

Ilea felt her bones bend under the pressure of the talons, her lungs entirely crushed. Her ash failed to gain purchase on the scales but she didn't displace herself yet. Heart of Cinder was reaching its peak as she grabbed onto the closest claw, the thing as large as her entire arm. Her sphere let her know the exact position she was in, letting her pull herself up.

She felt the claw pierce through her back as she did so, the elevated position allowing her to reach the Bluetail's body. She sacrificed a few thousand points of health and used Heart of Cinder, aiming for a specific set of scales below the creature's right wing.

Bright light erupted as her spell manifested, flowing out of her with all the heat and energy she had gathered. It burned into the creature, eliciting a screech as it shook its leg to get her off.

Ilea still grinned, watching the being turn its head back before the water in front of her turned into a pressurized beam aimed at her head. Her skull rocked back as her armor and face were shaved away, the remaining muscles on her neck pushing against the spell until it subsided, her right fist charging up Absolute Destruction all the while.

Her face reformed, her skull only slightly smoothed and healing near instantly. Empty eye sockets were covered once more by skin, eyelids blinking to reveal icy blue eyes now gazing at the creature's own. Reversed healing poured into the creature as white flame started to cover its body, her burning ash moving surprisingly well through the water around them.

It tried to shake her off again, descending now as it flailed, digging its claws even deeper. Ilea felt something slip and punched, aiming at the same spot she had targeted before. She hadn't been able to charge Destruction for long but the wave of mana it sent into the creature seemed to bother it slightly, a muffled screech sounding out, dulled by the water.

Another crack resounded as her rib cage was ripped out, leaving her floating as the Bluetail moved away, vanishing in the absolute darkness around them.

*Can see in the dark? I feel cheated,* she thought, feeling her ribs crack and her lungs once more begging for air, her chest closing up with both skin and ash. The sight issue didn't matter however. Her mark was set. And she was the hunter.

She sped up, and rushed at the being. Her precognition and sphere showed the lines of wind coming at her, slicing so delicately through the water, the motion was barely noticeable even with all her advancements. Ilea displaced herself forward and past the attack, appearing in front of yet another spell. This time she used her blink but the result was the same.

It may have been the same thing as with the Queen of Rot, but this time she saw the previous spells vanish behind her, meaning this was something else. She adjusted her body just slightly, several lines coming at her as she moved, twirling before she was sliced up, her bones the only thing that showed even a remote resistance to the powerful spell.

Half her torso and her head came out on the other side, still connected. She used her next displacement to summon the cut off pieces from behind her, Sentinel Reconstruction connecting the tissue near instantly. Her eyes were focused on the floating Bluetail, her body lit up with the flame of creation.

The creature sent a few torrents of water, like beams of light flashing past, invisible to the naked eye but bright within her sphere.

Ilea dodged with minimal movements, the attack laughable compared to the wind it had used before. *Can't use it constantly*, she thought and reached the being, dodging a tail strike before she tried to grapple its body. She failed to grasp the main part, the being rotating in a fast motion. Her arms and ash slipped before she managed to twirl her limbs around its wing. She was flung downwards from the sudden change of momentum, holding on as she pushed against the forces of both its strength and the water around her.

More of her limbs moved around its wing before she secured herself onto it like a climber to the side of a wall. Her fires and mana spread once more, the rest of her limbs trying to hit the same spot she had damaged before, her fists occasionally hitting the side of its body before she was whipped away again.

The surroundings lit up when thousands of wind blades came to life, each flowing towards her with increasing speed. *Free resistance training, how nice of you*, she thought, keeping up her attacks as she activated phaseshift. A few dozen of the blades hit before her spell manifested, stopped and slowed by her ash before they started penetrating, leaving shallow then deep wounds in her back.

Phaseshift activated and the fabric of her form changed, the Bluetail leaving her behind as her grasp was lost. She watched the blades fly past, her health steadily going up and down, the powerful spell coupled with her high resistance enough to pay for both her recovery and then some. Every excess point in health went into her auras, the cost of her Phaseshift increasing with each passing second.

She kept her eyes on the Bluetail, barely seeing its silhouette in the deep waters as it circled back and came for her instead. Her form returned to the material, pushing away the water that had taken her spot. This time she displaced herself right on top of the being, her ash quickly moving around its wings to stabilize her on its back.

Lowering herself down, she punched onto its spine, Destruction and Storm of Cinders flaring up as her mana was sent through its natural armor, some of it resisted but not all. Ilea was whipped to the side when the Bluetail turned, twirling with increasing momentum as magic gathered around its form.

She felt the attack coming, displacing herself as far away as she could. She watched as the creature lit up, a bright sphere of light and air expanding from the twirling monster. A powerful torrent started pulling on her, her wings unable to resist the stream. She blinked and displaced herself, the first spell not working as the water itself seemed to be in the creature's grasp. Her spell could move her far but the sphere was expanding and with every wait between displacements, she was moved back closer. The forces alone were making her dizzy, her body resisting the incredible flows.

