

## Chapter 381 Packing mule

“Are you ready to go?” Catelyn asked, having appeared a couple meters away. Her form was small, eyes a dark fiery color as she sat on a nearby rock. Her tails were swaying in the unnatural wind moving through the cavern.

Ilea stood in a smoldering, partially crystal covered, corroded and frozen crater. She gave a thumbs up towards the fox and smiled under her armor.

The mages stopped their attacks at that point, seeing the fox arrive.

“Did you convince Lucas?” Ilea asked. Several hours had already passed since their talk in the defensive dome like structure.

The first layer of the Descent was looking more like a crude town by now, simple and efficient buildings providing shelter, storage and mostly places to sleep and stay without immediate danger.

Pretty much what the village near the higher up cliffs provided but much closer to the Veramath tunnel.

*If mages put their heart into it, they can really get shit done. Like my resistance levels.* Ilea thought as she stepped out of the ten by ten meter crater that had expanded further and further as time went on.

With various elements clashing together in explosions, that was a given.

“He agreed to join on the grounds of sealing up the corruption as well as to study it and the Descent. The vegetation apparently is unique here. He did complain about me burning most of it down.” Catelyn explained.

Ilea rolled her eyes. “Of course he did. Well just make sure to warn everyone that he might not be able to distinguish us from the beasts when he actually starts fighting.”

“A berserker like skill then?” Catelyn asked. “He told me he will not join the battles themselves. Odd, seeing his high level. Higher even than yours.” She lay down on the rock that started to glow a little from the heat she exuded.

“Something like that. Only saw it once. But yes, there’s a reason his level is that high. Not fighting can only get you so far in this world.” Ilea commented.

Catelyn purred. “It can get you somewhere, you simply need much, much more time.” She looked up at Ilea with a confused expression when she was suddenly petted.

“Please, not in front of the Dark Ones. My authority might be questioned.” The fox said.

Ilea continued, moving her hand through the soft fur, her unarmored hand searing slightly at the heat. “Just turn into your killer form then. I doubt this will have an impact on how they view you.”

A sudden flare of scorching flame shot up Ilea’s arm, making her wince and remove her hand.

“Alright, alright.”

“Sorry, did that actually hurt you?” Catelyn asked as she hopped off the stone and landed softly on the ground.

“Of course not.” Ilea said and smiled at her. “Still, surprisingly powerful for my heat resistance and other defenses. You should have joined in my training.”

Catelyn sighed and shook her head, slowly walking towards the defensive structures around the tunnel. “I’m too busy for that. How did you reach such a level without any responsibility?”

Ilea summoned one of the cakes she had gotten from Popi, smiling at the instant reaction from the fox.

Her form suddenly extended, a massive fiery maw closed around Ilea’s arm. The cake was gone, including the plate it had rested on. The slight damage to Ilea’s armor reformed near instantly.

Catelyn made a couple sounds that didn’t quite fit her massive intimidating form, chewing before she swallowed with a satisfied sigh.

She shrunk again immediately after, the sizzling tracks her huge form left behind a mystery as she looked ahead with an embarrassed expression on her face.

To Ilea’s interpretation of fox expressions at least.

“I know people who do that for me.” Ilea said finally. “I’ll help in a fight but any riches or knowledge I gather, I’ll mostly let others deal with.”

Catelyn nodded. “Thank you, for the cake. Do you... perchance-”

“I have more, yes.” Ilea said and summoned another one, throwing it up into the air before a red streak of fur and fire rushed past.

“Why the question? Do you not like the responsibility you have with Hallowfort? You know there are others, right? Even Elana now I’m sure would be happy to take your position.” Ilea said.

Catelyn giggled, the voice deep and menacing before she shrunk once more. “I would never leave Hallowfort behind, nor its people. It means too much to me. I cannot deny however that I sometimes envy you.”

“You can leave too, go on adventures. I think you even talked about that once. Doesn’t mean you can’t be there when the city needs you.” Ilea said and chuckled. “I have friends too, you included. I’m here right now because you needed my help. Not because I wanted an exciting adventure. Just so happens to correlate.” She gave the fox a wink.

Catelyn snorted and looked up at her. “I know, I know. And I do appreciate your help. Without you we’d likely still be battling that Veramath. If we had even survived that far.”

“You’re at a higher level than me, don’t give me too much credit.” Ilea replied.

“Maro is here because of you, as is that elf and Lucas. I don’t mean your power alone, which is growing to frightening heights by the way. I think I just envy your free spirited approach. We might face the extinction of all life on Elos and yet you’re here, training your resistances.” Catelyn said with a smirk.

“You having friends and places you care about just adds to this. There are human towns in the south yet you are here, to help us out with this. You don’t seem to worry as much as I do.” She added.

Ilea thought about it for a while, the two soon reaching the first crude buildings. The smell of food came from within, not particularly inviting but nonetheless hot and ready.

