

Ilea sat down on one of the rocks, watching the waters flow by in a serene beauty. *Hmm...*

Maybe it isn't as bad as I thought, she mused, forming another small ashen pebble in her hand before she threw it.

The Varass Drowners were attracted by small disturbances like that, she had realized. Most of the time only one attacked, making her assume they had territories or some form of communication.

If the latter was true then they certainly failed to convey how deadly this new enemy coming to their layer really was.

She had killed an additional eight of them already, spending at least half an hour with each as they used their magic on her.

They thrashed and spewed their acid while pressing down hundreds of liters of water on top of her, increasing the weight ten or even a hundred fold. It was hard to tell without an industrial scale.

Perhaps some might consider it animal abuse but Ilea felt them rather fairly treated, considering her skin was constantly melted and her body nearly squashed whenever she engaged them. Neither was it a matter of hunting the helpless creatures. They came to hunt her all by themselves, realizing too late that their prey was different to the fish and gulls they normally killed.

Ilea was aware that she was justifying her murderous behavior, knowing full well that simply leaving them in peace would allow their ecosystem to remain stable, perhaps even grow. And yet she didn't really care. Knowing how it felt to be drowned with the help of gravity magic kind of squashed any remaining empathy she had for the creatures.

If they ran away or avoided her, it might have been a different situation but they weren't. In a world where humanity would likely never be close to a dominant species, worries like these were a luxury. One Ilea would certainly indulge in from time to time, feeling more inclined to trust a monster than a human.

She checked her growth from the training, debating if it was already enough for this layer.

'ding' 'You have defeated [Vile Varass Drowner – lvl 519]

...

'ding' 'You have defeated [Vile Varass Drowner – lvl 562]

'ding' 'The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 329 – Five stat points awarded'

'ding' 'Kin of Ash has reached lvl 328 – Five stat points awarded'

She was getting close to another third tier point again. Between Huntress and Perception, she didn't exactly have a preference. *Both will be there at one point or another*, she thought.

'ding' 'Sentinel Sphere reaches 3rd lvl 3'

'ding' 'Sentinel Sphere reaches 3rd lvl 4'

The skill had helped tremendously in collecting the acid from the creatures, as well as pull more power from the gravity magic. Not that the latter really made sense to her but somehow it had worked.

‘ding’ ‘Azarinth Reversal reaches 3rd lvl 15’

‘ding’ ‘Aspect of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 17’

‘ding’ ‘Ash and Ember Unity reaches 3rd lvl 15’

‘ding’ ‘Avatar of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 5’

‘ding’ ‘Avatar of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 6’

‘ding’ ‘Harmony of the Drowned reaches lvl 3’

‘ding’ ‘Harmony of the Drowned reaches lvl 4’

‘ding’ ‘Harmony of the Drowned reaches lvl 5’

The fact that she had faced powerful monsters with a quite obvious intent to kill her apparently helped with the skill as well. Ilea couldn't affect this one with her Avatar of Ash bonus, meaning it wasn't considered a resistance.

‘ding’ ‘Identify reaches lvl 10’

The slow leveling skill had finally reached double digits. Ilea had to admit that she was slacking with it, considering most everything could be identified. It didn't involve fighting or eating however, resulting in the somewhat slow progress. She was pretty sure that identifying a level five hundred monster was more beneficial than identifying a thousand trees either way, or at least told herself as much to ignore the skill.

A second stage bonus could certainly be interesting however. Even Ilea had to admit that much.

‘ding’ ‘Monster Hunter reaches lvl 3’

She had used the skill whenever possible, trying to intimidate the creatures with her gargled voice underwater. Not exactly beneficial to her air supply or the fights themselves but levels were levels.

‘ding’ ‘Blood Manipulation Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 8’

‘ding’ ‘Blood Manipulation Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 9’

‘ding’ ‘Blood Manipulation Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 10’

‘ding’ ‘Gravity Magic Resistance reaches lvl 8’

...

