near instantly.

It slumped down, still lodged on her ashen armor.

Ilea ripped it away and threw it back into the water.

The tunnel had opened up into a cave, a rocky beach extending to her right for hundreds of meters. The Veramath had dug its tunnel mostly avoiding the water, the way down leading into the rocky wall away from the beach.

“There are more creatures down there.” Ilas commented from a distance.

“Yea, we wanted to kill all of the corrupted ones, didn’t we?” Ilea asked, looking at the approaching shadows as she took a couple steps back. Ten of her limbs were deep inside the cave walls to make sure she wouldn’t be dragged into the deep.

“Even the swimming ones?” Ilas asked. “They can’t exactly walk up...”

Catelyn sighed. “She’s right. They’re corrupted nonetheless. Can you just stay there dear? I think you’ll make a wonderful piece of bait.”

Ilea smiled and gave her a thumbs up. “I’ll do my best.” she whispered, seeing the first creatures approach within her sphere.

Maro lifted his hand, the dead eel twitching back to life within the water before it was ripped apart by an oncoming fish.

That one’s huge.

[Corrupted Whalesharkturtle – lvl 284]

The creature shot out of the water, twitching eel in its turtle like head as it came crashing down on Ilea. Two eels followed right after, the same as the one she had already fought.

Five smaller fishes followed, their form confusing Ilea a little.

[Corrupted Salmon – lvl 1]

What? One of them slapped into her protected face, twitching as it fell to the ground, unable to breathe.

The others followed, crashing down and snapping at her. The turtle head moved fast but only met ashen limbs that pierced through the thick skull, releasing blood and corruption.

The eels were pierced before they could wind themselves around her body. Purple beams as well as barriers and fire slammed into the frenzied swarm that jumped out of the water without any concern for their own survival.

This is pretty ridiculous. Ilea thought as the corrupted salmon piled up.

Barbed tongues suddenly rushed out and slammed into her ash, trying to drag her down into the deep. Ashen limbs cut them loose immediately, before the connected beasts were revealed.

[Ball Snatcher – lvl 230]

Really? Ilea watched the thing fly out, a giant two meter puffer fish like creature that sprayed not only blood when it was pierced but dark blue acid in addition.

The sizzling noise of it eating into the various corpses around her added another wonderful ambient sound. Coupled with the fumes released as the acid ate into the corrupted flesh, she really, really hated that creature.

Ilea chucked back the dead, some of them twitching with Maro's magic as they shot off to find corrupted fishes to attack.

Stop littering on my beach. She walked alongside the cave wall, her limbs keeping her steady still. Even with her underwater skill and the ring she had gotten, there was no reason for her to take the plunge. Not here, not now.

The monsters were simple to deal with, mainly their number being an issue as they literally started filling up the cave. Few of them got close enough to even attack her, leaving their territory in their frenzy.

The salmons died without Ilea's intervention, likely what the other creatures ate in the first place.

The puffer fish had an acid spit attack that she took gladly, the corrosion eating into her ashen armor as she kept some of them alive to walk past and drench her again.

The horrific smell came from it eating through flesh, not her ash.

Two white eels were wrapped around Ilea's legs, continuously using their ability to drain Stamina as she walked along the beach.

Elfie was rather helpful with his barriers, moving dozens of the dead monsters back into the water with every spell.

Catelyn had stopped burning the beasts upon Ilea's request, mostly adding a vile odor to the cavern instead of doing anything helpful.

Few of the monsters were above level three hundred, giving Ilea little in terms of experience.

The constant stream of them didn't stop for hours however, at least making it easy for her to kill them.

Beasts from the lower layers continued to occasionally run out of the tunnel, taken out by a waiting Catelyn and Ilas, the latter having started to set up a small camp site where the tunnel met the third layer cave around twenty meters away from the stone beach.

Ilea sighed as she watched a shrimp like monster crawl out of the water a dozen meters away, colorful scales protecting its soft skin. Its eyes moved to look at her, orange pulsing veins visible under its defenses.

[Corrupted Cannon Shrimp – lvl ??]

Wait, didn't I hear about something like that? The thought went through her mind right before she felt the attack coming, her wings spreading in front of her as she braced for the damage.

The one meter tall mantis moved its small claws before a wave of force exploded outwards, rippling through the stone ground as cracks formed.

Ilea was pushed back, smacking hard against the cave wall as her ashen limbs tried to stabilize her.

The eels on her legs were squished by the impact, sliding down. Lifeless.

She decided to stay near the wall, watching chunks of the stone beach break off and fall into the shallow water, cracked and splintered by the sheer force of the magic.

“Are you alright?” Maro shouted from further back, sitting on a makeshift wooden stool as he occasionally resurrected a wave of beasts.

“Yes, yes.” Ilea waved him off, bracing herself with even more ashen limbs now.

The stream of beasts had lessened by now, Niivalyr and Maro taking out those landing closer to them.

Ilea continued killing the jumping creatures, taking a couple more blasts from the shrimp. It nearly managed to get through her ashen armor to her surprise.

Give me that blast resistance. She smirked and let it live, anything that came in the path of it and Ilea, was shredded by the shrimp’s magic as well as Ilea’s ash.

She checked her notifications and found that the kills were apparently attributed to the one landing the last blow. Ilea did manage to get most of them.