The magic began to subside, but not before she entered the sphere. There was no water, the air itself having turned into a grinder of a million tiny needles, each cubic centimeter filled with hundreds of compressed and serrated spikes.

Her ash was brushed away, then her skin, muscles, and her bone, the last much slower. Displacement activated before she was pulled further in, half her body gone and quickly reforming when she appeared in the lessening torrent. The light in the sphere receded as the Bluetail slowed its movements, swallowed once more by darkness.

Ilea resisted a last pull, water rushing back to fill the space occupied by the monster's spell. She cracked her neck with a satisfied expression, looking at her resistance gains. A few more teleports

moved her past the grid like lines of wind magic before she was sliced up again by the third wave. She healed herself the same way as she had before. This time her bones had resisted noticeably more. One minute had passed since the start of their engagement. *Time is ticking, my friend*, she thought, a manic grin on her face as she rushed into the darkness, the mark shining in her mind.

Ilea kept grappling and hammering the monster, her resistance growing over time. She found its intellect to be a tiny bit higher than the rest, its approach changing from time to time but never in a substantial or surprising way.

When she reached her maximum damage reduction, the spells didn't stop her quite as effectively anymore, her movements and spells optimized against the abilities of the Bluetail. She knew how long it had to wait for another set of wind lines, felt the pressure of its sphere spell before it even activated, and she distanced herself successfully in the last few attempts.

The lines she simply dodged backwards, allowing her more time to position herself on the third mesh. By now her bones only received deep cuts, her ashen armor and body slowing the magic enough to let her come out without having to use displacement to heal.

Her offensive paid off too, another few uses of Heart of Cinder finally damaging the scales enough to let her ash cut through. And once she did, her intrusion against the spot became more effective too. She realized the creature was trying to protect the area, which ultimately allowed her to focus on other parts, repeating the same steps until the monster was bleeding from several wounds on its body, scales scarred and ripped through, destructive mana flowing in freely.

Ilea advanced again, seeing the Bluetail slow down, its spells used less frequently by now. She sliced through its weak points, her ash sending in her mana as the white flames lingered on large parts of its massive body. Once again it started to charge up its sphere spell, Ilea landing another three hits before she blinked away, displacing herself further before the torrents started to pull on her.

She knew exactly how far away the creature was, using her teleportation another four times without ever reaching the central spot. When the pull weakened, she advanced instead, slamming into the being even before the water refilled the spherical vacuum.

Her grapple became more effective, the monster looking back to hit her with a spell when she moved past its wing, obstructing its view as her ash ripped out chunks of flesh, blood continuously seeping into the waters. She knew the Bluetail had adequate regeneration at its disposal but not enough to slow down the crazed ashen healer.

She continued to literally work her ash through the creature, pulses of mana flaring up in lines of cinders. Her fires illuminated the waters around them, mixed with blood and tissue.

With a last effort, Ilea moved all her limbs into the barely moving Bluetail, sacrificing a chunk of health before she pushed, her ash ripping the creature apart from the inside. Chunks of flesh, burned scales, wings, and talons flowed to the side, trails of blood left in their wake.

Ilea floated in the depths, suppressing her body's need to breathe. Several noises resounded somewhere in her mind as her gaze froze up. The adrenaline slowly faded as she calmed her body.

The chunks of burning Bluetail had moved away, one particular piece unable to illuminate its surroundings. Something absorbed the light.

Ilea watched an eye open, the yellowish organ as large as the Bluetail she had just killed. The last of the fires went out and she was left in darkness.

***[Flesh stricken Leviathan – lvl ?????]***

***‘ding’ ‘Identify reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 1’***

She froze up, her body unable to move for a full second before she displaced herself up, her only focus the marks left on the isles. Her wings moved as fast as she could push them, her teleportation pushing her onward as terror gripped her very soul.

***‘ding’ ‘Fear Resistance reaches lvl 17’***

***‘ding’ ‘Fear Resistance reaches lvl 18’***

A scrambled thought reached her mind. Neither malicious nor hostile. A weird thing, hard to decipher. Ilea didn't stop to analyze it all, only getting a vague sense of amusement.

***‘ding’ ‘Fear Resistance reaches lvl 19’***

***‘ding’ ‘Fear Resistance reaches lvl 20’***

She came out of the ocean, her wings pushing her upwards into the sky before she charged them and shot towards the isles, landing hard against the side of a mountain before she rolled onto her back, rubble tumbling down around her.

Ilea closed her eyes, opening them again when the image of the eye came to her mind. She meditated and healed herself, only slowly able to rip herself away from the impression. She checked her body, mind, even her soul, for something that was wrong, her breathing quickening. She found nothing.

