

The story so far...

When Ilea returned from the north, she found that Ravenhall was back on the upswing. With the war in Lys at a stalemate, refugees, merchants, and craftspeople looking for safety and distance from the ongoing conflict were finding a new home in the fortress city of the Shadow's Hand.

With all the equipment and gold from the vaults of Rhyvor added to the coffers of the city, Ilea and Claire laid the foundations for what was to come. An independent Ravenhall with its own guard and council, perhaps even its own healing organization.

Her friends and allies were hard at work, so Ilea went to check in on Riverwatch, the first settlement she'd found when she arrived on Elos. Her journey led her to a rematch with a demon she had fought some time ago and an investigation into the underbelly of Riverwatch. She met and trained with a group of elves that were part of the Cerithil Hunters, elves who had forsaken their domains to go into dungeons and fight the machines left behind by the Taleen dwarves, machines that Ilea is very familiar with.

Before she could go back to Ravenhall, Ilea was called to help in the north, where a corruption had started spreading amongst the monsters of the Descent. Frenzied creatures were coming up to the first layer of the ancient dungeon and endangering the settlers and scavengers that lived there.

She was joined by a group of powerful friends and allies, and they dove into the unknown to find the source of the corruption and the fate of the expedition that had gone into the dungeon before. Countless monster battles and days of resistance training finally brought Ilea to the 20th layer, where both she and her allies battled and defeated the corrupted Sand Elemental

threatening to endanger the beings of the Descent and everyone that lived in Hallowfort.

With the immediate threats dealt with, Ilea explored the rest of the dungeon accompanied by a little Fae friend she had made along the way, a being she calls Violence. At the bottom of the facility, Ilea helped drain and disperse a large amount of gathered mana before she learned that the ancient facilities within the dungeon had once belonged to the Ascended, beings from another realm that had come to Elos with an unknown purpose.

When Ilea and Violence looked for answers within an enchanted device, they found out that the facility was not abandoned at all. An Ascended named Vor Elenthir appeared and confronted Ilea, nearly killing her in the ensuing battle.

She escaped with the help of Violence and was invited to its home, where she learned the true nature of the Fae. With some reassurance, some questions answered, and new questions raised, she finally returned to Ravenhall...

ONE

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Catching Up

Ilea leaned against the windowsill in Claire's office. She sipped from her ale and looked out onto the busy square beyond. There were hundreds of people around – merchants, workers, civilians, guards, and adventurers equipped with armor, robes, staves, swords, and other weapons. She wondered what kind of magic and skills they all had.

A smile crept onto her face. Last time she had trained her resistances with the help of local adventurers and Shadows, it hadn't been particularly effective. But now, she had her upgraded Avatar of Ash available, which meant she could essentially deactivate her resistances and have even lower-level people help her train again.

I wonder if it will be enough or if my general resilience is just too high at this point.

High-level problems.

She sipped her ale, very much aware of the joyous, and potentially a little bit smug, expression on her face. She enjoyed the cool breeze flowing into the office. The nearby mountains were still topped with snow, but she could tell that spring was on the horizon.

She felt a deep calm settle within her as she looked out onto the square and the alleys beyond. It felt like she could finally relax after a long adventure. The last week or two with Violence hadn't been particularly stressful except for the last few days, and here in Ravenhall, she always felt like she was coming home.

The feeling reminded her of her first time in Riverwatch. The strange but exciting sensation of seeing people in actual, real-life armor equipped

with medieval weapons to hunt for and defend against monsters.

A lot had happened since then.

She was taken out of her contemplations when she heard and saw a metal tube arrive in a contraption set into the wall behind Claire's desk.

Claire took the tube and opened it. She unwrapped a small piece of paper and then made it vanish. She noticed Ilea's questioning stare. "This? A new addition. Turns out two brilliant young enchanters equipped with the resources of Lilith can create some interesting prototypes. I heard about Aki's new body too. Though I don't think that was their doing entirely. Trian should arrive shortly."

"A long-distance messaging device?" Ilea asked.

"Just within the city for now, but we're thinking about broader applications."

Ilea looked at the device and then moved her attention back to the square. *Seems like Iana and Christopher haven't been idle.*

Trian arrived a few minutes later. He burst into the room and glared at Ilea, then smiled. "You're alive."

"Why wouldn't I be?"

He stomped toward her. "All of those paintings. And then Cless couldn't paint you anymore. What on Elos were you doing? We thought you were on a mission to Riverwatch!"

Ilea summoned the sphere that Catelyn had given her, throwing it up and then catching it in a playful manner. "It's kind of a long story."

She told them about her adventures. About her time in Riverwatch, her call to the north, her adventures in the Descent, and finally, her encounter with the Ascended and the visit to the Fae.

After the initial shock and stunned expressions, Claire and Trian suggested they take a walk to better digest everything she had told them.

Ilea stopped at a street food vendor nearby and got all of them a few meat skewers.

"It's a lot to take in," Trian said, biting into his skewer. "A sun? Really? They took it? And one of them is still alive? Ascended, you said."

Ilea started eating too. "Yeah, I agree it sounds ridiculous. But you should have seen the mana, let alone the Fae. I'm definitely not gonna doubt anything Superfae told me," Ilea said and laughed.

They made their way to the second wall, one of three now protecting the city. Stopping near a building overgrown with ivy, Ilea spread her wings

and helped Claire up onto the roof.

Trian landed nearby. "And you're about to get a third Class." His eyes were wide with wonder and just a hint of jealousy. "Never thought a Shadow from my team would become the first human with three Classes."

Claire dusted off her blue and white robe, then cleared her throat. "We don't know if she's going to be the first. I highly doubt it, actually. Just because people don't go around sharing this kind of information doesn't mean nobody knows about it."

"I agree," Ilea said. "My healing Class certainly helps, but while my methods may be unorthodox, other people out there would have had decades or even centuries to work on their magic and Classes."

"Either way," Trian said and smiled, biting off a piece from his skewer. "It's exciting!"

Ilea grinned. She agreed, of course she did. She could hardly stop herself from going out there again, finding a few high-level creatures, and killing them to level up the rest of the way, however long that 'rest of the way' was. But she told herself to be patient, to get a few more general skills, achievements, and resistances to the third tier before she pushed her Classes further.

She bit into a meat skewer. "Any news on Kyrian?"

"He's alive. And fighting. And he seems stronger too. But it doesn't look like he's changing locations," Claire said.

"He got himself some birds," Trian said.

"Birds?" Ilea asked.

Claire smiled. "Yeah. Wherever he is, it doesn't look like there are any sapient creatures around. Maybe he saved them, or maybe he's just taking care of them. But yeah, we're waiting for news from the enchanters as it does seem like he'll need help to get back."

Ilea nodded. "I'll be there whenever we have a way to get to him. I'm glad we at least have Cless' paintings to know that he's alive."

