

Ilea continued her escapades for around an hour, working on her resistances and getting more used to the speed and maneuverability of her new wings.

The Fae was giggling in its seat, the previous envy forgotten completely.

“We should leave soon,” she said and twirled backwards, sand spears pulled towards her, piercing her skin.

Disappointed

“Yeah, I’d prefer to stay longer too but I’d be pretty annoyed if my friends die because I played around for too long,” Ilea said. The resistances gave tangible benefits of course.

She waved to the Deep Mirage, forming a basketball sized sphere of ash before she dropped it into the sand. Her True Creation made sure it would remain. It would fall apart after a while, especially after she went away too far but without communication, she at least wanted to leave something.

She bowed to the creature and flew up, checking her notifications. The Mirage didn’t copy the gesture but if anything, that made its greeting to the Fae even more mysterious.

‘ding’ ‘Sand Magic Resistance reaches lvl 3’

...

‘ding’ ‘Sand Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 1’

Sand Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 1

A powerful and versatile school of magic, able to slash, crush and suffocate. Usually found and common in certain desert regions, its masters unchallenged within their domain. Exposure has made you more resilient to this type of magic.

2nd stage: Through exposure and forced understanding, you will find it easier to move through sand. An ability most sand mages and creatures master early in their development and one of their core advantages.

‘ding’ ‘Stamina Drain Resistance reaches lvl 8’

...

‘ding’ ‘Stamina Drain Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 1’

Stamina Drain Resistance – 2nd lvl 1

The more rarely used drain magic focused on Stamina. Its effects are not as immediately noticeable as Health or Mana drain skills but the end result is just as devastating. You have leaned to resist such spells to an extent.

2nd stage: Stamina exhaustion won’t impact you as heavily anymore as it did previously. Your body is used to rapid magical Stamina Drain and can counteract its absence through mana and health respectively.

‘ding’ ‘Stamina Drain Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 2’

‘ding’ ‘Stamina Drain Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 3’

Ilea was happy about the advancements but felt quite stupid by now to have spend weeks with the Miststalkers to get her other drains up to the end of the second tier.

Avatar of Ash was pretty broken but she wouldn't complain. *Steady progress. If not for the levels from those sessions, you would've died along the way down here*, she reminded herself. It might not have been true but every little difference was just that, a difference. Marginal or life saving.

Ilea was pretty sure the skill had adapted to her behavior as well. It would be interesting to compare her skill descriptions with another Kin of Ash but she doubted there would ever be a chance to meet one.

Plus, they wouldn't have time to talk, instead training each others' Ash Magic Resistance. *Should have questioned that Gray Company guy more. Oh well, here we are.*

None of her class skills had leveled throughout the training. She didn't think it a coincidence, more a confirmation that the Deep Mirage didn't really have any intention to actually kill her.

She was only a little bit disappointed. The damage to her body at least seemed to compensate enough for her to get both resistances to the second tier.

Another ten percent to ash density... well at this point we're past a hundred already, meaning the increase won't be quite as noticeable than before, she mused, moving her ashen limbs and tail. Wisps of ash still rose from them but below was a smooth and deadly weapon, her armor too had changed.

The added weight didn't have much of an impact due to her control over the element, or it was simply offset by the skill gains in abilities involving her strength and speed. A little of both probably.

Ilea sped up through the rather dark layer and after a little bit of searching found the tunnel leading out of it, dug into the stone and earth.

The sand ended at the edge, marking the end of the Mirage's influence.

Ilea hadn't checked if there was more than one in the layer but with its relatively low level of power, she assumed there was a chance. One had been sufficient for her training, the only goal reaching the second tier and not the very end of it.

A creature of that power using their magic on her with a disabled resistance did plenty of damage for her to jump through the first tier with ease.

Trail

"I just noticed," Ilea said, stopping in her tracks before she used her sphere and huntress to check the tunnel. "It seems like someone fought in here. The others went through as well, just a couple hours ago I think." She checked the scratch marks and tracks.

"Hmm, I'm pretty sure there were more people present than just my group... and some of the damage... I have a hard time seeing one of them causing that. Maybe Elfie got frustrated and scratched over the walls..." she said and walked around.

A large part of the tracks stopped a couple dozen meters into the tunnel, only her team's magic and light physical remnants and smells noticeable. *Spells to hide it all? So the expedition did come this far.*

She sighed. It's possible that the Deep Mirage caused problems they hadn't foreseen. "Pretty stupid to go down here without insanely powerful people, right?" she asked. "Sounds like something I would do, not a prepared expedition."

Treasure

No Violence

"Yeah, I know. Especially the scavenger types in Hallowfort seem to prefer gold and artifacts over levels. I will never truly understand that outlook. Don't look at me like that, I know I'm not exactly the standard human," Ilea said.

The Fae giggled in her mind.

"No offense but is there a telepathy resistance? I feel a little uncomfortable with people being able to just scream into my mind," she said.

Harmless, the Fae sent and touched its chin with one of its stubby hands.

Healing, it said and pointed at her before it giggled once more.

