

Steel splinters clanged as they fell to the floor, pushed out of the ashen armor.

Ilea collapsed to one knee, breathing hard as the rest of her wounds healed quickly.

The Fae appeared in front of her with a questioning look. *Safe?*

“Yeah,” she said and rested on the wall behind her. “I think so,” she looked up and didn’t see any more attacks coming their way.

*Strong*, the thought arrived, the little guy pointing at her.

“No, I’m just an overconfident idiot that nearly died... again,” she said and calmed down, meditation flowing through her.

Ilea had to use her instant recovery so often, her mana was below a thousand. Even with the energy returned from the wind magic, the instant healing depleted her, still using around four times as much mana to heal a single point of health.

“That thing hit like a fucking truck, huh?” she said.

The Fae sat down on the floor and looked at her, not sending anything her way.

“I suppose I should look at the silver lining. I just survived a rampaging quadruple mark beast. Even scratched it once,” she said with a smile. “Damn hard for anything to kill me at this point.”

A giggle came and went, inside her mind. The Fae nodded before it bowed to her. *Protect*.

“You want to be protected?” Ilea asked, looking through the few notifications she had gotten.

**‘ding’ ‘Sentinel Reconstruction reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 21’**

**‘ding’ ‘Azarinth Awakening reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 19’**

**‘ding’ ‘Blink reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 15’**

**‘ding’ ‘Sentinel Core reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 14’**

**‘ding’ ‘Azarinth Fighting reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 19’**

**‘ding’ ‘Armor of Ash reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 21’**

**‘ding’ ‘Aspect of Ash reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 18’**

**‘ding’ ‘Keeper of Ash reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 15’**

**‘ding’ ‘Veteran reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 2’**

**‘ding’ ‘Veteran reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 3’**

Ilea wondered why her Veteran skill was leveling now, without any paralyzing effects remaining. *Might just be a matter of facing insanely powerful beings. Or I offended it by not freezing. Holy shit...*, she suddenly stopped.

*If I had been frozen for a couple seconds when it went all out... fuck, good thing I have the second tier now*, she sighed.

***‘ding’ ‘Wind Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 13’***

***‘ding’ ‘Wind Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 14’***

*That ridiculous battle and damage was necessary for two levels, against a creature with four question marks. Thank fuck I have Avatar of Ash now, otherwise I’d have to spend decades getting everything up.*

*Or I’d have to fight monsters of that power for each resistance. Time and time again*, she shook her head and sighed. Challenges were fun and what she was looking for but getting minced for half an hour wasn’t exactly a challenge. It was a beat down.

A testament to her survival and recovery, as well as her defense, reducing the damage she took by a ton already.

“If that expedition even looks at this creature, their mush. Do you think we went to far? The Gracken confirmed they went past though,” she said, looking at the little creature.

He crossed his tiny arms and looked down, tapping one of his feet that looked just as simple as his hands. No toes or claws, just a black stump.

*Thankful Protect.*

“Ah, now I get it. Sure, I guess you didn’t expect a Storm Griffin to show up either,” she said with a smile.

*Hiding Helpful*

“Probably. I just wanted to see if I can take it. My recovery is pretty good and until I actually attacked it, the attacks dealt pretty minimal damage,” she said.

*Joy*

“Well, let’s hope there is something we can kill in the next layer. I’m not particularly good at hiding and we can’t expect every monster to stay in its lair,” Ilea said. Only the lightning elemental and the Storm Griffin didn’t move out of their respective layers so far.

She suspected that there was a more powerful single enemy every five levels, the first one being the Veramath. It must have been the only one not able to deal with the corrupted beasts on its own layer. Or her theory wasn’t right at all.

“Ready for the sixteenth?” Ilea asked.

The Fae jumped up and twirled like a windmill.

“You’re a very weird creature,” she said and chuckled, watching the little windmill start to spin vertically as well.