“I haven’t really thought about it that way.” Ilea said. “The realm I am from, there was little influence a single person could have. Even the absurdly wealthy only had so much they could do and change. Personal power as here in Elos, simply didn’t exist.”

“We had an information network telling us about all the things in the world that were constantly going to shit, all the wars, the exploitation and crime. It was easy to focus on that. And it was disconnecting sometimes, to think about how powerless I was in the grand scheme of things.”

Ilea paused and looked up, at the crystals illuminating the cavern. “Something that helped me both back on Earth as well as here, was the fact that I am just one person and that I have to focus on the things in front of me, the things I can change and influence.”

“At first that was just me and the next Drake I wanted to fight. Progressing through the levels and survive. Now I have enough wealth and power to influence whole cities, perhaps even more than that. That realization was overwhelming at first but the same rules apply. I am just one person and I have to focus on what I can change and influence.”

Ilea looked at Catelyn and realized they had stopped in front of the second stone wall that was being constructed around the tunnel.

“I’m not a politician, nor particularly good with money. I’m not a leader either. So I let others do those things. What I can do here is help destroy the corrupted, help find out what is going on in this dungeon and who is responsible. And that is what I will do.” She finished.

Catelyn again chuckled. “You make it seem so simple. You still have views, morals both your own as well as from the realm you were born in. With your level of power, can you trust others to do in your place what you think is right?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. I do it anyway. Because I don’t want to be the queen of a city nor do I want to argue with someone about legislation. I want to explore and fight, with this wonderful body and magic I’ve come to love. I can’t do everything myself and neither can you. Finding people you can trust is just a part of it. You’re letting Elana guide Hallowfort in this very moment.” Ilea said.

“Her and the council.” Catelyn specified. “Yet I’m sure she will convince them to give her more privileges with time. That woman is brazen and terrifyingly efficient.”

“I see your point of course. Focus on what’s in front of you. With everything that’s been going on, the Feynor and now these... corrupted. It seems insurmountable.” Catelyn sighed.

Ilea smiled at her. “Hallowfort has stood for how many hundreds of years? Or was it thousands? I doubt any of this will make a difference. If it does, then you simply do what you can. Fight them until you can’t anymore. Stand or flee, whatever makes sense. Avenge your city or rebuild it. Why worry about it now when you don’t know the outcome?”

“Because my people depend on me. Because thousands will die if I fail.” Catelyn replied with a tired voice.

“Fuck them.” Ilea said. “They should be grateful that you’re fighting for them. That you’re leading them in this battle. Many of them are, from what I’ve seen. They’re powerful warriors, mages and each will shoulder what they can. While people surely depend on your power and guidance, you’re in this together.”

“That we are indeed.” She replied. “Perhaps all of living things in Elos.”

Ilea rolled her eyes. “Stop with the doomsday talk or I’ll get anxious too.”

“You should be, this is not a common occurrence. We know little to nothing about the deeper layers of the Descent. If its denizens get corrupted and invade the north as well as your lands, our peoples might very well find them unstoppable.” Catelyn said in a bitter tone.

“Then we move to another realm, or get some nukes to start anew. You’ve survived in the north, the most ridiculously hostile environment any sapient creature would choose to go. Let’s go and show them what we can do. One dead corrupted at a time.” Ilea said and grinned.

Catelyn shook her head, still, a light smirk showed on her face. “You’re really just here because you like the challenge, aren’t you?”

Ilea spread her wings and ascended above the top of the wall, the tunnel extending into darkness beyond the second wall ten meters ahead.

“How could you think so little of my motives?” She asked in a dry tone.

“Well, I do hope your enthusiasm will result in a successful cull of this infestation.” Catelyn said, floating next to her.

“Me too, as well as a bunch of levels.” Ilea said, finding herself truly hoping for a challenge.

The demons hadn’t destroyed humanity, not yet at least. Nor have the Taleen brought an end to elven kind. Ilea had her doubts that this was the end to sapient life on Elos.

Either way, her fists and ash would give their all to prevent it.

“Rations, light sources, magical items that might help, healing potions as well as bandages, possible shelter and materials that will help against harsh climates and magical conditions.” Ila read down the small list he had prepared, several bags of various items sitting next to him.

The group stood at the beginning of the tunnel, behind the expanding defensive spikes and low walls that slowed or even stopped approaching beasts.

The rotation of mages and ranged individuals on top of the wall was already routine by now, paid and taken care of by the city of Hallowfort.

“Can we finally leave?” Maro asked, sitting on one of the low walls with a group of skeletons and undead behind him. Only the most powerful it seemed, their levels all above two hundred.

“Each will take a pack.” Ila said and grabbed his own, easily lifting the massive backpack at least twice his size.