"You're saying there isn't a healing resistance either... eh, guess you're right. What happens if it's meant as an attack though? Like a high pitched noise invading my brain?" she asked.

Mind

"Mind magic?" Ilea asked and got a conforming thought back. "Hmm, so then it's Mental Resistance. Still weird then that there isn't a mana intrusion resistance for attacks. If the mind can differentiate telepathy from mind magic attacks."

Or I'm misinterpreting this little guy's singular words. Or he's fucking with me... because that's what Faeries do, isn't it? Just don't eat any food it offers, she thought and looked at the floating creature.

She wondered if such rules existed in Elos. And if they did, was it simply a mind magic attack? Something an ordinary human couldn't resist? A vampire with a sufficient level and light magic resistance could probably survive daylight as well, if it was a weakness at all.

Ilea chuckled at the thought of a steaming vampire complaining about the weather. *Should move to England*, she mused.

There were monsters in Elos that had been popular in fiction back on Earth, as well as a lot of other creatures with a variety of abilities. None so far had shown magic based heavily on rules like etiquette or daytime and with everything she had seen so far, Ilea just assumed there were ways around it. If a creature had enough levels and power.

The Fae was one of the only beings she had met that was most definitely out of the ordinary. Its level hadn't risen either since she had met it, still sitting at one hundred and three.

"Do you not level?" she asked, pretty sure some of the battles would have counted as a team effort. She was glad of course, the experience not split at all.

It looked her way but didn't send anything, as it tended to do.

"You like being mysterious, don't you?" Ilea asked, squinting at it.

The creature actually winked at her.

“Ancient Fae, toying with young human to get entertainment in an endless void of time. I’ll never understand ageless creatures like you,” Ilea said and shook her head, not hiding the joy she was feeling. Most of her traveling companions weighed on her after a while. This one had yet to come even close to that.

Its small frame likely wasn’t very heavy either. That possibly helped.

“Number twenty,” she said, reaching the exit of the tunnel after a steep decline. “Another desert.”

The dunes spread for kilometers, a rather massive sandstorm raging in the distance.

Team, the Fae sent and pointed.

Ilea looked but didn’t see anything in the distance, not for a lack of light, warm illumination provided by growing crystals far above.

“Feel free to lead me there, little guy,” she said with a smile, watching the Fae appear on her head and grabbing some ashen tendrils not much unlike reins.

Ilea laughed, reminded of her sprints through the western forest, Alice on her back as they ran towards Riverwatch. Her wings moved behind her, tail extending as she ascended. *I wonder if she’s even still alive. Might be the only other human with an Azarinth class, if she didn’t waste the stuff I gave to her butler.*

She focused on the now again, keeping her eyes peeled for the powerful single creature she expected at the twentieth floor as she sped up, flying over the dunes while the Fae steered her.

“I can see five moving beings within the hall beyond this gate,” the elf said.

“I’m pretty sure there are six,” Maro added.

“Five or six then, might be one is hiding. I assume it’s Verita and a close knit group with her,” Catelyn said and looked over the group.

The enchantments had been broken and they could teleport in.

“Again, I won’t ask you to help but another healer would certainly be useful,” the fox said, addressing the survivors.

Hana shook her head, “If there is anything we can do to help, we will.”

“I agree,” Relly said and tightened the chains around his scaled arms.

“They have been moving around frantically for the past two minutes, I assume corruption,” the elf added.

“Then let us put an end to it,” Catelyn said and grew to her large form, the heat around them increasing instantly.

Hana forced herself not to hiss, her body not made for such temperatures. Her Heat Resistance didn't help much with the discomfort she felt.

"Everyone ready?" the fox asked once more, getting a variety of confirmations from the group.

"On three, one, two, go," she vanished and so did Hana.

The lizardwoman appeared within a spacious hall with a variety of steel beams and stairs as well as several doors leading out. The center of the room was elevated, a set of stairs leading up from each side. In the midst of it floated a sphere of steel, hundreds of glowing runes adorned it all. The power it emanated could be felt even from twenty meters away.

Hana gripped her blade as she heard the growls from the corrupted scavengers and explorers, former members of the Hallowfort expedition.

They all rushed forward, Verita at the front with two glowing blades that seemed to sear through the very air. One warrior using two sickles, moving quickly as he jumped over a steel beam.

[Corrupted Warrior - ??]

[Corrupted Warrior - ??]

A second warrior approached from the right, wielding a monster's spine with a steel tip that glinted in the cold magical light.

She felt the power of a curse grip her, making her unable to move as the air cooled down around her. Hana spotted the floating cursed mage a little farther back, clad in a dark cloak.

A second mage appeared on their left, powerful mind magic nearly knocking her out on the spot as she roared and activated all her buffs. *We are doomed*, she thought, seeing the spine tip lash out towards her from the warrior that had closed the distance.

A white barrier appeared in front of her, the weapon shattering against it uselessly before the white shield splintered and vanished, pieces of it appearing around the warrior before his armor was shredded through by the shrapnel.

Purple beams slammed into both mages at the same time, a bright red flame engulfing the second warrior and Verita.

