

Chapter 402 Getting Lost

The Halian finally managed to spit her out, a combination of tentacles, gag reflex and acidic stomach juices doing the job.

She slithered to the ground, failing to stand up due to the slippery juices burning into her skin. Her ash was reforming, deep cuts on her body healing under it. Ilea blinked, avoiding any further battle against the ground.

Her ashen limbs reformed, healed to move the process along. One of her eyes had been pierced by a thorned tentacle, refocusing as it sprang back to life.

She let out a breath and spat out a mix of blood and acid, looking at the creature.

It was writing in the ground, screeching in anguish and fury, thousands of cuts on its insides showing, most of its eyes scratched or punctured, some outright ripped out. The beast had a bad day, that much was certain.

Another screech left it, acid spewing out from its massive maw, slathering Ilea in the brown muck.

She felt the substance burn into her ash, disintegrating it quickly. It stopped at her skin, her healing and resistances pushing against it. Ilea rushed forward, watching the mouth shut before she slammed into an invisible wall.

“A barrier... really?” she asked, putting out her hand. She tried to gauge it, compared it to Claire’s and other barriers she had come across. Destructive healing mana started pouring into it, Ilea using the downtime to let her mana regenerate.

The battle, more a messy dinner really, had lasted just around a minute so far. The beast didn’t have long, now hiding behind its barrier.

Ilea watched her mana pour into the slowly more visible barrier, eating through it like the acid still clinging to her skin. She tried blinking inside but appeared at the same place she had started. Whatever prevented her teleportation was still there.

My mana against yours then, she thought, charging her Heart of Cinder. Thanks to her ash aura, she was getting stronger with each passing minute of battle. Her sphere informed her that the barrier was slowly being eaten up, having a hard time fighting the reversed healing that ate away at it.

Ilea used up between fifty and a hundred and fifty mana per second if she went all out, Absolute Destruction alone using seventy five points per fully charged strike. Storm of Cinders from sixteen separate limbs used around sixty mana per strike. With around eight mana regenerating per second without Meditation, it wasn’t quite enough to keep up her offense.

Sentinel Core helped, especially when the creatures used spells against her. And meditation added a factor of four to her base regeneration, nearly doubling it. Her skills of course still ate up much more, leaving her below four thousand mana after the minute long engagement.

Nothing less was required from a monster she assumed to be above level six hundred. These weren’t creatures easily overwhelmed, not by an enemy with a much lower level. Even if she had two classes.

She wouldn't stop here however, continuing to eat through the barrier as her fire spell charged. Each passing second with Meditation active would mean another strike or two against the creature.

Heart of Cinder was charged a little over half a minute later, burning away at her insides. She put her hand through the barrier and released the spell in a beam of energy, heat and fire.

The Halian shrieked and thrashed in its hideout and soon to be grave within the walls of the twelfth layer, enveloped by fire as its hard skin was scorched, its insides cooked. And still it remained alive. Powerful but injured and bled.

Ilea broke through moments later, the barrier wavering due to her attack. She blinked close and rammed her ash into its eyes, and some into its maw to try and open it again. Mana poured into it during the assault, her hands slamming down, each strike sending a destructive wave through the monster's form.

It died half a minute later, overwhelmed finally by the insane amount of energy destroying its insides. The creature stopped moving rather unceremoniously, its attempts to stop her in its death throes lackluster compared to the earlier assault. The Halian had closed its mouth and thus sealed its strongest weapon.

'ding' 'You have defeated [Halian – lvl 610]'

'ding' 'Azarinth Reversal reaches 3rd lvl 14'

'ding' 'Storm of Cinders reaches 3rd lvl 13'

Ilea blinked back up into the tunnel, her wings taking her the rest of the way. The creature below was huge, now unmoving and dead. *Fucking disgusting*, she thought as she looked down, her mana regenerating as her body was cleaned by ash.

Her bone armor appeared again, slowly restoring what had been damaged or lost. Which consisted of a large part of it.

A moment later, she sat down on the edge, the crack leading down into the beast's little alcove. "Shit day, hmm?" she asked and summoned a meal. The smell of a dead creature didn't bother her much anymore, nothing compared to the things she was exposed to every day within the Descent.

Random creatures are already above six hundred down here, she mused, enjoying Keyla's cooking with each bite as her mana regenerated. Ilea hoped the expedition hadn't gone much deeper, despite her growth and the possibility of fighting a variety of dangerous and interesting creatures. For their sake and that of her friends at the very least.

She herself could come down here and test herself against these monsters whenever she wanted, without anybody else's life on the line.

Ilea snorted. *Sure, as if nobody has a world ending threat for me to fight at this point. I'm too fucking powerful. I bet the empire is knocking on Ravenhall's gates, Adam somehow summoned another demon horde and maybe there's an actual demon invasion. Or hey, maybe the Taleen switched targets to humanity. Because I've been fucking with them so much. Yea, why not make it my fault too.*

She chuckled to herself. The Feynor were a danger in the north, to Hallowfort and all the Dark Ones. Baralia in the south, as well as any other nation or tribe holding slaves.