‘ding’ ‘Gravity Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 3’

Gravity Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 3

A force of nature, bound and warped my magic itself. Perhaps not noticing the damage dealt to your body, you have developed a way to resist this magic.

2nd stage: You remain firmly planted and understand a little of the intricacies of gravity. A more practical sense that allows you to move in varied gravity with less difficulty. Be it magical or otherwise.

'ding' 'Corrosion Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 14'

'ding' 'Corrosion Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 15'

The main benefit was of course the new second tier resistance. Ilea tested it against the creatures and the forty percent reduction to damage and power as well as the second tier made a tremendous difference.

She opted to deactivate the skill again of course, adding corruption to one of her arms as well.

It was beneficial training still but Ilea didn't want to spend much time here, mostly because of the low number of monsters. Her resistances were important of course but a couple more class levels would give her another set of third tier bonuses.

The latter usually had a vaster impact than a little bit more resilience and ash density.

When this whole thing was over, Ilea planned to take a couple months off and just get all her resistances to the end of the second tier. Her next evolution was still a ways off and while possible, she doubted it would come at three fifty. Perhaps not even at four hundred.

Will I get three question marks when I get to five hundred? she wondered. *Everyone would freak out when they saw me and I'd become an international target.*

The thought wasn't exactly comforting. Mostly annoying. Already there were people after her because of Alice. She really didn't feel like dealing with even more misinformed arrogant idiots.

Although at that point I could probably just sit there and ignore whatever they did to me.

Likely not her style but in her mind there were hundreds of them, queuing to challenge her. *Hundreds isn't an issue, even now,* she thought and smiled. *They're still people. Not corrupted and frenzied monsters.*

She cracked her neck and spread her wings, slowly flying down towards a lower point in the thirteenth layer. Another resistance had been brought to the second tier and she had gotten a level out of it but all in all these last two layers seemed lackluster.

I wonder what the next one holds, she thought, reminded of an advent calendar and the excitement of opening the next door. Just that this time there were horrific monsters and hostile terrains waiting inside.

She reached the entrance to the next layer, beyond a lake that formed at the bottom of the rivers and streams. Ilea didn't spot anything within other than a bunch of level ten fish. Impressive power really for something so terribly nonthreatening.

The entrance to number fourteen was a two by two meter hole bored into the stone ground. Whoever built this place didn't exactly want the monsters to mingle it seemed. *Makes me wonder about the purpose of the corruption.*

She climbed down and came into a dim layer. Five or six magical lights shined onto a flat surface below, barely reflected. One of them was flickering.

How very ominous, Ilea thought and checked her sphere, finding carvings left behind at the bottom of the entrance.

Fly to the right hand wall, a way will be revealed.

Who writes like that? Ilea wondered as she shook her head. She formed an ashen pebble and dropped it, hearing a plop resound below.

A tiny wave moved over the still water, disturbing the perfectly even surface.

So it's water, Ilea thought and started moving to the right. It was certainly creepy down here but after being drowned for over four hours, she shrugged it off mostly.

'ding' 'Fear Resistance reaches lvl 12'

Should level that one too. Maybe..., Ilea debated if she should just go ahead and dive into the unknown.

She hesitated, still moving towards the broken in entrance she saw within her sphere now.

A thought suddenly entered her mind, not intruding but questioning and barely with recognizable form.

Ilea staggered back, unsure if she was under attack. *What?* She sent the equivalent of the question back.

Nothing happened for a minute.

"Serass... sal utuun?" she heard an ethereal voice reverberate in her mind, powerful but not terribly surprising.

Ilea had talked to Weavy plenty of times, telepathy having lost its novelty.

"Yes, hello. I speak Elos and English, emotions too if you prefer that," she replied in her mind and sent the thought equivalent of a wave.

She remained floating above the waters, ready to blink away at an instant. It was quiet for a while.

