

Chapter 385 Mine Residents

The tunnel ceiling rumbled, chunks of stone falling down as a set of ashen limbs pushed through.

The group was waiting, hovering over the huge pointed rocks spreading over the ground of the sixth layer.

Ilea was wedged between the stone, her ashen limbs digging into the ground and ripping through the several meters thick ceiling. She could tell it wasn't the separation to the next layer but merely another part of this one.

A tunnel led through underground, found by her sphere after they had flown over the lowest point of the layer for a couple of minutes.

"Are you sure she's the best for the job?" Maro asked, looking at Ilas. "You know Elfie has barriers."

Elfie hissed at the mention of the nickname. "Must you call me the same way she does?"

"Well now I certainly must." The necromancer replied in a matter of fact tone.

"He cannot see through stone. Either way, we will break through." Ilas replied as he moved a little closer to Ilea.

"A fireball would have accomplished the same." Maro said again but was ignored by the group.

Lucas moved closer and started to extend his roots before he stopped and floated back again.

"She... seems to have it covered." He said, glancing at Catelyn with an awkward smile.

"Did it!" Ilea exclaimed as she broke through, her wings moving to keep her in place. Chunks of rock tumbled down with a deafening crashing sound.

"Thank you." Catelyn said and floated closer. "Shall we?"

Ilea gave her a thumbs up and moved down, landing in the crude tunnel. "Hello!" She shouted, waiting for a moment before she waved to the others.

"Nothing here." She added and walked along the tunnel, the others quickly following behind.

The way bent after a while, leading downwards. The angle was too steep to walk, the group using their various flying magic to get down.

After an about fifty meter descent, Ilea could see the shattered remains of the stone that had once separated these layers. "Number seven." She said with a smile.

"Indeed." Ilas said as he touched the chunks of differently colored rock jutting out of the tunnel walls.

"If the corruption has reached this deep, few beasts will be able to get up to the higher layers." Catelyn said and sniffed the air. "I believe something has burrowed through here."

"The corruption has reached the higher layers. We must assume this natural barrier is not enough to stop the beasts lurking below." Niivalyr said as he looked down.

“Going to be hard to find all the monsters if they burrow through the stone.” Ilea said and punched the wall lightly.

“Do not underestimate a beast’s perception. They might very well know of our passing already.” Ilas said, gesturing her to move ahead.

Ilea continued, moving next to Catelyn in her small form.

The tunnel ended a couple minutes later and opened up into what looked like a slightly deformed makeshift mine.

Ancient withered wooden beams supported parts of the walls and ceiling, metal sockets made to hold torches still clung to the walls. Empty. Every single one.

Spheres of warm light drifted into each side of the corridor.

Ilea activated her Sentinel Huntress skill and checked both ways with her sphere. There were signs of magic as well as some faded tracks but nothing she could pin on someone or something, let alone follow it.

“A mine.” Niivalyr commented. “Crude, human. To extract metals and the like. It seems dangerous, so deep within the dungeon.” He added, looking around before his eyes fixated on the wooden beam sitting five meters above, not looking like it had been meant to support the tunnel for more than a couple years. Those years had passed perhaps a thousand ago, perhaps more.

“The stone itself should hold.” Lucas said as he looked up. “Little strain is on the wood.” He smiled, reassuring the elf.

“The dangers men are willing to go to are directly correlating to what kind of reward hide within these walls.” Maro said and knocked on the stone.

“We would survive a cave in.” Ilea said confidently and got up from her crouched position.

“You would.” Maro replied. “And no, we’re not going to test that. There is no cave in resistance.”

“How would you know though?” Ilea asked in a whisper, her ashen limbs slowly moving to a nearby wooden beam.

“Please, do not.” Ilas said and extended a hand.

Ilea rolled her eyes. “I’m joking.” She paused and looked down the tunnels. “Where to?”

“Should we attract the beasts again?” Catelyn asked, looking towards Ilas.

“It seems unwise.” He replied and pointed down in one direction. “Both lead down. We know not what lurks here. We shall wait until we have fought one or two, before we call upon the rest.”

“Fine with me.” Ilea said and started walking.

They came upon a fork in the tunnel about twenty minutes of walking later, some of them having eaten a meal on the way. Ilea of course being one of them.

Two tracks of rusted metal led along the newfound tunnels, dented and ripped apart in sections still visible to the group.

Ilea looked at the Dark One, their now pretty much official map person and guide. She assumed he had some kind of innate ability not to lose his way in a labyrinth of tunnels, able to tell north from south even without a compass or stars present.

He pointed silently, perhaps a little envious of the smell Ilea's meal had exuded, some of it still hanging in the air around her.

"Looks like whatever destroyed those tracks burrowed out from below." Maro commented as he crouched down near the tracks. "Hard to say what it was."

"Veramath perhaps. Yet beasts of such levels have no difficulty destroying forged steel." Ilas added. "We will find out soon enough."

Catelyn walked ahead. "We should look for a place with more space before we try to attract any beasts. I'd rather not fight in these tunnels."

"If this is just a mine, carved into solid rock then we won't be finding any massive caverns." Maro replied.

