

## Chapter 413 Ghosts

Ilea and her Fae companion found themselves in an eerily quiet cavern. It expanded for kilometers in each direction, crystal growing on several pillars that reached from the bottom to the top.

Stalactites overgrown with the shiny mineral grew from the distant stone ceiling.

*Maybe the crystal is the real corruption here,* Ilea wondered as she looked up.

*Shiny*

“Yeah, it’s pretty shiny. Do you want some?” she asked.

The Fae tilted its head, not quite understanding the question it seemed.

“Crystal,” she said and pointed up and then to the Fae.

It shook its head.

*Well... that was. Something?*

Ilea chuckled to herself as she started walking through the layer. So far there was no movement visible at all.

*Sad*

“Sad? You’re sad?” Ilea asked.

The Fae didn’t react, its white eyes focused ahead.

They walked a couple dozen meters farther before Ilea halted. She perceived something ahead of them. A humanoid shape without a face or discernible legs. Her eyes didn’t inform her of the presence but her sphere did.

***[Spirit of Elysium – lvl ???]***

Identify worked as soon as she focused on the skill through her sphere’s perception.

The being didn’t do anything, simply remained where it was.

“Hey there,” Ilea said and waved at the creature.

The Fae looked up to her before a giggling sound came into her head.

“Shut it, you should greet them too. It’s rude to stare at a stranger,” she reprimanded the creature on her shoulder, making sure a hint of joy remained in her voice.

The Fae stared at her for a moment before it turned and waved at the Spirit.

The being of course, did not wave back.

*Rude*

“Yeah, maybe a little,” Ilea said and walked around the creature, leaving it alone for now. If it didn’t attack her, she had no reason to do the same.

She kept an eye on it through her sphere and they were quickly past the thing.

“Weird. Was that why you said sad before? Because of them?” Ilea asked, seeing more of the spirits floating around. She didn’t get an answer.

The skeletons of various creatures and destroyed rusted gear that soon started to pop up didn’t exactly create an inviting atmosphere. Her nose picked up very little, meaning most of these creatures had died some time ago.

*Others made it this far then*, she thought, picking up the broken handle of an axe or whatever weapon it had once been.

A sniff didn’t tell her anything about the thing. She held it out to the Fae that seemed interested.

It grabbed the handle and held it, sitting down once again.

*Hmm*, she mused and continued through the open cavern. More of the spirits showed themselves from time to time. None were hostile.

*I mean if that’s it?* She thought and spread her wings before speeding up and flying through the cavern.

The exits to the next layers were usually either straight down or ahead. Usually.

This time she could see from pretty far away that there was a break in the crystal growth on the far wall. Likely where the way to number eighteen was located.

She noted that some of the spirits appeared even fifty meters above ground, where she was currently flying.

The only thing she noticed was that near all of them were to her right.

“Can you talk to them?” she asked the Fae.

It nodded a couple seconds later, holding the handle a little closer to its body.

“Want to talk about it?” she asked, finding it strangely easy to be open and nice to the Fae. Perhaps it wasn’t that strange with how otherworldly the creature felt to her.

She let it be when it didn’t react, not about to pry. It was difficult enough having to deal with the lacking communication tools.

*Layer seventeen seems like a bloody waste*, she thought and landed near the cave at the end. She already saw the steel gate that lead out.

Her sphere picked up something when she got closer. Sentinel Huntress activated and let her know that her team had moved through here. Not too long ago.

There were also signs of a struggle, older however than the tracks her group had left behind.

Something was scratched into stone, right next to the gate.

Ilea couldn’t read it.

She tapped the absent Fae with an ashen tendril moving out from her armor. “Can you read that?” she asked, pointing at the scribbling.

The Fae nodded silently.

*Violence bad.*

*Disagree.*

“The first thing is the translation?” Ilea asked, assuming the second part had been added by the creature.

The Fae nodded.