*With pretty good control and balance*, she noted to herself before getting up.

The last couple layers weren't exactly profitable, more taxing on her pride and social energy. Neither had a bar to fill with hear healing magic so she just had to deal with it.

The next layer came after another set of stairs, this time leading into an open space with pale blue light shining from crystal like stone set in the ceiling.

It was a vast and expanding area with hills and rocks dotting the environment. A little less high reaching than the previous layer.

The entrance was a broken steel gate at about fifty meters above ground, a stairwell leading down but most of it was missing. What remained of the metal was lying down at the ground, torn apart.

*Monsters flexing their power by shredding through the steel*, Ilea thought and looked around.

There were some moving creatures she could see, even with the bad light and from this distance.

Four legged creatures about the size and shape of a panther. Not that she had seen a panther but she assumed them to be a little below her height.

She noticed they were prowling frantically or outright running around.

"Ready?" she asked her tiny companion.

*Conquer!*

"Ok, calm down there emperor," she said with a smile and jumped down, spreading her wings to move her away from the steel wreckage.

A noise to her right made her turn, her eyes finding one of the creatures standing atop a boulder.

It growled and showed its sharp teeth. Orange puss dropped from various wounds on its body large body, reaching Ilea's chest in height and twice that in length. It had four reddish gray eyes and a maw that looked just a little too broad, its jaw unhinging to show several rows of teeth. Its body was covered in thick near black hide, powerful muscles visible below. Short black hair showed on parts of the creature, especially atop and behind its head.

***[Corrupted Zanedin Hunter – lvl ???]***

*Alright, here we go*, Ilea thought and watched the monster rush at her.

The thing came in range of her limbs and vanished without a trace.

Ilea felt the impact as her leg was bitten into, the familiar sensation of a powerful curse flowing through her. "Motherfucker," she exclaimed, her limbs lashing down at it before it vanished once more.

There was no distortion in space, no precognition warning her of the attack either. *Or maybe it did*, she thought, moving her ashen limbs closer to her, short bladed tips forming before they started to spin around her body.

The creature's teeth had penetrated her ash but the wound was shallow, healed quickly. The curse was mostly ignored, eating away at her health and making her senses dull. Both effects were remedied by the powerful healing flowing through her.

She spread ash around her, forming little flakes that she threw up with her manipulation.

The beast came once more and vanished. This time it appeared again ten meters away from her, several cuts showing on its body as it snarled. The flakes had fallen considerably, as if they had teleported.

*I was wondering why such a weak creature resided at this level, Ilea thought. "Come, you're frenzied. Get shredded."*

The beast of course wasn't itself anymore, neither recognizing the taunt nor caring for its own well being. It appeared again several times, its teeth slamming through her defenses and spreading the powerful curse through her body.

Ilea smiled when she found the beast stuck to her ash, her hands reaching out before she slammed her fist into it. A couple punches and it was over.

The noise in her mind informed her about the kill before her precognition picked up something. *Interesting.*

She held up the corpse and watched with curious eyes as the body expanded, exploding in a flash of blood and bones.

The blast was powerful, washing away her ash and a chunk of her bone armor but not quite managing to get past her skin. The damage was healed again quickly and her ashen armor reformed on top of it.

**'ding' 'You have defeated [Corrupted Zanedin Hunter – lvl 582]'**

**'ding' 'Blood Magic Resistance reaches lvl 16'**

**'ding' 'Time Magic Resistance reaches lvl 5'**

**'ding' 'Time Magic Resistance reaches lvl 6'**

*There you go, she thought and spread her wings, flying up as she checked the surroundings.*

A susurration seemed to go through the creatures she had seen in the distance, groups turning their heads and growling before they rushed her way.

"Yes, come to me my darlings... blood magic, explosions, curses and time," she could hardly contain her joy as a grin spread on her face. All the resistance levels she would gain out of this. There were dozens of them, even class levels weren't out of the question.