She heard a few conversations going on nearby and glanced over the stone railing of the roof. A merchant was having an argument with the Shadowguard, with some adventurers loitering nearby. She assumed they wanted to help the merchant get her way to maybe get a discount from her after. It was hard to believe that the demon summoning had devastated Ravenhall and its population less than two years prior.

"Feels like the city is back to how it was when I first arrived."

Claire smiled, though a hint of bitterness showed on her face. “Things have been moving quickly, more so due to the war and our recent independence. The population is higher than it was before the demon summoning, and we’re still growing, building deep into the mountain below while reinforcing the walls and the guard.” She sighed and sat down, leaning against the stone railing as she looked up at the sky. “It’s sobering, to say the least. To hear about blood corruption, Elementals, and ancient realm-traveling civilizations with the capability of removing entire suns from the sky.”

“We may be a few thousand years behind, but we’re here now. All we can do is work with what we have,” Trian said. “Besides, Ilea has cracked the three hundreds in just a few years. Who’s to say others won’t follow suit?”

“Others? Do you have anyone specific in mind?” Ilea asked.

Trian smiled from ear to ear. “Come on, I’ll show you.”

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TWO

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Performance

Nathan walked toward the main hall of the headquarters, careful not to attract any unnecessary attention. He had joined the Sentinels three weeks prior, but he still wasn't entirely sure if it had been a good idea. After everything that had happened in Veraan, of course he would take this opportunity. It was a promise of power given only to the desperate. He wasn't blind to it, or to the dangers something like this could pose. But how could he refuse?

He hadn't been able to protect them.

Nathan sighed. What was done was done. He was here now, and if he planned to survive, to get stronger, he had to stay in the now.

They were supposed to check the notice board at least once at noon and once after dinner, just in case something came up.

For two weeks now, he had participated in the hastily thrown-together lessons this organization provided. The teachers certainly had charisma and power to boot, but the topics they were talking about seemed a little directionless.

There were general combat classes, classes on battle strategy, first aid, the human body, monsters, even alchemy and a class on herbs. These were all things that he expected from an organization that was supposed to make them into healers who could also defend themselves and fight monsters, but it just kind of felt like the teachers were figuring things out as they went.

That was one of the reasons why his initial suspicions had calmed a little. He had taken the offer to join based on his previous employment at a few shops that Lilith owned and her reputation in the city. But seeing how

the faculty seemed to still be figuring things out, he just couldn't see it as some kind of nefarious plot to sacrifice or brainwash young people for some egomaniacal purpose.

His father had warned him of those types more than once.

The main hall was comprised mostly of wooden benches and tables. Support beams reached up to the stone ceiling in the underground hall, and warm magical lamps embedded into both the ceiling and walls provided light. It was simple but served its purpose. What really caused everyone to gather here was the food that was available all day.

And not the kind of food Nathan had expected from an organization without an entry fee. It might have been the most delicious food he'd ever eaten. If he hadn't known this whole thing was funded by Lilith, he would have been quite confused rather than just suspicious.

Crowded around the notice board were other Sentinels, talking either in whispers or loud, excited tones.

"Hey, Nathan!" a voice boomed from off to his right. A few people in the main hall glanced his way but returned to their own conversations a moment later.

"Luke," Nathan said as he turned and nodded at the man.

[Farmer – lvl 28]

That was an awkward nod if I've ever seen one. He's a farmer and, what, five, six years younger than you? Get your shit together.

It didn't help that the man was around twice his size, his clothes barely containing the muscles beneath.

"Did you hear the news?" Luke asked as he approached, placing a hand on Nathan's shoulder in a casual manner.

Nathan winced slightly, then steeled himself. "We just finished our combat lesson. I haven't had time yet to check. What is it?"

Luke grinned and took several steps back. "Classes are canceled this afternoon. We are to gather in the lowest training hall."

That was indeed some news.

They made their way over to the food court in the same hall.

"What do you think that's all about, then?" Nathan absentmindedly piled food onto his plate. He went for some bean and potato salad, hesitating on the meat before taking a few slices of bacon.

A special gathering. Is this where they reveal their plans? Where they will... No. No, you've seen them, talked to them. Trian isn't like that.

He gulped.

"What else would it be? Lilith! The dark shadow, clad in ash with wings that darken the suns themselves! She will grace us with her presence!" Luke exclaimed in a mocking tone.

Some of the other students looked up from their meals or books, and while some smiled, others seemed annoyed.

How can he trust everything this easily?

"Or they're going to sacrifice us all to power some ritual," Nathan suggested in a whisper.

"Didn't you work for a business that she owns before coming here? Show some trust. I'm pretty sure this isn't a scam."

Nathan scowled. "I worked in a store owned by her, as did many who joined. Doesn't mean I ever met her. Nor that she's trustworthy. She is rich, that much is sure."

He'd already had a few conversations with some of the other students, and they all agreed that this place was suspicious. Some had snooped around and others had checked in with information brokers and even Shadows, but all they'd got was that this was just another place owned by Lilith.

They had all been given high-quality clothing and their own rooms equipped with a desk, a wardrobe, and beds that were beyond comfortable. They could even switch out the mattresses if they liked to have a firmer or softer one. And the food was either great or downright otherworldly.

It was just strange. Nathan knew how much all of these things cost.

He knew that plenty of the others had come to Ravenhall after they'd lost everything to demons or the war. He had, too. They had all been approached and told about opportunities here, but this was beyond what any of them had expected. Education always came at a price, and Nathan had heard plenty of stories from the big healing orders.

There were usually lots of evaluations, oaths, contracts – even blood magic and curses – though he wasn't sure if that last part was true. Here, all they had to do was talk with each of the instructors. If they decided you were a fit, you stayed.

He went to check the notice himself just to make sure.

"It's directly from Trian," Nathan said after he sat back down.

Luke leaned forward and whispered, “Some say he’s a blood mage, you know.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean? I guess not *every* blood mage is automatically a monster,” Nathan admitted.

“All I hear from you two is fucking complaining. You get your own room, a bed, clothes, and good food. What more could you ever want in life?” Celeste said as she joined the two with a plate piled high with meat, potatoes, and bread, all drenched in gravy. She gave Nathan a quick glance, her shrewd black eyes unreadable, before she focused on her food with a grin.

Nathan looked at her unkempt hair, blonde and quite short. He could see both dust and what he thought to be dried blood in the strands. Such things didn’t surprise him anymore.

“Don’t you think it’s weird though?” Nathan asked. “Every store, inn, and restaurant associated with the name Lilith is well-run and generally of good quality. That’s how you set up a front for more shady business – make it so no one will question you. We’re not learning about a Class at all. Nobody is even a healer here.”

Everything about this place screamed that he should be suspicious, yet he knew that part of him wanted all this to be true. The people here seemed honest, but his dad had warned him about things that appeared too good to be true...

Celeste shrugged and started eating, replying with a full mouth. “As I said, food, beds and all. Plus, the training is amazing. I’m pretty sure Sidney is a Shadow. I love it.”