“Why do you perfectly understand me sometimes and then you just don’t again? It’s almost like you answer on a whim and ignore me when you feel like it,” Ilea said, turning her head lightly towards the creature.

*Agree*

“Asshat,” she said with a smile. Ilea wasn’t annoyed. She had always preferred people who were more direct. For once, it wasn’t a criminal trying to fight her.

The Fae sent a giggle.

“Now I want some violence too,” Ilea said and blinked past the door.

---

Hana bit into the piece of wood Jonna had handed to her. She glanced at her arm, nearly overcome with corruption.

She nodded to Relly, the large saurian watching her with an unsure expression. His armor had been destroyed again in the fight.

The more aggressive three corrupted had been taken down rather easily but Krentin had certainly put up a fight.

*Just as I hoped he would*, Hana thought. She was proud to have chosen him as a team leader and it wouldn’t have been right if his corrupted body hadn’t at least nearly killed some of them.

His cunning and planning didn’t come into play this time, mainly the reason why their group had prevailed at all.

“Dew it,” she said through the piece of wood.

Relly seemed to find some courage, gripping her blade before he lifted it above himself.

Jonna’s healing kept the corruption at bay but in the long term, there was only one thing that could be done.

The blade came down with all his strength, aimed rather well. It slashed into her arm, near the shoulder.

Hana bit through the wood and hissed. Her over sized blade wasn’t exactly made for producing nice cuts. Most of the flesh was separated however, the bone nearly broken through.

Relly ripped it out and cut down again, separating the rest.

She was glad he hadn't hesitated again.

Hana focused on the healing magic flowing through her, ignoring the pain from the severed arm and the bleeding. While it wasn't the first time she had lost a limb, it wasn't exactly her favorite.

Jonna's magic could recover lost limbs, if the injury wasn't older than a couple weeks.

"Th-" Hana started and realized she had bitten into her tongue, spitting out a piece as well as a substantial amount of blood before she continued. "This is going to take a while. You better start looking, Carul."

The mage nodded, suspiciously quiet.

"We shouldn't remain here. The area is too open, there are bound to be creatures nearby still," Relly said, handing her the blade back with a nod. "Well done."

"I don't need your praise. I want to burn the corpse of our companion. Your lightning should help," Hana said, looking over at the destroyed body of Krentin.

Jonna nodded behind her but kept working on her arm.

"We should not stay here... I sense several beings in the vicinity. It will only be a matter of t-" Carul said but stopped abruptly when he glanced into Hana's eyes.

"We will make haste," Relly said as he started piling wood and fabric from the tents and boxes their camp had consisted of before the ambush.

Some few in the expedition had storage items, carrying most of the supplies through the layers while the rest was traveling light, focused on staying hidden through the various spells.

Now of course, most of the supplies were useless. They had no way of getting anything out anyway. The saurian handed everyone some food he found as he continued to pile up things. He too was chewing on a piece of dried meat.

The group hadn't eaten much in weeks, surviving only thanks to their high level and experience.

"Are you sure you don't want to eat the bodies?" Relly asked, moving the first one on top of the makeshift pyre.

"There is enough food around, no need for cannibalism," Jonna said in a tired voice. She had been rather badly injured too in the battle. It really was a blessing that both her and Hana had spent so much time training with Krentin, their dark magic resistance reflecting years of traveling together.

"Humans do not eat their fallen companions. Don't start, she won't shut up about it," Hana said with a strained voice, watching her arm slowly reform.

Carul snorted at that but Relly just nodded and continued moving the bodies.

A spark of lightning set it aflame a couple minutes later.

The mage hid them with a shadow spell, including the fire.

*You better build up a reputation wherever you are now, old friend, she thought and held her curved sword out towards the flames, using only her left arm. I will be joining you soon.*

It took Carul nearly an hour to find the tracks he had mentioned. Weeks had passed but most of these corridors hadn't been walked in centuries, making every change stand out.