And with the corruption flowing through them, she could just stand there and have her ash shred through them, the element apparently not caring when time stopped for her mind or the area around her. Even if it did, the frenzied creatures would embed themselves on her anyway.

*Who's the shredder now?*, she thought and flew away while snickering, blinking several times before finding an isolated corrupted Zanedin Hunter. It wasn't easy to win over her excitement but more testing was required before she would face the larger groups.

The beast immediately turned her way and used its magic.

Ilea felt the curse spread lightly from the already closed wound on her leg. The monster was injured already, sporting several deep gashes on its side, one of its eyes pierced.

*So my magic keeps working? Even healing?* She was pretty sure that was the case. Ilea turned her head and listened, hearing dozens of hasted paws sliding against the dry earth.

The creatures were fast, of course they were. Everything down here was. If that weren't the case, the world would be ruled by quick moving teleporting rogues.

"Come on, once more. I need the data," Ilea said and smirked, watching the injured beast rush at her without a single care for its wounds. The corruption on her arm was already pushed out of her body by her second tier resistance.

She blanked out again, watching as the beast now limped, still growling at her of course. No wound showed on her body. The curse too had little effect by now. *Am I getting used to its attacks? I'm still subject to its time magic.*

Ilea was sure the hyena like beast retained some of its instincts. Why would it even retreat after attacking? The corruption however made it continue, despite its heavy injuries and the obvious fact that the woman in front of it was neither prey nor a challenging foe. She was death.

*Let's see if I can take it,* she thought and deactivated her resistances.

When she came to again, her wound were healing but more numerous. The curse had spread further through her and corruption pulsed in each of the small wounds ripped open by the enemy's maw. *Ok, maybe don't do that against the group,* she thought and activated it all once more.

A splatter of blood and energy followed, as if it teleported right in front of her. The blast shredded through her ash but this time stopped at the bone. *Alright.*

She knew that the time magic was pretty powerful, taking her out of the fight for a split second and enough for the monster to get a hit in. The beast could repeat the attack too, giving her little pause between bites.

Their defense was low of course, shredding themselves up on her ash alone. The only thing she had to maintain was her healing, meaning she could theoretically do this until she grew tired or hungry. Which was a long fucking time.

**'ding' 'You have defeated [Corrupted Zanedin Hunter – lvl 603]'**

**'ding' 'Blast Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 12'**

**'ding' 'Blood Magic Resistance reaches lvl 17'**

**'ding' 'Blood Manipulation Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 11'**

**'ding' 'Curse Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 10'**

**'ding' 'Time Magic Resistance reaches lvl 7'**

**'ding' 'Time Magic Resistance reaches lvl 8'**

"This is amazing, honestly", she murmured to herself. *No class or class skill levels this time but I suppose it's fine.*

The beasts obviously exploded in a blood magic blast but the kill was still attributed to her. Thanks to her Avatar of Ash, her ash armor had gotten much stronger and the Griffin showed her that it was pretty difficult to kill her at this point.

*Each of the attacks give me mana too, she mused. Now it's just a question if they can basically freeze me in time when more of them are around.*

That was the crucial piece she was missing right now. The difference between an insanely tuned and effective training method for her and her abilities or well, her death.

*Could also try flying, she thought and jumped up when the first monsters closed the distance. She formed ashen spears and shot them down, only to find that the monsters simply appeared next to them. Time magic, hmm. Maybe I should look into that.*

Her speed and blink coupled with precognition and her sphere allowed her to dodge most attacks already anyway and she doubted time magic would help against an unending barrage like the Griffin had provided. *I'm good*, she thought and flew away once more.

The additional explosion had increased the group trying to keep up with her. *Not yet*, she thought and slammed down into the ground amidst three of the creatures.

A grin on her face, ashen blades placed on limbs that clad her armor spun with high speed, ready to cut through anything that approached.