"Thy purpose, I must know," a deep voice now, revealing nothing of its intentions.

"Are you speaking English?" she asked with a smile. Elos felt and sounded very similar to her but Ilea had a suspicion that it was because she acquired the magic through whatever had brought her here. *Hey, maybe I shouldn't offend the ancient unknown creat... nice telepath.*

"I'm here to find a lost expedition and to destroy the corruption that was unleashed," she answered truthfully. Her personal stake in leveling was important to her too but it was a side benefit as well as a necessity, not her reason to be here in the first place.

A long pause followed. Ilea wasn't sure if she had lost the being's interest.

"Thy art of flesh. Yet uncertain remains, thy truth," the being spoke.

Ilea was sure the thing was talking in English. With a certain flair but it was English nonetheless. Even Cless spoke Standard most of the time.

She tried to talk back in English but had a hard time focusing on it, the changes marginal in her mind.

"Are you from another realm?" she asked, not willing to share the name of her home world yet.

“Thy art... not a captor, tormentor, a thief of life. Yet thy mind remains closed, hostile,” the being said, ignoring her question.

Ilea sighed. “You’re not very forthcoming either, mate. I won’t lower my mental resistance before I can trust you.”

A long pause came and went.

“A language long ago, found in a... vessel. English. It is... the first time I have spoken... it. It is unknown to me, should this realm be another. Thou speaketh of corruption. What dost thou... mean?” the voice asked.

“A vessel... interesting. I’m pretty sure you’re from another realm then. We share that. I don’t suppose you know how you got here?” Ilea asked. “As to the corruption... do you know where you are at all? I’m not sure how much I have to explain,” she added right after.

“Perhaps there is another name for it. Not all the words were written within the books I found, many letters lost to the deep. We had considered, the possibility of another plane... separate of that we call... harbor?” the being said.

“Home is the word... harbor is a facility where ships are stationed, close to water. I assume the vessel you found was a ship then,” Ilea suggested.

“Home then. If you can prove the existence of another realm, the chance is high that your assumption about me is correct. These waters are not endless, confined by steel and stone. The magic is powerful here, comforting and... serene. We are within a place of power, where the energies of the world... coincide. A creature unknown to me, has taken that which belonged to me. To cause torment, to disrupt the order of life itself. What is the corruption you seek to destroy?” it said.

“A creature unknown to you... we call it a dungeon, what you call a place of power. Where powerful creatures dwell and are born. This one, I believe to be constructed by someone. I think there’s a high chance it’s the same thing that brought you here,” Ilea explained and summoned a flask filled with corruption.

“This liquid is a form of blood manipulation that eats into whatever living thing it touches, killing it and making it frenzy. Afflicted creatures attack everything they see, corrupting it in turn. It was released a month or two ago and has since taken over much of the dungeon. Many powerful beings resisted it however and fight those taken,” she added.

The being was silent for a while.

“May I... see?” the voice asked.

“It’s pretty strong, make sure not to touch it,” Ilea said and moved the bottle down towards the water with one of her ashen limbs.

“A drop will suffice... if you will,” the being said.

Ilea was unsure but right now she was pretty intrigued about what the being was and more importantly, what it knew. Maybe she could even extort some resistance levels out of it.

She opened the bottle with a second limb and tilted it lightly until a drop of the ooze plopped into the water. A little more came out due to the slimy texture.

Several minutes passed until the creature talked to her once more.

“It is true then... they have succeeded in their creation. This... corruption stems from me,” the being said.

“From you?” Ilea asked, confused.

“Made from the blood, the very life that flows through me,” the creature said, tremendous regret very much apparent in both the sound of its voice as well as the emotions it sent her way.

“So they captured you, put you in this tank and weaponized your blood?” Ilea asked.

“Weaponize? It is... an unfamiliar word,” the being said.