“How would you know? Just because we’re in Ravenhall doesn’t mean every other high-level warrior you see is a Shadow,” Luke said.

“Just a feeling. I’ve lived on the streets here long enough to be able to tell.”

Maybe she’s right. Nathan sighed. Maybe he was overthinking this. What if he’d just gotten lucky? The teachers appeared genuine, if a bit unprepared. He’d been put together with these two as well, and he liked them both.

“I wanted to ask you before...” Nathan started, looking around as the words got stuck in his throat.

“Spit it out, rich boy,” Celeste said between bites, barely looking at him.

I wasn't rich. But maybe compared to her, I guess. He shoved the thought away.

"Is it true? The demon summoning?" he finally asked.

"Maybe you shouldn't—" Luke said, but he was interrupted by Celeste holding up a piece of bone.

"Why? It happened. Nearly everyone died. I hid for weeks in the underground. Good thing the demons had shit noses and eyes. The rats were a worse threat."

"They say if a demon kills you, your corpse stands up again and becomes one of them," Nathan said.

The stories that had reached his village had been horrifying.

And fascinating, if he was honest. He had wondered about how people could fight monsters like that. He was glad now that he had never voiced those thoughts to anyone.

"I didn't see that. But there were a lot of them... more than I saw at the beginning. And there were no corpses. Could just be they ate everyone," Celeste explained as she bit into a juicy chicken leg.

"Do you three mind if I sit here?" a new voice asked.

It was a woman with striking blue eyes and long black hair in a single braid falling down her back. She wore simple but high-quality clothes, Nathan could tell.

He stared at her for a moment too long and gulped, looking down at his food. Something about her made him feel tense.

[Battle Healer – lvl ??]

A battle healer, and she's a high level too. That's the first actual healer I've seen here.

"Finally, a fucking healer," Celeste said with a grin. "You're a new teacher? Nice to meet you. Celeste." She offered her greasy hand.

The woman smiled and sat down, grabbed the hand, then put down a plate even more stacked than Celeste's.

"I'm a substitute teacher or something," the woman said and started eating. "Nice to meet you all," she continued after swallowing.

Or something?

Celeste eyed the newcomer's plate but soon focused on her own again.

"I don't think it's true," Luke said.

“What?” Nathan asked.

“That people rise again after a demon kills them,” he clarified.

“I’ve seen it happen,” the new woman chimed in, surprising the three.

“Really?” Nathan asked. “How could they be defeated, then?”

“The demon was only level fifty after it rose. Still dangerous, but it was killed by a brave warrior right after.”

Celeste snorted. “Great. Just what I expected.”

Nathan could have sworn he saw a smile twitch on the healer’s mouth.

“Will you teach us your Class?” Luke asked. “I haven’t seen a battle healer before, but it would be fitting. They did tell us that learning about fighting and healing would both be important.”

The woman smiled at that. “Mine’s a rare one. I doubt any of you could learn it. The pay here is good, though, so I agreed. I’ll show you some healing magic at the very least. And some other things, maybe. We’ll see what you can pick up.”

She doesn’t look much older than me. But something about her feels off. She feels dangerous.

“Do you know what the assembly is about?” Nathan asked her.

“Assembly?” the healer asked.

“It’s probably about the new healer they managed to hire,” Celeste said, nodding her way. “In half an hour or so. Lowest level of this majestic castle.”

“Not exactly a castle, is it?” Luke asked.

“I believe it was a joke,” Nathan said.

The healer leaned forward and smiled. “Tell me, what do you think of this place? I’m not sure if I want to get stuck here, even with the pay.”

“It’s... new. It’s supposedly owned by Lilith,” Luke said. “The food is good, the classes are interesting, and I’ve learned more about fighting than I did in my eighteen years before coming here.”

“You’re a fucking farmer, Luke. Of course you didn’t know shit about fighting,” Celeste said with a chuckle.

“Who’s Lilith?” the healer asked.

“You’re not from around here then?” Luke said with a smile. “She’s the greatest there ever was! She owns more than half the restaurants in town and a ton of other places too, like smithies and such. She’s the richest and most beautiful woman in existence, and her ashen wings are legendary. I’m pretty sure she’s a Shadow too. Never met her, though. A mystery, really.”

His tone indicated he was joking. Mostly.

Nathan looked over at the healer, and his eyes went wide. She had met his gaze with her own for the first time. He was overcome with a sense of danger. Of power. Something in his brain told him to run, but all he could do was sit there. Anything he might have wanted to say got stuck in his throat.

It's her!

A random healer suddenly appearing before an assembly? The first of its kind? It has to be! Stay calm...

Breaking out of his thoughts, he found her attention was back on Luke. The man was babbling about the legend that was Lilith.

What does that mean? What's going to happen now? Should I run? No, she would stop me, wouldn't she?

"...wings pow-er-ful and righteous, she landed toooo defend the weak!" Luke sang, getting boos from the people sitting nearby. His voice really wasn't the best.

"Do you have a singing skill?" the woman asked with a lopsided grin.

"Not yet. But I won't let them discourage me!" Luke exclaimed.

She laughed. "Don't. I've seen miracles happen. Your dream might just come true."

Nathan was having a hard time breathing. Right until she touched his shoulder. Something warm and strange flowed into him, his mind calming immediately.

"Are you alright? You looked a little pale," she said.

"He has his moments. The scars should tell you enough," Celeste said.

"Don't," Luke hissed.

The girl rolled her eyes and continued eating in silence.

"It's alright. You've calmed down a bit, right?" the healer said.

Nathan nodded. It felt wrong. He touched his neck and felt the skin, burnt and disfigured. "I'm... fine," he said.

"Well, that was interesting. Let's hope we meet her at the assembly. Sounds like a terrifically unreal person." She got up. "Fifteen minutes?"

"Yes, ma'am. Just take the stairs and go down all the way. Can't miss it," Luke said.

Nathan glanced at her once more. Her movements seemed different to him now. Lethal. Like the monsters he had seen in the woods.

Like the soldiers.

“How the fuck?” Celeste exclaimed, looking at the empty plate next to hers.

“You got beaten,” Luke said with a laugh. He patted Nathan on his back and smiled. “You okay?”

Nathan nodded. *Should I tell them? No. She’ll reveal it herself. Why talk to us first? She wanted to know about the rumors? Or was it a warning? To make sure nobody would bail?*

“We should go too. Finish your plate, Celeste,” Luke said, getting up.

The girl rolled her eyes and stood up, taking her plate with her. “Sorry, Nathan,” she said as the pair left.

It was nice that she apologized, at least.

Nathan followed the two in silence, glancing at the other students as they trickled in from the other floors onto the main stairwell. The entrance hall was on the ground floor, then the main hall was one floor down beneath the earth, with all their personal rooms on the same floor. One floor deeper were all the classrooms, and then below were several floors with training halls. The stairwell led further down still but ended at a stone wall. They likely planned to expand there at a later time.