***‘ding’ ‘Fear Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 1’***

***Fear Resistance – 2nd lvl 1***

***You have overcome something truly terrifying to you. Your ability to deal with non magical fear is increased.***

***2nd stage: You have experienced true terror, your very core shaken many times. You overcame or at least survived. Even when your instincts are overwhelmed, you will find your mind calm enough to analyze the threat, your body warned but not paralyzed. Remain vigilant in the face of terror.***

Her breathing slowed, her heartbeat following. She kept her eyes open and focused on the dancing mists far below. This was the last time she went into these waters, no matter how beneficial it was to hunt Bluetails in their preferred environment.

*What was that.*

*It was just an eye I saw, wasn't it?*

And yet it felt like more. More than just an eye. Something she should not have seen. Something she could never wipe from her memory. Her healing continued, focused now on her mind.

***‘ding’ ‘Mental Resistance reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 17’***

She knew there had been no mind magic attack. This was something else. Something more fundamental. The only thing coming remotely close was her experience seeing the Fae, its true form. The Fae however had not been hostile.

*Was this thing? It didn't seem to care at all. It didn't attack. Did it try to communicate?*

For once she didn't feel like talking to some eldritch creature. Not down in the dark depths of the ocean. She focused on her messages instead, trying to distract herself from the memory within her mind.

**Identify - 2nd lvl 1**

**You can grasp general information from someone or something.**

**2nd stage: Ascertain more details with Identify.**

*Not exactly explanatory. But the base skill is kind of the same.*

She would just have to try it out. A quick glance at a nearby stone offered some insight.

**[Rock] - [Hard]**

*Yes. Useful. Very.*

**'ding' 'You have defeated [Mature Bluetail – lvl 1108]'**

**'ding' 'The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 480 – Five stat points awarded – One Core skill point awarded'**

...

**'ding' 'The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 487 – Five stat points awarded'**

**'ding' 'Kin of Ash has reached lvl 474 – Five stat points awarded'**

...

**'ding' 'Kin of Ash has reached lvl 481 – Five stat points awarded'**

**'ding' 'The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 429 – One stat point awarded'**

...

**'ding' 'The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 438 – One stat point awarded'**

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

**'ding' 'Flare of Creation reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 25'**

**'ding' 'Displacement reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 22'**

***‘ding’ ‘Space Shift reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 18’***

***‘ding’ ‘Body of the Valkyrie reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 22’***

***‘ding’ ‘Deviant of Humanity reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 3’***

***‘ding’ ‘Harmony of the Drowned reaches lvl 12’***

***...***

***‘ding’ ‘Harmony of the Drowned reaches lvl 16’***

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

***‘ding’ ‘Monster Hunter reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 13’***

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

***...***

***‘ding’ ‘Oxygen Repository reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 6’***

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

***‘ding’ ‘Water Resistance reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 3’***

***‘ding’ ‘Wind Resistance reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 3’***

***‘ding’ ‘Wind Resistance reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 4’***

***‘ding’ ‘Wind Resistance reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 5’***

***‘ding’ ‘You have defeated a Mature Bluetail in its preferred environment – One Core skill point awarded’***

***‘ding’ ‘You have seen a Leviathan and lived to tell the tale – One Core skill point awarded’***

She sighed, hugging her knees as she read through everything. Progress, but she didn’t exactly feel like celebrating. Ilea stood up and spread her wings, flying to the peak of the mountain before she looked at the various isles. *That one seems appropriate.*

Of course she chose the one with the broadest somewhat flat area, as far away from the ocean as she could get. It wasn’t as large as the volcano isle but an extensive valley between two rather shallow hills provided some cover. She wouldn’t tumble down and fall into the water if she fought there. *Plenty of Bluetails flying around too.*

The mists and daily storms would provide some additional danger. She just hoped the monsters wouldn’t avoid her because of a tiny bit of arcane lightning.

She distributed her new stat points into Vitality, Wisdom, and Intelligence, bringing the first two to 1500, the last to 1450.

Ilea landed safely within the valley, mists flowing away at the impact, the first stalkers already on the way. She had seen white flames cling to a sizable section of forest on another isle when she flew over, Feyrair’s mark corresponding with the location. Neiphato remained near the spot where Kyrian had first introduced them to the blue birds.

She took a deep breath, enjoying the air for the first time since coming out of the water. Her ash moved out to slash through the draining creatures, heat and power gathering within her as she charged up Monster Hunter. Hunting Bluetails on land wouldn't be quite as effective, she knew as much, but if she got a few higher leveled ones, it wouldn't matter. *Hope you're enjoying your vacation, Kyrian*, she thought, watching a group of five Wyverns rush towards her location.

*Alright, let's see what we have.*