Ilea walked over and put one into her bracelet, not about to argue about free provisions. The dark one was the expert on the Descent after all.

Catelyn stored away one too, into an item not visible on her body. Perhaps it was a skill of hers.

Maro stood up and stretched, making one vanish as well.

Niivalyr did the same.

“Mhm, a powerful party indeed. Do not look at them with such surprise, young one. It is no shame not to possess an item of such power. I myself have lost those I had found.” Lucas said casually, a smile on his face as he stepped to his pack and groaned to lift it.

“Should I take yours?” Ilea asked. “Give you a hand.”

The old man chuckled as he fell backwards, a cough suddenly rattling through him. “A lovely suggestion.” He finally said as he freed himself from the shackles of his pack.

Ilea walked over and helped him up, storing his pack in her bracelet. “Don’t act so weak, I’ve seen you fight.”

He frowned at her. “Mhm, and for that I am sorry.”

*So you want to be seen as a weak old man instead of what you really are?* Ilea didn’t ask the question, not about to start another discussion.

“Would... someone be kind enough to, free me of my burden?” Ilas asked, looking down and his voice a little quiet.

Catelyn strolled over and grabbed his pack with her tails, putting it away into whatever pocket dimension or item she had control over.

“So downwards, kill all corrupted and seal exits?” Ilea asked and stepped ahead, turning to glance over the group.

“Sounds simple enough.” Maro said and got up, his skeleton crew following behind.

Elfie grinned at her, his robe suddenly replaced by a set of black metal armor, reflecting little light. Engravings showed where various enchantments had been placed with intricate elvish writing and magical runes.

His robe appeared on top, open to expose the armor below. His face was hidden behind a mask similar to Feyrair’s, hair flowing out behind. The gray mist in his eyes seemed to move as he focused on Ilea.

“Let us purge this dungeon.” He spoke, brimming with power and confidence.

Ilea clapped and smiled at him. “Nice.” She commented, her ashen armor expanding from her back to cover her bone one.

*Fire fox, ash healer, curse elf, wood pacifist, death king and the four handed shadow. Ready to steam roll through this fuckery.*

“The second layer is mostly comprised of dark tunnels, filled with various insect like creatures.” Ilas explained as they walked down the massive nearly twenty five meters wide tunnel.

There were no light sources in the tunnel itself, Catelyn and Lucas providing for the group with hovering flames and balls of light.

Ilea didn’t use her newfound staff, keeping her hands free to take care of the approaching beasts.

There were plenty and the group moved somewhat slowly, even with Lucas’ impressive speed at covering the few tunnels and cracks they discovered with roots.

“The third layer is mostly under water, housing various monsters that thrive in such an environment. The worm must have moved through the dry parts, otherwise I see no way for the creatures to have reached the first layer.” Ilas continued, his swords drawn and at the ready.

Ilea moved a little ahead, just a couple of meters. Her sphere extended through the whole tunnel, each beast quickly taken out with her ashen limbs.

The others didn't seem to mind, only stepping in when the monsters grew more numerous. None of them cared to hit Ilea with their spells, knowing her rather well.

"When do we reach it?" Maro asked as he resurrected the intact bodies and sent them running ahead. He couldn't gain information from them but the sounds of battle gave the group plenty of foresight. Some of the undead even managed to take out a couple more beasts.

Ilea would have complained but the kills were few and far between. Her proposal for them to attack her in the meantime had been rejected by Catelyn. Understandable but still a little annoying.

The short training with the mages earlier had brought her only one level, a small upgrade at least thanks to her Sentinel Core but not as much as she had hoped for. They simply couldn't deal enough damage.

### ***Crystal Resistance – 2nd lvl 1***

***Crystals aren't just shiny decorations to old ruins and caves. You have learned that the arcane scholars have found ways to turn the beautiful natural phenomenon into something quite more deadly. Less deadly to you with this skill.***

***2nd stage: Your body adapts, crystal growth and transmutation now exponentially harder to achieve on your tissue.***

It was only applicable to Crystal Magic and didn't really benefit her any more than the second tier of Death Magic Resistance did. To be expected of course but she always hoped for more versatile bonuses.

"The upper layers tend to blend into each other. It is hard to say in which we reside." Ilas said. "Yet due to the lack of water, I assume we are in the second one still."

Ilea shredded through an Old Blooded that rushed them, the beast screeching up to its last moment, a barrier slashing through its neck.

Elfie would reach his three hundred evolution in no time if they continued to encounter so many of the high leveled beasts.

She liked the look with his new armor, a calm and confidence he hadn't exuded before. *Fighting with his group of hunters really seems to have changed him.*

"Done, we may move on." Lucas said from the side of the tunnel, massive roots covering the previous opening to the second level cave system.

"What about the creatures that are already in there?" Ilea asked as she focused ahead again.

"They will find their way to the top, where they will be killed." Ilas explained.