If he wanted to run, this was his chance. But he didn’t. He wanted to know more, to find out if this was the real deal.

The people from the other classes were in various states of disarray. One looked properly battered, showing bruises from the heavy steel armor they had to wear during some of the combat lessons. At least they’d been given armor – otherwise the teachers would rip them apart.

Aki stepped into the broad stairwell as they passed the fifth floor below ground level, glancing over the students with his shining green eyes.

Many looked away, not wanting to challenge the being.

Nathan looked back. It fascinated him. A machine capable of thought and as deadly as the strongest warriors he had ever seen. Nobody knew what it was or how it could exist. One of their few rules was not to talk about Aki to outsiders. Even though Nathan got the feeling that Aki would actually enjoy fighting some challengers from the city.

Maybe a Shadow or two would be interested in fighting him.

They soon reached the bottom floor, where much of the stairwell wasn’t quite finished yet. Stone rubble covered the ground. It felt more like a cave than part of a building, let alone the headquarters of a healing order.

Not order, 'organization', he reminded himself. Trian had made it clear that they shouldn't be associated with the known healing orders. Good thing too.

Trian was there as well. All the teachers were, including the new healer. *Maybe it isn't her?* he thought, watching her greet the others. Orthan's eyes went wide before he nodded. Sidney smiled from ear to ear. Lyza was the only one who didn't seem to care at all. Nothing new there. He couldn't see William, but he knew the man was otherwise engaged with teaching the Shadowguard.

People were talking amongst each other, whispering about what this was all about.

"What do you think, Nathan?" Luke asked, standing next to him.

"Not sure," was all he said. He could've run. But he hadn't. A slight smile came to his face. Yeah, he knew why he was here.

He watched the healer talk to Trian before the man nodded. She vanished and appeared in front of the murmuring students. Some heads turned toward her, but most people didn't even notice.

"Greetings, everyone," she said, her voice barely reaching the second row of people.

Her head tilted to the side.

Nathan watched her, and as he saw a grin form on her lips, their eyes met.

He gulped.

A whistle resounded through the large stone hall, clear and high-pitched.

'ding' You have heard the call of a powerful healer. You are paralyzed for five seconds.

What??

He couldn't move an inch. The murmuring had died down in an instant, everybody frozen in place. The healer was still looking at him, but her eyes soon moved over the large group of assembled people.

He should've been scared, should've seen his suspicions as confirmed, he knew it. Yet what he felt was relief – relief and excitement. If someone so powerful wanted him dead or sacrificed, he would already be dead.

The other option was that this was the real deal.

“Now that I have your attention, it is a pleasure to finally meet you, Medic Sentinels. My name is Ilea, otherwise known as Lilith.”

With that, the five seconds passed, and Nathan could move again, taking a deep breath as he looked around at the confused group of people. Nobody dared make a sound.

“Fuck,” Luke said in a whisper.

Lilith looked at him and smiled. “I apologize for showing up so late. Now... in the coming weeks, I’ll take over your afternoon lessons.”

She walked a little closer and sat down on the ground.

“Come on, don’t be scared of me. Form a loose half circle and sit down. Make sure the ones at the back can see me.”

Don’t be scared? Are you kidding me?

“Really?” someone behind him whispered.

“Yes, really,” Lilith said and looked straight at him.

She heard that?

“What you heard before is a skill called Monster Hunter. I got it from fighting creatures well beyond my level. Time and time again,” she explained.

Nathan gulped. “But you’re a healer,” he said.

She smiled. “Yes. Yes I am. Now come, everyone, sit down with me. Today, I’ll show you what healers can do.”

Nathan couldn’t help but smile, pushing past some of the stunned people before he sat down somewhat close to the woman. It took all his guts, but he hadn’t come here to fool around. More and more, he felt that his suspicions had been misplaced. This was his chance to gain power, and he wouldn’t waste it.

The others slowly followed suit, sitting down in a half-circle as Lilith had instructed.

She sat with her knees close to her chest, hugging them casually. “Why are you here?” she asked them after a while.

“Free food,” someone said.

Nobody chuckled. Except Lilith.

“We’re supposed to become healers,” someone else said.

“Healers who can fight, who can support adventurers directly, or even go fight monsters on our own,” another voice said.

“Combat healers,” Luke said.

Now a few people chuckled.

“Combat healers... it’s the description we have. I like Medic as well,” Lilith said with a smile. She looked at the few people who had chuckled. “You still came here, even though you think it a laughable notion?”

“Healers are weak,” Celeste said, her voice serious.

“They’re supposed to stay behind walls, take care of the injured and sick,” someone else said.

“A lot of adventuring parties need healers, but I heard they get killed if they’re not part of the guard or an Order,” another voice said.

“I want to become a healer, but I can’t afford to join an Order,” Luke said. “I don’t care if it’s a weak Class, but I want to be able to help people, protect them.”

“Me too,” someone else said. The words were spoken with conviction and weight.

Nathan knew the latest voice. Ford. A mage like himself. He didn’t speak much, and his level was too high for Nathan to see.

“If we are with a powerful organization, we won’t have to fear the Orders,” Hadley said. Nathan had hardly ever heard her speak. A pale, scrawny girl but a level thirty-eight alchemist.

“Why didn’t you join an Order then? Or the guard? The imperial military?” Lilith asked.

“Fuck the Empire,” someone said.

A murmur went through the group.

“The Sentinels are here to support adventurers,” Luke said. “We should help fight monsters, not people.”

“Few healers are out there, protecting and healing the most powerful humans. The Orders don’t care about adventurers and neither do the cities, as long as their walls are secure,” someone said.

That’s Lorelei, Nathan recalled. She was one of the oldest students, probably close to thirty. A warrior and nearly as packed with muscle as Luke.

Lilith smiled. “We agree on that, and that’s why we decided to start our own healing organization. Now, I won’t lie to you all. I can’t help you get the exact Class that I have. For various reasons. But I don’t think it’s needed.”

She stood up and smiled.

“I can tell that many of you have doubts. Why wouldn’t you? You should think for yourself. So instead, we’ll try a little demonstration. Just to

show you a small bit of what's possible – if you put in the work, the pain and sweat that are required. Healing magic will be the most powerful thing we have at our disposal.”

A single tendril of ash came to life behind her, and some people shifted where they sat.

“Ash. It is the element of my second Class. Now, many Classes have the ability to heighten resilience, defense, speed. Many provide powerful spells and ways to destroy. What is unique about us healers...”

She trailed off, holding out her arm, and the ash suddenly lashed out faster than Nathan could perceive. A sickening, wet noise echoed in the chamber as it sliced through flesh.

Some people looked away, but not as many as Nathan would have expected. *We're not that different, are we?*

“This is my arm,” Ilea said, holding the severed limb with her remaining one. “You might notice my lack of concern. There are skills that reduce pain. The main one is a general skill called Pain Tolerance. If a skill reaches level twenty and levels once again, it advances to the second tier.