“Ehm... Ilea?” Lucas had walked up to her, taking a step back as he eyed the shrimp and the fish body parts and bones scattered around the area. Water was seeping into the continuously damaged cavern.

“Hmm?” she asked, spearing through two Ball Snatchers, scattering vile acid over the remains. She lifted them over herself and shook the corpses to drench herself too before she chucked them back into the pool where they once lived.

She gave Lucas another look, stepping a little to the side as another shrimp attack rolled past, the ash on her back quickly reforming after the force had pushed the stabilizing limbs further into the rock. “What is it?” She asked with a smile.

“Your... hmm work... is extraordinary.” The elder said and chuckled awkwardly.

A nod, several angry salmons flopping to the floor close by. Ashen spears tore through an approaching Whalesharkturtle, one of her limbs finally ending its life right before it could snap at her. “Thanks for the compliment. I do pride myself in efficiency.” Ilea added and drenched herself in acid once more.

“I wanted to ask... if perhaps you had some food with you. The rations are hmm... rather bland.” Lucas said, wincing as he watched another group of fishes get skewered and thrown back.

“Didn’t you bring your own? Oh wait, you don’t have a storage item. Yea, sure. Don’t get used to it though.” Ilea replied with a smile and summoned one of Keyla’s meals. Due to the recent stock up, she had an easier time sharing.

The man nodded gratefully and smiled. “Thank you... it smells... ehm... well I’m sure it’s good.”

“That’s the corpses. The food is top notch.” She said and pushed away the shrimp with two of her limbs. “Blast attack. No claw stuff.” She said to the beast and made a blast motion with her hands, imitating its little claws.

“Oh, Lucas. I know you dislike violence but would you be willing to train my wood magic resistance while we’re working here? They’re mostly below three hundred and the shrimp isn’t making the difference. I think I could add some training to it.”

The elder frowned but then looked at his food. "I suppose I could throw some... spears or use roots from a distance. If you think it's really safe." He took a step closer and held out his hand to get reassurance.

"You've seen me. I'll let you know if it's too much and Lucas, I really appreciate it." She smiled and watched him walk back to the others.

"Want my help too?" Maro asked and patted Elfie on his shoulder. "Come on, you too. See if we can push her into the water."

"I'll drag you down with me." Ilea said with a smirk.

"You are trivializing this threat... we do not know what lurks below and if any of us die, we might be taken by the corruption. Please, you too... Ilea. Take this seriously." Niivalyr argued, watching the scene with tangible annoyance as he continued to move corpses into the sea.

"You can take my post if you want." Ilea said. "Just extend your curse, more enemies hit and I get to train a little. I can teleport away if something more dangerous suddenly shows up. It's been hours Elfie, come on." She extended her arms, feeling the powerful shrimp attack flow through her, the stone cracking further.

Lucas was eating in silence, facing towards the tunnel they had come from, the only place where no monsters were currently being slain.

The elder did send the occasional wooden spear and root her way as he had agreed to do.

Maro shook his head and did release the occasional death magic beam into her side. He didn't seem to care much either way, neither speaking up for or against the idea.

When the monsters started to further thin out, Niivalyr did extend his curse but made no mention of it.

Neither did Ilea, who was testing the cone of her Heart of Cinder and how long she needed to charge it to disintegrate the various monsters entirely.

The thirty second charge was too much in the cavern, steam rushing up or boulders falling down depending on where she aimed.

A five second charge was already quite powerful, its range however quite limited. Enough to kill one of the eels but not disintegrate it entirely.

She tested longer charge times but in the end moved back to her trusty limbs and spears, mostly due to the smell.

Ilea checked her notifications then, sadly no class level ups due to the small number of corrupted Cannon Shrimp that had made their way all the way to the top of the lake.

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

'ding' 'Corrosion Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 9'

'ding' 'Curse Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 4'

'ding' 'Death Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 4'

‘ding’ ‘Stamina Drain Resistance reaches lvl 2’

...

‘ding’ ‘Stamina Drain Resistance reaches lvl 5’

‘ding’ ‘Wood Magic Resistance reaches lvl 9’

Progress, slowly but surely. Ilea smiled. The upper layers had been a complete slaughter but she didn't have any delusions about her own and her team's power.

The deeper levels of the Descent hadn't been conquered and who knew how deep exactly it went? The fact that no insanely powerful beast had made its way up to these levels gave her some hope but only time would tell.

Worst case, they had to collapse this whole thing and bury everything within.

Ilea just had a suspicion that that would not be enough.

"I think we're pretty much done here." She said, killing the corrupted shrimp with three of her lances, its defenses not even as durable as those of the Whalesharkturtle.

‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Cannon Shrimp – lvl 452] – For defeating an enemy one hundred and thirty or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted.’

Yea, I need like fifty more of you guys. She looked at the water but shook her head.

"We might have only killed a part of the corrupted monsters in this layer." Ila said as he glanced at the returning Ilea.

"I'm not diving in there." She said. "They can rot in the water for all I care."

"Send someone to poison it." Maro suggested.

"None of the beasts can survive on land, corrupted or not. This is enough. Let us move on." Catelyn said as her fire beam cut through a distant Pure Blooded that lit up in the dark tunnel, for just a second.