"Quiet." Ilas said and put his head on the floor. "Prepare. It seems... something is approaching."

The group tenses up, spreading out in the dull and small mining corridor.

Ilea started tapping the floor with two ashen limbs. She watched as the others started flying, Lucas moving back where they had come from.

Maro summoned a few corpses from his storage ring and revived them, copying Ilea's idea as he floated a little further away.

With Lucas' light sources gone, they relied on Catelyn.

"Any of you need light to fight?" Ilea asked.

Nobody replied, mana exuding from them as their spells came to life.

"The forest would have been difficult." Maro finally said. "These tunnels are fine either way."

Ilea felt it too now, light vibrations coming from below. Something was burrowing up towards them. It got stronger with each passing second but still barely notable even with all her skills.

The creatures entered her sphere and broke out of the ground in nearly the same moment.

A ten meter long centipede like creature with a black shell protecting its upper body. Instead of feet it had fang like protrusions coming out of its stretched out belly, hundreds of them and each humming with magic.

Ilea felt the attack before it came and decided not to blink in that instant.

[Shade Shredder – lvl ???]

The thing was over a meter in diameter, quickly wrapping itself around Ilea as her ash started cutting into it.

Its shell was dented before a surge of mana rushed through it, the fangs grinding over the ashen armor suddenly extending and sharpening.

Wind magic? Ilea felt the somewhat familiar mana cut into her ash, digging deeper with each passing moment.

Her own mana was pushing into the creature, her ashen limbs not finding purchase on the powerful shell nor the sea of blades below.

Storm of Cinders and her reversed healing were dealing damage as she counter healed the damage done to her armor.

She withstood the crushing damage and tried to get her arms out to deliver some punches. Unsuccessfully, as she tumbled to the floor with the beast wrapping around her once more.

Sharp wind magic enhanced claws, spikes and teeth like protrusions moved past her face and dug into her eyes before she covered them with ash as well.

They rolled through the tunnel, Ilea's limbs slashing into the creature as it was cutting into her.

When she was far enough from the others, Heart of Cinder released and burnt into the screeching monster.

It didn't let go however, despite the burn marks showing both on its shell and the skin around its bladed stomach.

The beast grew more frantic, moving faster as its magic increased in power. It managed to get through the ash and ground against the bone below.

The loud grating sound pounded in Ilea's ears as she reformed her ash and continued her assault, slamming the grappling beast into the walls with whatever purchase she got with her legs or wings.

Blinking didn't work at the moment but she wasn't terribly concerned so far. The beast out damaged her armor's healing but it hadn't yet managed to get to her skin. Her third tier recovery didn't work on her ash armor but it did work on her body.

The constant flow of additional mana thanks to its wind magic was a nice touch as well, the creature not understanding that it was fueling her with the attacks.

Heart of Cinder released again, smoke rising from the burnt skin. The stone around them disintegrated in parts, both Ilea and the creature tougher than whatever material the tunnel was made of.

Her strength wasn't enough to get out, the Shredder wrapping around her more and more tightly. Ilea's armor was through by now, the bone providing a momentary barrier but nothing compared to the ashen defense on top.

A thousand lines of red blood formed slowly as the shredder moved around her.

Ilea got her elbow free and started punching the creature with little force but added Absolute Destruction.

Pain disabled, Ilea continued her attacks, noticing that after another couple hits, the creature was slowing down. Its wind aided blades weren't digging as deep as they had before.

Sentinel Reconstruction now outweighed the damage dealt, her destructive mana still flowing into the creature from both her touch as well as the sixteen limbs that pushed past and through the gaps left behind by the creature, delivering Storm of Cinders continuously.

Its grip finally loosened, the creature untangling as its head dived towards the ground, black blood dripping from various dents and cuts the ashen limbs had managed to deal.

What do you think this is? Ilea thought, ashen armor reforming on her torn and bloody skin as her limbs grappled around the creature, her legs closing around it as it started to burrow into the ground with a stone manipulation skill.

Ilea held on, most of her limbs now trying to stop the Shredder from moving further into the stone.

It was bleeding profoundly now, various injuries obvious as it struggled against the hold of the ash healer.

She would have likely not been able to hold on, had the creature been at its full strength. However with all its injuries and Ilea now focusing on the open cuts with a few of her limbs, its screeches and struggles soon became death throes.

A grin spread on her face as she finally ripped it out of the floor, pummeling it with punches and her limbs as it twitched, a few of its fangs still flickering with wind magic from time to time.

'ding' 'You have defeated [Shade Shredder – lvl 532] – For defeating an enemy two hundred and ten or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted.'

'ding' 'The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 316 – Five stat points awarded'

'ding' 'Kin of Ash has reached lvl 315 – Five stat points awarded'

Ilea ignored the messages and rushed back to the others, her bone armor regenerating from the bits and pieces that had remained. The whole right side of her helmet was gone, as was most of its torso and legs.

Her body was wet with her own blood but she had no time to take care of it now, blinking through the corridors before she saw the light of fire.