“The benefit of Pain Tolerance in the second tier is the complete removal of pain. Should I choose to do so. I won't force any of you to acquire this skill, but the benefits are extraordinary.”

She waved at the group with her severed arm.

“This is quite a problem, isn't it? And the pain that I turned off would be telling me this. I was injured. My arm taken. I can't hold my weapon, I can't concentrate on my spell because of the pain. I will bleed out soon. If I survive, the wound might get infected. If I can't find a capable healer in a couple days, I will lose my arm forever.

“Now, watch,” she said before looking at the wound. Close to her shoulder, tissue reformed at an insane speed, bone, muscle, and skin, until her hand closed once more into a fist.

“I still ruined one of my shirts, but you get the idea,” Lilith said and tossed the severed arm behind her.

Nathan couldn't keep the grin from his face. His heart was drumming in his chest as he forced himself to look, watching the blood slowly flow down the perfectly reformed arm.

“Now for some combat demonstrations,” Lilith said as a dozen flowing tendrils of ash formed behind her back.

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THREE

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Impressions

Trian was right, these guys are hungry, Ilea thought. And not just that girl who still has a plate of food.

Her decision not to remove her head in the first lesson was probably the right one. Maybe the second lesson, though...

Only a few of the students had looked away when she had cut off her own arm, and they were all watching her now. She could feel that a few were distressed, but most of them had different expressions on their faces. Most of which suggested they wanted to learn what they had just seen.

* * *

Hadley couldn't believe her eyes. The woman had cut off her own arm without flinching and regrown it in seconds.

If I could attain that power... Still, it doesn't mean she's a particularly strong fighter. Just that she can take a hit.

"That won't help you win against a mage. They'll just keep burning you up until you're out of mana to heal," Lyza said.

The teacher seemed unfazed. "Good thing then that most of my skills are combat-oriented. Aki, I heard you advanced quite a bit. You even got some upgrades, it seems. Care to test yourself against me?"

Hadley glanced at the machine, a shiver going down her back. It was relentless, powerful, fast. Unfeeling. Even the other teachers respected it.

Is she stupid?

“Are you sure? We don’t want to make a mess,” Aki said.

He sounds... apprehensive? Really? They know each other.

“Don’t worry, I won’t hit you very hard,” Lilith said with a vicious grin.

Hadley watched as the machine jumped up and landed a dozen meters away from the healer. Some people stood up to see better, and she followed suit.

“My Classes are mostly based on body enhancement skills. They make me faster, more resilient,” Lilith said. “Come now, attack.”

The machine moved, faster than Hadley had seen it move before. Her eyes could barely keep up, even with her perception skill from her second Class.

Six blades slashed into the healer, but she moved in a blur, back and away.

There was a thunderous crash of metal striking something hard and unyielding, and Aki’s movements stopped entirely. His blades were stuck in Lilith’s *skin*. She held on to one of his blades with one arm.

“Defensive skills will help you resist damage, but in the end, every fight is just about who comes out alive,” she said and twirled, dragging the machine with her before she threw it at the opposite wall, the steel slamming against the stone with a loud crash.

Her wounds have healed already! How is she so strong?

“If you have good Classes and train your skills up high enough, you’ll be able to see enemy movements, sometimes even before they happen. You will have armor and projectiles at your side,” she said, ash suddenly flowing over her body until she was fully covered.

Two horns emerged from her head, pointing toward the watching group. Limbs of ash formed behind her and fanned out, and lances of ash appeared out of thin air and hovered close to her. The healer was gone, replaced by a warrior of ash.

“To defeat monsters, you will need strength, speed, mobility, understanding – anything that might help you out. Something that all of you should know is that everyone makes mistakes. Being healers, we won’t need to worry about one or two. Missing limbs are just a part of the job. Losing a heart or even your head might not actually be a death sentence. Not anymore.”

Hadley now knew she’d made the right choice in coming here.

* * *

“You won’t be exactly like me, and I don’t think you will unlock the exact Classes that I have, but we’ll help you find your own path to becoming Medic Sentinels,” Ilea said as she watched the people before her.

All of them already had Classes, ranging from farmers to fishermen to warriors. Their low level, coupled with their choice to join and train with the Sentinels, would make it possible for them to unlock something new entirely and give up their earlier Classes. The question was how long that would take and what exactly they would unlock.

Aki was coming at her again. He really had gotten better since he’d been fumbling around in Balduur’s forge.

She enchanted him, added padding.

He was bigger, faster, more robust than a normal Guardian. His blades were deadlier. Perhaps he could even face a Centurion the way he was now.

Ilea let him attack, his blades digging into her ashen armor without finding much purchase. She turned around and slowly grappled him with her ashen limbs, lifting him up before she turned him onto his head.

“The academic classes you take part in are a part of the puzzle. Combat training is another. I will take you through the process of acquiring resistances and potential achievements. If you want to get where I am or even higher, you will have to endure pain. You will have to watch your body get destroyed and reformed. Until it is a process as normal to you as breathing.

“I won’t force you to join, nor will I make you decide right now, right here. If at any point you think it impossible to continue, you can leave. I will get you an appropriate position in one of my businesses.

“Now that everyone is here, can someone tell me how you can gain a resistance?”

“You let an element damage your body,” one of the boys said.

It might have been unfair to call him a boy – he was close to her own age. Still, she felt older. Perhaps it was just the fact that she had seen Elementals, had survived the Ascended. He was a level thirty-two mage with a prominent scar showing on his neck, extending to his shoulder. He was the same one who, back in the main hall, had put two and two together about her identity.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Nathan,” the man replied.

She liked his confidence. He was scared of her, yet he still spoke up.

We'll make sure that you won't be scared. Of anything.

She grinned.

“That’s correct, Nathan. Can you tell me what the benefit of a healer is in resistance development?”

“They’re sometimes used to help train warriors, defenders specifically. It means we can heal them while they take damage and level their defensive skills, including resistances.”

“True. But you’re going to be healers yourselves. Why train someone else when you can advance your own defensive capabilities?”

She looked behind her.

“Trian, would you help me out here?” she asked, smiling when the man appeared next to her.

“As some of you might know, Trian is a high-level lightning mage. Not too common, but you’ll encounter them from time to time, as well as creatures capable of using that type of magic. Anyone brave enough to take some damage?”

Nearly twenty people immediately raised their hands.

Even though I'm just going with the flow, they're already so invested. Maybe I'm not the worst teacher after all... Or it might just be that I really like the subject.

“We’ll start with you three,” she said, pointing at the trio she had talked to over lunch. All of them had raised a hand.

She watched them approach and extended three ashen limbs, one to each of them. “I will heal you through these. It’s going to hurt... a lot.”

Then she glanced at Trian. “Just one second’s worth.”

Trian nodded, then gave them a serious look, “Ready?”

All of them nodded.

Sparks flowed, the three students screaming instantaneously. The farmer bit through his tongue, the rogue sprained her fingers from clenching her fists, while Nathan, the mage, passed out.