As far as her knowledge of fantasy narrative was concerned, there were necromancers and dragons out there, just waiting for her to reach the right level of power. Then they would invade and burn down whole kingdoms. Only for the hero to emerge.

You can summon someone else for that, destiny.

So far, things went alright. At least in her opinion. The demons had fucked up a lot of shit but the threat wasn't close to as world ending as some people made it out to be. They even took out Ravenhall. Even if they had managed to somehow take over the human lands, the rest of humanity would have just been pushed farther north and west.

As soon as they would have gone into elven territory, they would have been slaughtered. *If anybody needs a bloody hero, it's the elves*, she thought and smiled. Ilea believed them at this point. Isalhar and Elfie both had corresponding stories. Their shitty leaders didn't care much and their people saw the Taleen merely as a training opportunity, despite their heavy losses of both lives and land.

Well, I don't actually know enough about that conflict to really have an opinion about it. Just seems more dire than whatever humanity is dealing with. Every little monster or plague will be highly threatening to a race of people where the average level is below one hundred.

And of course we monopolize healers.

She shook her head and smiled. *Small goals. I can still explore and fight powerful beasts here, while helping a friend with her world ending threat.*

Ilea wondered how much of their previous talk was just fueled by her wish to fight monsters alone. The arguments were valid of course but everyone knew she wasn't exactly here for the same reasons as the others.

Lucas and Ilas don't care much for the corruption either I think. Not anymore at least. Why would they? I'm pretty sure the Elemental provides a better barrier than we ever could.

At this point it was more about finding the expedition, or bury their remains. For the others that was. For her, fighting monsters was enough. Finding out who built all this and experimented with the creatures was another thing she felt somewhat strongly about. If only for the fact that a lot of people had died already.

At least destroy your viruses before you abandon a testing facility, she thought and finished her meal, getting up a moment later.

"Alright. Let's see if I can find more of these fuckers," she said and walked back.

Ilea wandered through the tunnels for twenty minutes, not finding a single thing other than her own reflection in the hundreds of glass like ice shards covering the stone.

She tried finding a trail of either the expedition or her group that must have passed through here half a day prior. Nothing revealed itself however, neither to her sphere nor her Huntress skill.

She hummed the theme song for one of her favorite Superheroines to stave off the boredom that was slowly growing. The main reason was to attract any monsters that were nearby. So far, nothing had shown itself.

Ilea had her precognition, her sphere, her Azarinth Perception as well as her insane defenses in case something did jump her.

Ten minutes and a lot of unknown corridors later, something did show. A creature that appeared in her sphere and vanished.

Ilea felt the space next to her side distort and turned, using her arms to defend herself when a dozen blades cut into her. They penetrated halfway through her ash before the creature vanished once more.

A four legged dog sized beast with a ball like head, adorned by too many eyes and no mouth. Twelve protrusions came out its back with bladed ends, the whole thing a sickly purple color.

It appeared again behind her, ashen limbs lashing out to counter the attack. Blades clanged against each other before it vanished again.

Ilea at least managed to get a glimpse at it with Identity.

[Blade Lurker – lvl ???]

The thing appeared again, cutting deeper this time.

Ilea was fast enough to respond but the thing appeared in an awkward spot every time, as if it knew where she could reach easily and where she couldn't. Her ashen limbs were the only thing keeping it away for now.

After she got eaten by several creatures, Ilea had some time to think about possible ways to use her new power up to her ash effectively. *Just need to make it a little more uncomfortable.*

Barbed thorns formed on her ashen armor, growing out quickly before she added the same to her limbs, moving them from her back to her limbs and torso. They started spinning with quickly increasing velocity, around her arms, legs, chest and stomach. One even swirled around her head.

Everything was still connected to her body, giving it the benefits of her active skills as well. Anything that attacked her in this state would have a damn annoying time.

Ash Hedgehog baby, she smiled and watched the creature appear, its blades cutting into her defenses. Several cuts ripped open its purple skin, both close to the protrusions on its back as well as its side.

The ash chipped but quickly reformed, injuring the monster with each teleport.

Ilea noticed that the Blade Lurker moved with increased velocity after every blink, its weapons cutting deeper every time. Its body was in turn ripped apart by her thorns.

When it finally cut to her bone armor, the beast whipped around, getting stuck in her ash.

Ilea snatched it with her arms, hugging it close as it was shredded through by a thousand thorns. Blood sprayed the walls and her armor.

She let it go when the killing notification resounded in her mind, a sad lump of mangled flesh at that point, landing with a wet noise.