She saw the beasts before her, then they were injured, crippled and finally they exploded in blood. Three explosions ripped through her armor and flesh, not reaching much deeper because of their placement.

*So they can't freeze me completely. The intervals seemed a little smaller but I could blink out*, she thought and reached another group. Five creatures running at her from a different direction than she came from.

Monstrous teeth bared and an insanity in their eyes wrought by the corruption of their blood.

The intervals were the same this time, despite the two additional creatures, confirming that there was some limit to their magic or how it could influence someone.

*No time wumbo jumbo, at least not to ridiculous extents*, Ilea thought with a smile, realizing with joy that the blood explosions hurt the creatures as well. Kills were still attributed to her but perhaps with a lower experience ratio.

She didn't quite care and faced the next group with a broad grin. This time, she deactivated her resistances to see if she could take it.

Five of the creatures moved in at once.

Her healing was running through her, ashen armor in place, her bone set mostly destroyed. She didn't store it, taking the little reduced damage it would provide where the remaining pieces still protected her.

Wounds suddenly appeared on her, ripe with corruption and curses. She coughed up blood, finding her condition the same a moment later.

The beasts showed a dozen more cuts with every use of their magic, blood coloring her surroundings and the ashen spikes moving on her body.

Her chin was wet with blood, much of it flowing down and onto her chest. And yet her vitals remained fine, the bite wounds somewhat shallow and the magic unable to compete against her resilience and healing, even without resistances at play.

Ilea couldn't tell if the spikes actually made the the beasts bite less deep but she imagined it wasn't exactly easy to get past. An impressive feat in itself, really. To even injure her at all.

Once more, she saw them explode, the energy ripping through her and the creatures around.

Two survived and used the opportune moment to get some nasty bites in while Ilea remained partially uncovered by ash, many of her blades and spikes washed away by the blasts.

She chuckled, the noise interrupted by time magic before she activated Heart of Cinder. Two more blood explosions rattled through her, her body shredded down to the bone in parts as she tried to move the energy towards her with the help of her sphere. The kept at bay corruption was purged by the flames.

*Now this, is what I'm looking for*, Ilea thought and watched the muscle and skin on her right arm reform, covered by ash a moment later. The deep wounds on her body were healed and all the magic purged when her resistances activated once more. She looked through the levels from the last encounters and smiled.

**'ding' 'You have defeated [Corrupted Zanedin Hunter – lvl 512]'**

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**'ding' 'You have defeated [Corrupted Zanedin Hunter – lvl 623]'**

**'ding' 'The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 330 – Five stat points awarded - One third tier skill point awarded'**

**'ding' 'Kin of Ash has reached lvl 329 – Five stat points awarded'**

**'ding' 'Azarinth Awakening reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 20'**

**'ding' 'Sentinel Sphere reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 5'**

**'ding' 'Sentinel Core reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 15'**

**'ding' 'Azarinth Fighting reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 20'**

**'ding' 'Aspect of Ash reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 19'**

**'ding' 'True Ash Creation reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 17'**

**'ding' 'True Ash Creation reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 18'**

**'ding' 'Ash and Ember Unity reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 16'**

**'ding' 'Ash and Ember Unity reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 17'**

**'ding' 'Avatar of Ash reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 7'**

**'ding' 'Avatar of Ash reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 8'**

***'ding' 'Blast Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 13'***

***'ding' 'Blast Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 14'***

***'ding' 'Blood Magic Resistance reaches lvl 18'***

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***'ding' 'Curse Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 11'***

***'ding' 'Curse Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 12'***

***'ding' 'Time Magic Resistance reaches lvl 9'***

***'ding' 'Time Magic Resistance reaches lvl 10'***

***'ding' 'Time Magic Resistance reaches lvl 11'***

***'ding' 'Time Magic Resistance reaches lvl 12'***

***'ding' 'Time Magic Resistance reaches lvl 13'***

Yea, I think I'll clear this one.