Jonna looked at every intersection, every door and room. She had an exceptional memory for places. Krentin had usually sketched a map as they explored dungeons but in an emergency, even he had trusted the healer to find the way.

"We are approaching the core of this facility. If it is built symmetrical," Jonna commented, eyes focused on the dead scorpions.

Patrons of Torment, shredded apart by magic. At least five of them.

In the midst of the carnage remained a halved dark one quite familiar to all of them.

"Nima," Relly said as he approached. "She must have been caught."

"Or she protected someone," Hana said. "Why wouldn't she teleport away from them?"

"Out of mana?" Carul suggested and checked the surroundings, "However I agree with her, there are various tracks leading away. A little less old than the ones leading to... the center," he said, glancing at Jonna with the last word.

"Perhaps. If there are survivors then they would be in hiding, let us move on," Relly said.

"We should check for items, her armor might fit onto one of your shoulders," Hana said and started going through the remains.

"Or yours," the saurian replied.

Hana hissed, "You are the strongest here. If we are to succeed, we have to make sure you are equipped with the best gear possible."

"Agreed," Jonna said.

Carul nodded.

"Very well," Relly said and started prying the pieces off the chunks of flesh still sticking to it.

Jonna looked away.

Hana glanced at the healer but didn't comment. Humans were sensitive in ways she will never understand.

"Did she not own a ring?" Relly asked, looking at Nima's hands.

"She did," Carul said.

"Then someone came here before us?" Hana asked.

"It is likely," Relly said and put the remains down again. They would feed another.

The group moved on through the corridors, avoiding any stray corrupted monsters until they reached a massive closed steel gate. Three Patrons of Torment were crawling on the ground in front of it, occasionally clawing at the walls or hitting it with their spiked venom filled tails.

Deep gashes and dents in the metal showed how powerful the creatures were but also how thick and resilient these particular gates seemed to be.

“Can we take three?” Relly asked in a whisper. “This is the core, is it not?”

Jonna nodded.

“I cannot fight one alone,” Hana admitted. As much as she wanted to run in there and battle the creatures, she wouldn’t risk her group for a foolish attempt. Krentin had explained the benefits of caution and calculated risks to her many a time. Some of it stuck.

“I cannot fight them, they would rip me apart,” Jonna whispered.

“We could sneak past, teleport inside,” Relly said.

“We do not know how thick the gates are and if there are enchantments in place against intrusion,” Hana said.

“Right,” Relly commented. “Perhaps there is another w-” he said, interrupted by Carul.

“Something is approaching. I have just perceived them. They are... shrouded... I know that spell. We may have potential allies coming,” he said, nodding towards where they had come from.

“Let us not reveal ourselves until we know what or who we are dealing with,” Hana said and took the lead. “There may be creatures here with similar spells.”

Jonna nodded.

“We should not meet them here, so close to the monsters,” Relly said.

They moved farther back through the steel corridors occasionally broken through by one of the Fang Shapers. None were close by anymore at least.

“They are here,” Carul said in a whisper.

Hana couldn’t see anything.

“We have no choice,” Relly said and teleported out of the spell’s influence.

He appeared with open arms, a couple meters away from the group. Close enough that they could interfere should the shrouded being be an enemy.

“Greetings. I am a warrior of Hallowfort and I ask you to reveal yourself,” Relly said in a confident voice.

*Not what I would have said,* Hana thought and watched.

A couple seconds passed before a shadow appeared, the veil lifted.

Her eyes went wide as she glanced the familiar forms of Catelyn and the first layer guardian, whose name she did not know.

“Relly,” Catelyn said, glancing over at Hana who stepped out of the spell as well, followed by the others. “It is good to see you.”

The fox did not reveal any emotion in her voice but Hana could sense it nonetheless.

“It is good to see some of you have survived. I had nearly lost all hope,” she said and nodded to them all.

Hana chuckled and walked over, giving a glance to the other companions, one clad in armor, the other in robes, their faces hidden.