Their health was topped off again a moment later.

“Well done. How did that feel?” Ilea asked.

The farmer choked and spat out the piece of his tongue he had bitten off. “Fucking horrible!” he shouted.

“Third worst pain I’ve ever felt,” the rogue said. “Can we do it again?”

Could it be? One of my people? Ilea asked herself.

“Something is weird, though,” the girl said, looking at her.

Ilea smiled. “What is it?”

“It’s like... you know, normally, when you feel pain, you don’t want to do whatever made you feel it again. I know that it hurt, but it’s like it doesn’t matter. Like I’m calmer than I should be.”

I was right. This is going to make a huge difference. It’s why I managed to get this far after all. Ilea glanced at Trian and saw him smile as well.

“I have quite a specific healing class. It’s hard to explain, but let’s just say it’s going to be even easier to train resistances while I’m around to heal you.”

She understood that her arcane healing had some effect on the mind, an effect that helped process and heal otherwise potentially traumatizing experiences. At least, that was how she understood it. Maybe her Class just recognized such effects as something to be healed.

Nathan woke up, sitting up before he looked around, confused.

“How long until I get Pain Tolerance?” Luke asked.

Ilea shrugged. “I have no clue. It won’t help massively at first, either. Everyone who wants to join can line up. One at a time until Trian or I reach capacity. If you don’t want to join, just stand back. This isn’t mandatory. Any questions you have, ask away.”

Ilea spent the next three hours answering questions about resistances, healing magic, fighting, monsters, dungeons, and many other topics. She didn’t know the answers to most of the questions, but the experience of being electrocuted and healed helped tremendously with getting the students to open up.

All of them chose to undergo the training, many tapping out for a while but joining again later. After half an hour, the first few people reported acquiring Lightning Resistance. After one hour, the first instances of Pain Tolerance showed up.

Ilea healed and talked to them, learning a lot of names that she likely wouldn’t be able to memorize in the first week or two.

“I consider Heat, Ice, Water, Wind, Pain, Poison, and Mental Resistance some of the most important defensive abilities,” Ilea told them. “We’ll focus on getting you as many resistances as possible. As well as any other general skills we can think of. Veteran being one of them...”

* * *

Nathan focused on his hand, unable to hold the fork he was trying to grasp. It clanged against the wooden table, as did many others.

“Just use your hands,” Celeste said, bringing the food to her mouth. Her hands were shaking too.

“She’s insane!” Luke exclaimed, trying to keep his voice down.

“I think I’m in love,” Celeste replied with a full mouth. “I got Veteran, Pain Tolerance, and Lightning Resistance. Can you fucking believe that?”

“We all got those skills...” Nathan said in a whisper.

“Are you guys for real? We were just electrocuted for five hours,” Luke said.

“Yeah, and it made us all stronger without actually getting injured, and I’m not even scared of tomorrow!” Celeste said.

Nathan shook his head, dropping the fork and using his hands to eat instead. “We were injured. Again and again. Even if it doesn’t leave a lasting effect, it still happened.” He touched his neck and swallowed emptily. He felt confused. It wasn’t what he had expected.

“Are you guys already giving up?” Celeste said. “The benefits are obvious. You heard her. If we get more skills and learn about healing, we might get new unique Classes.”

“Might. What if it’s all for nothing?” Nathan asked. He could see that Lilith was powerful, but none of the teachers were sure about the Classes, not truly. It felt like they *believed* it would work, but would it be worth going through all that pain for anything less than something certain?

“It’s not just about Classes. These are actual skills. Coupled with everything we’re learning about the body and injuries and all the bandages and splints we’re applying in our normal training, I’m so much more confident in surviving a fight than before.”

“Yeah. And while I agree that it’s pretty nuts to go through this training, why would she suggest it if there’s no point?” Luke asked.

“She likes other people’s pain? It’s part of some dark ritual?” Nathan suggested.

“She’s right,” a new voice said. Lorelai. The woman adjusted her braid as she sat down next to them. “Nobles do it to kids. Force them to go through horrible experiences to get rare Classes. Often without healers, let

alone someone like her who can heal the mind. Not that I've ever heard of such an ability."

"That's sick," Luke said, his eyes opening wide.

"Yes. Yes it is. The difference is that we have a healer to take care of us that actually gives a shit. And we all have a choice."

"You really think she would let us leave?" Nathan asked. "We know who she is, what she's doing here."

Lorelai chuckled. "You have a very optimistic view of your own importance. Did you see how she took out Aki? It was effortless. It would take the Shadow's Hand to do anything to her."

Nathan gulped.

"Trian has strong ties to the Hand, I'm fairly sure about that. They won't give a fuck about some random low levels," Celeste said. "I believe her. If you want to go, just go."

"She seemed sincere to me as well," Luke said.

Celeste scoffed. "To be fair, you have the people skills of a pig."

"Hey, pigs have complicated emotions too. They're very loving animals," Luke said in a serious tone.

"Is he joking?" Celeste asked, looking around at the group.

"No, they do show surprising emotion. Especially the younger ones. Appreciate your food," Luke said.

Celeste looked at her food and continued eating.

"You think this has a point then?" Nathan asked.

Lorelai nodded. "It takes courage and a shit ton of suffering, but if I can get anywhere near what that woman is capable of, I'll be happy to rip off my own arms to reach it."

"Agreed," Celeste said. "And it's all free. Even the Hand costs you three hundred gold, and they're already level two hundred."

Nathan wasn't sure. But he didn't want to leave either, if only for the company of these people.

Maybe that's how they get you.

He smiled at his own ridiculous thought. No. He was scared. And he was looking for a reason to run away.

But he wouldn't.

"Afternoons are going to be difficult," Nathan said as he contemplated a piece of sausage. *Damn hand shaking. The lightning is gone, stop it.*

* * *

“That went better than expected,” Ilea said. “I didn’t think many would want to go through that.”

Trian gave her a weak smile. “Most of them have been through worse.”

The faculty had gathered in their own hall on the third floor down. Warm magical lights shone from above as well as from a bunch of oil lamps on various pieces of furniture.

“How did you find them all anyway?”

“Talked to Claire and got a list of establishments you own,” Trian said. “We then visited a lot of them and talked to the managers for potential candidates. Most people who live in Ravenhall now came here due to the demon summoning or the ongoing war.

“It wasn’t difficult to find people who wanted to gain power, to protect others, or to prevent things that had happened to them from happening to others. It took a while, and we all talked to all of them, mostly making sure their main motive wasn’t revenge. There’s sure to be anger, but they’ve all proven themselves reliable in one profession or another before.”

Ilea nodded along. With everything that had happened in the last few years, she imagined the number of people looking for an opportunity like this was high, especially here in Ravenhall. She noted Trian’s specific mention of revenge but didn’t comment on it. She’d been there with him, and she agreed with his focus.

“You’re absolutely crazy,” Lyza said, looking at her. “But I don’t dislike it. Maybe I’ll join in on the training.”