One of the creatures was burrowing itself into the stone, bleeding and scorched, a huge chunk of its middle section missing. Decayed.

She focused on the one still going, flickers of magical barriers visible from where the monster had grappled to.

Maro was to the side, heaving in shredded armor as a dull purple fire was blazing around him. He looked rough in her sphere but alive.

Catelyn nearly filled up the whole of the tunnel, her fire surging as she burnt the sides of the remaining creature, trying not to injure the grappled elf. A difficult task.

Ilea saw flickers of Ilas appearing as his blades cut into weakened portions of the shredder right before she appeared.

Her ashen limbs moved through the gaps and started healing the elf, the sound of cracking and shattering barriers audible.

Good thing he got that pain tolerance. She thought, seeing the state of his body. Ilea couldn't reach Maro from where she was but he had survived worse.

Punches and destructive mana slammed into the Shredder, still outpacing her healing.

Niivalyr was hanging on to life with his barriers and Ilea's help, all his mana focused on defending himself in the precarious situation.

One of her limbs ripped off a chunk of the monster's shell, Ilas immediately appearing as his steel dug into the exposed flesh.

The creature was screeching in pain, the combined damage overwhelming its predatory senses.

It slowed down and let go, quickly slithering away.

Ilea immediately caught Elfie, his armor mostly in tatters. Her healing flowed into him as she sent a couple ashen spears at the fleeing creature. Two of her ashen limbs extended and released Heart of Cinder in a cone.

At the same time, Catelyn teleported past and unleashed an inferno that singed the ground and walls near the group, ten meters farther back.

Only a smoldering husk remained of the Shredder.

Catelyn moved on to the third one, its plated and protected head with four eyes and circular maw frantically pushing through the rock as it tried to carry its heavily injured body away from the fox.

Another screech resounded before a several meter red and hot crater was revealed when Catelyn shrunk once more, her form no longer blocking sight of the tunnel.

She immediately appeared next to Maro, a bright flame touching the man and mending his wounds.

Niivalyr coughed and nearly staggered back, caught by Ilea as his eyes widened.

"Another twenty seconds." She said simply, her body covered in ash. "How many were there?" She asked.

'ding' 'Your group has defeated [Shade Shredder – lvl 510] – For defeating an enemy one hundred and ninety or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted.'

'ding' 'Your group has defeated [Shade Shredder – lvl 468] – For defeating an enemy one hundred and forty or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted.'

"Four." Ilas said and faced the way they had come from. "The sound of battle still resides." He added, blades at the ready.

"Go, I'll take care of them." Catelyn said, nodding to Ilea and Ilas.

Ilea gently moved Elfie to the wall and helped him sit down. The most pressing injuries had been dealt with but he was still riddled with cuts and bruises, certainly looking more like a corpse than anything else.

"Th..." he started and coughed again.

"Your throat is still fucked, don't talk yet." Ilea said and vanished, following the quick moving Dark One through the tunnel.

His teleportation was quicker than hers, Ilea losing sight of him in her sphere. The sounds were audible now however.

Roots filled half the cave, Ilea blinking through.

Bloodied wood covered Lucas, the Shredder grinding against his defenses as thorns and roots cut into it in turn. Both were injured it seemed.

A beam of bright light cut into the beast as it screeched and increased its tempo.

Ilea dodged the roots going for her and blinked closer, her ashen limbs slashing into the Shredder as it dug through Lucas' armor of wood.

He screamed in anguish and anger when it cut into his flesh, another bright beam of light brushing past the monster, cleaving a deep smoldering cut into the stone tunnel wall. Not enough to penetrate the creature's defenses but it left a heated streak.

Ilas tried coming closer but disappeared again when a wooden tendril slammed through one of his arms. He winced and hovered near the ceiling.

"Get back to the others. I have this under control." Ilea said, healing Lucas as he screamed and lashed out. His attacks lashed into her ashen armor, not quite managing to get through.

She charged destruction for a couple seconds and slammed her fist into the Shredder's head, stunning it for a split second as the magic flowed through its brain.

Her limbs slashed into its eyes with thin and sharp tips, digging as deep as they could before it started moving again.

Slower now, the combined effort of Ilea and Lucas definitely showing as it dragged a black streak of blood over the wood, screeching in pain.

The delay in its attack had allowed Lucas to reform some of his defenses, the slower creature having a hard time getting through by now.

It noticed as much after a couple of seconds but by then it was too late. Ashe and wooden tendrils gripped around it, light and destructive healing magic shredding through its defenses and body before it died, within their grasp.

Ilea deflected the roots coming from her as the elder ripped apart the Shredder corpse. She punched his protected head and started cutting into the wooden helmet.

"Stop it, Lucas. It's dead." She shouted, regenerating her damaged ashen armor against his assault. "It's me! Ilea!"

Finally, dozens of projectiles, roots and light beams later, the elder calmed down. The defenses quickly receded, revealing the man below, covered in blood and injuries quickly healing.

He blinked, embarrassed and full of regret as he stared at the healer.

"Don't give me that old man. We both knew this would happen." She said and flicked his forehead, the blow rocking his head back.