**[Necromancer - ??]**

**[Mage - ??]**

*Powerful beings*, she noted. The guardian too was beyond her identification range. She could tell the two beings were close to even Catelyn's might. *Who are they?*

She hadn't seen either of them in Hallowfort before. People came and went, many exploring the landscape or scavenging in dungeons for months at a time but after decades, she thought she had met most residents. Those powerful at the very least.

"The corruption, what happened?" Catelyn asked a moment later, looking over the group that had revealed itself.

Relly glanced to Hana and then back to Catelyn. "We reached the twentieth layer with some difficulties. Especially the last layer. Even the combined effort of our spells could not shelter us against the creatures," Relly said and paused for a moment.

"We were recovering, choosing this facility as a place to set camp for a while. I assumed the leaders decided we should not move deeper. Even with all the preparation, the monsters had noticed us. Beyond what we could manage in terms of sheer power."

"Many started to explore this layer, find and retrieve whatever treasure they could. It wasn't... well, it wasn't exactly as lucrative as many had thought," he explained.

"Two days in, the monsters changed their behavior. They moved in a more aggressive way, driven by something beyond their instincts and hunger alone. They pursued without relent and soon we figured out why. A corruption had infected them... as you have found too. Your presence here is worrying. Has it spread farther up?" he asked finally.

Catelyn listened to saurian and nodded. "I had hoped you knew more. Yes. Corruption has befallen many species in the dungeon. A large horde spilled into the first layer, threatening to infect much more than just the Descent."

They were quiet for a moment, shame and realization coming over them.

"We were on our way to the core of this facility," Jonna said.

Carul nodded. "I saw a group leaving in this direction shortly before the monsters were corrupted."

"You did?" Catelyn asked. "Why did you not intervene?"

The mage quieted down, glancing at the others for help.

"They were exploring already. I would assume the group had nothing to do with it. He's just trying to find someone to blame," the necromancer commented, unbothered by the powerful dark one. His voice sounded tired.

Hana assumed he was a human. The robed one, she wasn't sure about yet. Something made her apprehensive when she looked at him.

The being hissed.

She knew the sound and jumped back, taking her blade from her back as she hissed back. “Elf,” she stated.

“And an ally,” Catelyn said. “My apologies Carul. It has not been a simple journey. We came to destroy the source of the corruption. What is this core you spoke of, young healer?”

“It is my assumption that we are close to the center of the facility, considering its size and the make of its corridors,” Jonna said calmly.

“Good, then let us go there. We have wasted enough time,” Catelyn said.

“We should wait for the human,” the elf said, not moving an inch.

Catelyn stopped and turned. “She had enough time to catch up. I am tired of hiding and waiting. We have found remnants of the expedition. This is the layer where it started and here we shall destroy our enemies.”

The necromancer chuckled, giving the group a look over. “These people won’t add much, they’re not even above two fifty. Except for this guy,” he nodded to Relly. “My name is Maro, pleased to make your acquaintance.”

Hana hissed once more. “To be insulted by someone like you, who toys with death.”

“We are here to destroy the corruption and to prevent its spread,” the elf said. “Too many have died already, let us set aside our differences.”

Maro chuckled, “Now you sound like Ilea. Sure you’re an elf?”

“Your provocations are tiring, king. And your attempt to mask your fear is childish,” the elf retorted.

Catelyn growled, getting everyone’s attention. “Relly. Are there monsters guarding the core?”

The saurian nodded. “Three Patrons of Torment. Their levels range around five hundred to five hundred fifty. They have powerful venom, all are corrupted,” he quickly supplied.

“A lower level than higher up then. How peculiar. We should be able to handle that easily, even without her. Don’t you agree Elf?”

He didn’t say anything.

“Then let us kill those creatures and let off some steam. We all seem to need it,” Catelyn said as she grew to ten times her size, the surroundings heating up to an uncomfortable degree. Her eyes burned with anger and impatience, her teeth ready to tear and shred.