“To use it for war, destruction and killing. A weapon is something you fight with, to survive, defend, kill or oppress, depending on what you’re going for,” Ilea explained.

“A terrifying purpose,” the being said and went silent.

“Though only natural, in pursuit of power and superiority. Much have I felt from those that passed. You too share this nature and yet... I sense no animosity or fear. Yet... a strong barrier prevents me from delving deeper,” it said, “Similar to that which took from me.”

“I’m very much interested in finding out more about that being, as well as the corruption. Is there a way to cure it?” Ilea asked.

“It has been long, since last I felt its presence. Little do I know. Yet it is not of flesh, its mind near impenetrable. I had felt... an ambition... beyond compare as well as unnatural precision. The cure is death or physical removal. Only the body itself can fight it and few creatures have the capability to do so,” the being explained.

“I have it, Blood Manipulation resistance in the second tier. I’m also a healer. Maybe I can somehow fight it with all that?” Ilea asked.

“Blood is life itself. You cannot heal that which needs no mending. You may stop it but not destroy it. A curse perhaps or fire, both incredibly rare and near impossible to find,” it replied.

“Not in this realm it isn’t. Fire magic is one of the most common skills here,” Ilea said and smiled.

“Then perhaps... there is a chance,” the being said. “Thou dost not trust me... yet there is something I must know.”

“And what is that?” Ilea asked.

‘ding’ ‘You have demonstrated knowledge of a General skill: English Language – lvl 15’

English Language – lvl 15

You can speak the English Language.

It felt like a slap, it really did.

Are you fucking kidding me?? Ilea thought. *Now?*

A confused emotion reached her mind.

Not you. I just got a skill for speaking my own language.

“Peculiar,” the being said. “I feel a mark on thee... something familiar and yet... it is uncertain.”

“You’re speaking in riddles,” Ilea replied.

“Then I shall be plain,” the being said and sent thoughts to her mind, memories, feelings and a figure. A black form with two white eyes. A Fae.

“What about it?” Ilea asked, unable to discern what the creature meant with all the thoughts and emotions. “Are you a Fae?”

“You know of their kind then?” the being asked.

“Yea,” Ilea replied and sent back some of her own memories, the process reminding her of selecting a bunch of pictures and emotions from her mind library before she sent them through the channel she had with the being.

The being remained quiet for a whole minute.

“It has not been in vain... to alert you of my presence. I am of a kind much unlike yourself. Our desires and needs differ greatly and yet here in this unknown place I have found company. One that was struck with the same fate that many here befell. I ask of you, would thy release it? Of its torment?” the being said.

“You made a friend here? And now they’re corrupted?” Ilea asked.

“It is the fate I fear has fallen upon them, yes. And yet it remains uncertain, as so many things,” it said.

Ilea nodded lightly. “Let me guess, it’s on the hundredth layer?”

“It is here, merely twice the distance between me and you. I had yet to alert anyone of myself or them. The marks on you speak true however, not an enemy of their kind,” the being said.

“Sure, I’ll check it out and get back to you. What may I call you by the way?” Ilea asked.

“I am... of the Veiled Enavurin, young child. What are you?” the Enavurin said.

“I’m Ilea, human. Two legged monkey with a bigger brain basically, though sometimes I’m not sure about that. Nice to meet you. Names aren’t a concept to you?” she said.

“They hold no meaning to me. You may call me what you wish, should it help your monkey brain,” the Enavurin said without a hint of mockery.

“Then you are the Gracken of the Deep, ancient Enavurin of the Descent,” Ilea said with a broad grin. “Now tell me, where do I go?”

Ilea didn’t have a reason to doubt the creature for now, other than it being a monster found within one of the most dangerous dungeons she’d been in so far. It probably wanted to eat the Fae, if there even was one but if there was a chance the thing was speaking the truth, Ilea wanted to give it the benefit of the doubt. Being in its good graces could lead to some mind blowing resistance training, quite literally.