The latter didn't seem to care, ramming her blades into the white barrier that formed in front of Catelyn. The corrupted body of Verita vanished and appeared behind Catelyn, immediately slammed down by several of her tails before she turned and opened her maw.

Hana had to look away from the bright flames, seeing instead how the necromancer appeared close to the left mage, purple energy engulfing the dark one, decaying its armor and skin until only bone remained.

The second mage was caught within four barriers that squeezed together, forcing his limbs into unnatural positions. Seven white spikes of runed magic appeared around him, slamming into slight openings in the barrier and through his body, killing him instantly.

The sickle wielder fought against the first layer guardian, his weapons deflected as he was quickly reduced to minced meat by masterful strikes of four swords.

The curse had nearly faded, Hana's hand gripping her blade as she started running at the heavily injured corrupted warrior, dodging his spine weapon before her blade dug deep into his neck.

She turned and squinted her eyes, bright flames still emanating from Catelyn. The others had jumped away from her. A noise resounded in her mind a couple seconds later, spelling the death of perhaps the most fearsome and powerful expedition leader.

She shared a look with Relly, both of them astonished by the display they had just witnessed. They truly were amongst monsters.

“Was that all of them?” the elf asked, dropping the corrupted mage corpse to the floor before he approached the central platform.

The necromancer shook his head but approached the sphere as well, “There’s something else in here, atop that beam,” he said and pointed up at one of the steel protrusions connecting the central platform and the ceiling.

“I remain untainted and am an ally!” the panicked voice suddenly came from an unknown place in the hall.

Hana looked at where the necromancer had indicated and saw the air shimmer before a being revealed itself, unfocused and lacking any defining features other than six arms and a torso.

“A Dark Sprite,” Maro said, interest apparent as he looked at the being.

“One should not point out the species of a being ascended,” the elf commented.

“Sure, you’re exactly the one that would care about dark one social etiquette,” Maro said and waved at the sprite.

“You better come down and explain yourself before you meet the same fate as the others,” he said in a charming yet cold tone.

Catelyn roared before she bit down and ripped off Verita’s corrupted head, throwing it to the side before the body followed, crashing against the gate.

The fox stepped away and casually removed the blades deeply set within her chest. Blood vaporized as it touched her flames, the wounds slowly healing. “Human, some assistance if you will,” she said, glancing at Jonna.

“O... of course,” she answered and moved closer, her healing magic flowing out.

Catelyn’s expression relaxed as she closed her eyes.

“My name is Met, I am part of the expedition... same as some of you present... please, I am not your enemy,” the dark one said and slowly floated down towards them.

Catelyn, Maro and the elf spent the next twenty minutes interrogating the survivor.

Hana had her own questions but the hierarchy here was clear. Making the de facto head of Hallowfort come down to the twentieth layer of the Descent to find out what the fuck had happened wasn’t something that occurred every day, not even every decade.

Verita had found the hall and tried to convince the leadership to focus on the device, to try and unlock its secrets. She had thought it the central piece to the Descent and a tool to unlock its secrets and treasures.

Both Nima and Venekov, the other expedition leaders had thought it too dangerous and unknown. Studying the sphere was a low priority and to be left to the enchanters.

And so Verita got together a small team of trusted or well paid others and tried anyway.

“She was sure to have understood the sphere, despite the language being something I had never heard before,” Met explained.

“The sphere can talk?” Maro asked, looking at the thing.

“Yes, I believe it to be a living core of sorts to this facility. The spread of the corruption you have reported is regrettable but it confirms the influence of this device,” the sprite said.

Catelyn growled in annoyance. She didn’t act of course, knowing about the nature of many sprites. Its actions had unexpected results but it was not driven by malice or greed, merely by curiosity.

“And why did she activate the corruption?” Catelyn asked, “Or did she not understand the being?”

“The mind mage that had fallen to corruption, slain now by you, he had a talent for languages. It seems a translation error has caused Verita to activate something she should not have chosen,” Met replied.

“A translation error?” Catelyn hissed. “Then why are you alive? You mentioned corruption spreading into the room, infecting your companions who fell to it after some time.”

“I believe it to be a form of Blood Manipulation. You see, the second tier of a resistance to such magic will prevent the spread of an infection, fight it even,” the sprite answered.

“I have heard of this too,” Carul said from the side, he looked down when the attention shifted to him.

“It is rare to see such magic,” Met said.

“That explains some things,” Maro muttered. “Can you prove it?”

Met floated to one of the corpses and took a little of the orange goo, spreading it on one of its arms. The corruption settled before it was eaten away by an invisible force until nothing remained but the sprite’s dark form.

“There’s a cure then,” Catelyn sighed, her face looking relieved.

“For those with sufficient strength to endure it,” the elf said.

“And a healer... or a couple to keep it at bay,” Maro said. “You there, how’s your mana? I’d like to get this second tier resistance as we figure out what to do from here,” he nodded to Jonna.

Hana didn’t like his tone but couldn’t deny the usefulness of that resistance. She herself was already halfway towards the second tier. Maybe she would join him, now that such knowledge was revealed.