“Any of you can join whenever I’m here. Or you can take the afternoons off,” Ilea said.

“We’ll finally have some time to prepare better lessons,” Sidney said. “Can’t believe I’m working for you now. You were so weak back then!”

“Hey, I nearly beat you, didn’t I?” Ilea winked. She remembered the evaluation well.

The woman shook her head. “No way. Now I’m not sure anymore. Fuck... Adam was still around then, the son of a bitch.”

“He hasn’t shown himself since his disappearance,” Trian said. “I too suggest that while Ilea is here, we focus on working on our Classes.”

“Sounds like a good idea. Where’s Aki, by the way?” Ilea asked.

“The Guardian is watching over our students, as well as this facility,” Orthán explained. “He is awake at all times, thanks to the enchantress.”

“I really need to talk to her about that. She made him quite dangerous,” Ilea said with a smile.

“More of him would be useful,” Lyza suggested.

“I’m not so sure about that. I’m glad you took the job, by the way. How do you like it?” Lyza had been the arena manager for her resistance training mere months prior.

“Most interesting thing I’ve ever done,” Lyza said. “And Trian pays too well. I don’t know how filthy rich y—”

Sidney cut her off with a hand to her mouth. “It’s fine. The pay is acceptable,” she said, grinning. “I like the students. I like teaching them how to fight. Not as arrogant as the Hand members.”

Ilea hadn’t even asked her, but she supposed it made sense to understand their motivations now that she was getting more involved. Trian had chosen them, but she was part of the faculty as well now.

She glanced at the last of the three, the former trainer of the Alymies.

“It was a surprise to learn that it was indeed you behind all this,” Orthán said. “I had thought Trian mad when he started talking of a healing organization. Still, it filled him with such passion, I could not resist.” The older man smiled, glancing at Trian, who smiled back.

I remember a time when he would have been embarrassed about that. I’m starting to think this is going to become something big.

“We are still hidden here, the name of our House protected,” Orthán continued. “We owe you a great debt, but that is not why I wish to stay – not the only reason, at least. I believe it a noble goal, to train more healers. Ones that can fight as well. Unburdened by the rules, scriptures, and allegiances of the Orders.”

“It’s good to have you all on board,” Ilea said. “If you need any resources or creatures for your lessons, just let me know. I’m going to be out most nights and may be able to procure some things.”

“Now that’s interesting,” Lyza said. “What exactly will you be doing?”

“Some of my own resistance training.”

“I do wonder how that looks,” Orthán murmured.

“There was one minor thing we wanted your opinion on,” Trian said. “We’d like to have a badge for members to identify themselves, same as

with the Shadows. We were thinking something like a shield or maybe a wing?”

“I would prefer an actual bird,” Sidney said.

Ilea thought about it for a moment. “What about six small wings?”

“Like the Fae we found on that mission?” Trian asked.

“Yeah, something like that.”

“We can have a few prototypes made and see what we like. Six wings would be distinctive, so I think it would work.”

Lyza nodded. “Cool. Something else. Do you have human corpses? I’d like some for my lessons.”

Ilea nodded. “You can have mine. No head, though.”

“What?” Sidney asked.

“The head is the most interesting part,” Lyza moaned. “But alright. If you find some, do let me know. For now, I’ll take the rest of the body.”

“Seriously, what?” Sidney said again.

FOUR

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Busy Schedule

Done with her new teaching hobby for the day, Ilea went back into the city. She was looking forward to getting back into the wilderness for some of her own training soon.

She made her way to the door to Claire's office, blinking into the building after signaling to the guard.

"Come in," the woman said after Ilea knocked. She was sitting at her desk, as she generally did. Working on the unending administrative workload from the city and the Hand.

"Do you ever tire?" Ilea asked. It was getting late.

Cless wasn't there tonight, but her little art station remained, taking over a third of the room.

Claire gave her a look and finished writing the letter or document she was working on. "There's a lot to be done."

"City management, demons, or the war?" Ilea said as she sat down on the opposite side of the desk.

Claire set the document aside. "No recent sightings of demons, let alone large-scale issues like last year. City management is getting smoother and smoother. It's the new projects and potential opportunities that take up a lot of time. We've reached a good spot with the city, but there's always more that could be done, and it's difficult to make those choices. The war has been less on my mind as well, what with Lys now pushing back more actively against Baralia."

Ilea raised her brows. "They're pushing back? So the siege is broken?"

“Yes. It seems Alyris has finished with whatever internal affairs have kept them from acting, or they’ve simply managed to wait out the will of Baralia and their nobility. It takes a lot of resources to keep up a siege as well, and the little to no results they got would have worn down their resolve. We don’t know all of the details and things are moving quickly now, but it seems like Alyris’ initial approach is paying off. We’ll see how far the Empire goes with this, but neither Dagon nor Sulivhaan think they’ll reach an agreement anytime soon.”

“And that means?”

“It means the Empire will move into Baralia’s lands. The old Kingdom has long been splintering, King Baron barely holding on to a semblance of unity. It seems this wanton invasion was one of his last attempts to keep power. I wouldn’t be surprised if Nipha and Asila join the war efforts now as well, vultures looking to get a piece of the pie.”

Ilea knew very little about the complex structures and relationships between the nations in question. What she knew was that Baralia had attacked the Empire, using demons and assassins to kill even random civilians and spread chaos. And as far as she understood it, they had a long history of slavery. Those things alone made her care little about the Empire’s retaliation or the vultures that would join in to fight Baralia.

She didn’t really want to think about the tens of thousands of people who would die or lose their homes simply due to the ambitions and decisions of those few in power.

I wonder where Felicia is in all this.

“You wanted to know about general skills and dungeons,” Claire said, changing the subject. She summoned a piece of paper. “A list of skills you could learn. I added small notes with my opinions.”

Ilea smiled. “You’re the best.”

“I am. And here’s a map with known dungeons in the surrounding regions. Many have been claimed by governments, regional adventurer guilds, or other groups. The info is there, but take it all with a grain of salt. Rules and management differ greatly, and Shadows, let alone someone as powerful as you, can get a lot of leeway.”

She summoned another sheet onto the table. A hand-drawn map with various marked locations.

“So many potential skills,” Ilea said as she glanced at it.

“Potential, yes. The locations marked with a skull, artist’s choice, are the ones generally avoided even by higher-level teams.”

Ilea smiled and stored the map, then looked through the list of general skills that her friend had prepared.