'ding' 'You have defeated [Blade Lurker – lvl 517]

'ding' 'Ash and Ember Unity reaches 3rd lvl 14'

This level isn't very lucrative, is it? she sighed and reformed her defenses, getting rid of the gore. *I should move on to the thirteenth as soon as possible.*

Ilea's plans didn't pan out exactly. She just left a corridor with ten Blade Lurkers, each cutting into her defenses before she took them out. The numbers nearly overwhelmed her at one point, their blades chipping too much of her ash to make it effective. A charged blast of fire took three of them out of the action, allowing her to refocus on the rest.

It didn't seem like the monsters had an upper limit to their speed, cutting deep into her flesh, their own bodies nearly breaking under the stress their abilities put them under. And now she was looking at a hazy illusion moving into and out of the walls.

The person looked like a hazy nightmare version of Claire, calling for help in a voice much too deep and distorted.

She followed of course, hoping for another Halian, perhaps one that was worse at the illusion part of the job.

What she found was to be expected.

[Corrupted Halian – lvl ???]

The monster screeched, its tentacles thrashing out of the opened mouth as it ripped at the walls to get out.

So much anger, and still you're stuck in a wall, Ilea thought and formed her shredder like protrusions, adding several layers of ashen padding to her defenses. *Full mana, Heart charging, hedgehog mode on.*

She thought about waiting for fifteen minutes to get the full benefits of her Aspect but decided against it. Ilea had killed one before and now it was corrupted and frenzied, a husk of its former self.

"Here's dinner," she said and jumped in, the tentacles trying to grab her getting shredded as soon as they touched her moving defense.

What followed was a grinding mush of thorns and teeth, fire and blood.

The added aggression and unrelenting frenzy of the Halian actually made it more dangerous, contrary to Ilea's expectations.

The mouth smashed down in quick succession, its teeth grinding into her ash without any concern for the Halian's own safety. It didn't stop or slow down its attacks, acid spew and tentacle strikes no matter how many wounds it had, how much of its body got burnt.

Ilea had to retort to her instant recovery several times but decided to remain within its mouth, stopping the walls with her arms as her ashen limbs and her reversed reconstruction slowly whittled away at the creature's health. She had to refrain from using more offensive skills after a while to preserve her mana.

She had tried blinking out but this time, the monster was using its barrier to keep her in, instead of out.

The end result was the same however. The Halian died, in a gory soup of blood, guts and orange ooze.

Ilea finally blinked out, going on one knee as her lungs reformed. Not instantly, to preserve some mana once more. She was still fine but a sudden appearance of ten more Blade Lurkers could pose a significant problem.

Meditation had been active during most of the fight and was flowing through her now too, giving her an additional bit of mana every passing second. The acid had provided some resource as well, considered a magic attack. Likely because she had a related resistance.

She sat back and looked through her notifications.

'ding' 'You have defeated [Blade Lurker – lvl 505]

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'ding' 'You have defeated [Blade Lurker – lvl 523]

'ding' 'You have defeated [Corrupted Halian – lvl 605]

'ding' 'The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 328 – Five stat points awarded'

'ding' 'Kin of Ash has reached lvl 327 – Five stat points awarded'

'ding' 'Azarinth Awakening reaches 3rd lvl 18'

'ding' 'Sentinel Core reaches 3rd lvl 13'

'ding' 'Aspect of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 16'

'ding' 'Keeper of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 14'

'ding' 'Corrosion Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 10'

The ten stat points went into Vitality as she waited and listened. Nothing showed up.

Ilea jumped down and stored her bone armor, reducing her ashen armor in the process. There was still plenty of acid and corruption remaining inside the corpse, slathered onto her in perhaps the deadliest bath a human has ever taken.

What better way to deter other creatures than a corrupted and acid ridden corpse, she thought and sat down, her skin slowly burnt through.

She deactivated her armor of ash as well, both the corruption as well as the acid instantly increasing in potency. Not ten fold as she had hoped for but at least twice or thrice as powerful.

Ilea felt a little exposed without her ashen armor but she had to learn to trust her other skills as well. Gaining resistance levels quickly was a major priority at this point and while it took a moment for her armor to form on her body, the effects to her real body were instant.

She sighed, turning on her perception of pain, instantly wincing as her teeth clenched. The corruption was most certainly worse than the acid, sickening and like a bright all consuming sensation in her mind.

She stopped it again. Losing focus here, especially while her defenses were down was stupid. More so than what she was willing to do at the moment. Ilea planned to level her pain tolerance as well but while there were so many other resistance levels to be gained, she could certainly sideline that project.

To think now that she was deep within a northern dungeon, she would train without her defenses active. When even within Ravenhall, she had kept her ashen armor present most of the time, likely slowing down her training.

The damage output coming from the mages was good either way but she still shook her head at the thought. *Monsters are at least open with their intent, more trustworthy than humans in their own way.*