Alchemy (If you’re interested. Expensive and time-consuming to learn)

Astronomy (Requires extensive knowledge)

Baking (Seems up your alley)

Brewing (If you’re interested)

Calligraphy (Should be possible to pick up fairly quickly with your Dexterity)

Carpentry (Might be good)

Cartography (You own shops that could offer training in this – might take a month)

Cooking (ask Keyla – good idea, might take a week or two to learn)

Dancing (I could teach you)

Enchanting (Iana is busy and it’s not your forte. I’d leave this one)

Engineering (Complex topics, if you’re interested)

Farming (Not so much, would take months to learn)

Fishing (If you enjoy it – others probably more efficient)

Herbalism (Extensive knowledge necessary)

Instruments (Take long to learn)

Jewelry Making (Has potential)

Languages (Lots of time and effort)

Leatherworking/Tailoring (Plenty of shops. You’re probably too strong, not recommended)

Mining (Definitely, should be simple enough for you. Grab a pickaxe and go to town)

Painting (Cless would surely offer – might take longer)

Pottery (An option but difficult)

Resistances (Explore the dungeons, some new things might pop up – I will keep looking. I believe you have the most important ones covered already)

Singing (Not sure)

Smithing (Good idea – would take a while, but you might be able to do small repairs)

Survival (Probably impossible for you with your regeneration, I’d let it be)

Tracking (With your perception, might be worth the trouble. But not if you have a skill like that already)

Trapping (Would need to travel with someone)

Weapon skills (I know you mostly use your fists and ash. You've learned about archery. Keep on that)

If there's anything else you're interested in, let me know.

Ilea was lost in thought for a while after reading through the list. It was obvious it wasn't exhaustive but rather just a few things that Claire thought might interest her. A lot of them did.

There really is a skill for everything, but I suppose most people would mainly work on their Classes. They do cover most professions, after all – or, well, whatever it is someone spends most of their time on. I guess as general skills, they would be considered a hobby or a side gig.

She had her Class skills to work on as well, and while a lot of things she saw on the list did interest her, she wasn't sure how much of her day or week she was willing to invest into them. Especially now that she had also taken on an instructor role with the Sentinels.

If anything, it confirmed that she wasn't missing out on anything obvious.

"I think while I'm interested in a lot of general skills, the only thing I'll really focus on for the time being will be the resistances," she said eventually.

"I expected as much. I guess it depends on what kind of third Class you want to get. If you have something specific in mind, you can start working on that magic, skills related to specific weapons or fighting styles, or something related to tracking, hunting, crafting, or anything else you might be interested in."

"I don't think I want to specifically prepare. But maybe I'll try out a few things and see how they feel. Can you get someone to teach me how to use a warhammer? During my mornings, sometime in between, or just in the arena. I'll take you up on the dancing offer as well."

Claire smiled. "I look forward to it. And sure, I'll find you a teacher for the hammer."

"Are any of the marked dungeons on the map former mines?"

"Yes, I think so. I can mark a few."

“Nice. I might pick up mining as well, then,” Ilea said. “Oh, before I forget. There’s a skill I wanted to test. One of my third-tiers now allows me to mark people. It lets me locate them, and they can send me a short message.”

Claire raised her brows. “A way to call for you no matter where you are? Yes, I’d very much like to have that mark.”

She held out her hand.

“I don’t know the exact limits yet. We’ll have to test it.”

Ilea poured a little under two thousand mana into the mark that slowly became visible on the back of Claire’s left hand. A complex rune glowed with a bright blue light before it slowly faded, leaving a barely visible rune behind.

“Fascinating,” Claire exclaimed. “It looks similar to some of the runes I saw on your body before your body enhancement spell changed.”

“Can you tell what it does?”

“No... I have no idea. It’s faded, mostly dormant. But I can feel the magical connection to it.”

Ilea felt something in her mind, knowing that there were two marks now. Focusing on them, one indicated that it was close and slightly to her right. Claire. The other was hard to grasp, but she assumed it was just the Fae meddling with things at home.

“Can you use more than one?”

“Yes, two at the moment, and more when the skill levels again.”

“I can activate something within it. I assume that’s the message part. Should I try it?”

“Go for it.”

Hello?

The thought reached her mind. With Claire’s voice.

“Nice. You sent the word *Hello?*”

“I sent *Hello? Can you hear me?* But I suppose only one word is possible,” Claire replied.

Wait, I can still feel the location of the mark.

“I thought the mark would disappear once you sent the message. I can still track you...”

“Most of the mana has faded, but the connection is still there, yes. It will take time to replenish the message ability, but I think the connection will only fade if I will it.”

“Let me reapply it, then,” Ilea said, and she did just that. It felt good to know that Claire could call for her now if anything important came up.

“So, when are we having those dancing lessons?”

“I have plenty left to do. Maybe we can start tomorrow evening?” Claire suggested.

“Sure. I’ll visit after I’m done with the Sentinels,”

“How did that go?”

Ilea smiled. “It was fun. Way more than I expected.”

She gave Claire a quick rundown.

“Of course you would sneak in and confuse the students,” Claire said and sighed.

“I told you it was fun.”

* * *

Ilea left the city half an hour later, checking her map as she exited through the northern gate.

A list of skills and dungeons. It’s like Christmas, with all the gifts spread throughout the world. Just have to go out and get them. Now, where to first?

“Ma’am, are you sure you want to leave alone at night?” a guard asked, clutching his spear tightly.

[Warrior – lvl 84]

Ilea smiled. “I think I’ll be fine.”

There were a couple of dungeons nearby, but Claire had scratched them through. Either because the magic types used by the creatures within were common amongst humans or because the level was too low to even consider.

In the end, Ilea decided to go north.

One of the dungeons close to the Imperial Plains was specifically marked. It also had a little skull indicating that there were unknowns present or the nearby population and adventurers actively avoided the place.

She charged her wings and sped up and over the mountains, realizing quickly that the landscape here wasn’t as vast and expansive as in the north.

She slowed down again and descended, already past the mountain range within which Ravenhall and Morhill lay.

The sky was mostly clear, with only a few clouds visible. The terrain changed quickly, from the plains with its low hills to the steep mountainous incline that soon reached dangerous heights and cliffs.

My wings are never gonna get old.

Ilea grinned. They were fun but also incredibly convenient. Coupled with her lack of need for sleep, she could train in the city, help out the Sentinels, go out and explore dungeons that weren't too far away, and be back at the Golden Drake the next morning for breakfast.

She landed on a cliff and looked out onto the far-reaching plains below. The wilderness was bathed in faint moonlight, but no other lights were visible to her.

Dungeons and general skills.

She looked through her skills, wondering which ones she should advance to the third tier first.

Definitely want Monster Hunter and Veteran. Doubt I could get any of the others to the end of the second tier in a feasible amount of time. Void and Blood are musts too, leaving me with just one third-tier skill point. If I do advance all those.

General skills available for third-tier advancement:

- Blood Manipulation Resistance

You have faced both the carefully crafted Corruption of the Descent as well as the might of a Fallen Hero. Neither has fazed you, proving that your body is ready to advance Blood Manipulation Resistance to the third tier.

- Corrosion Resistance

You have literally bathed in acid and chosen to slather yourself in corrosive substances instead of trying to avoid them. It is, quite frankly, concerning. Your body has melted and regenerated so many times that it might even be second nature by now. Should you wish to advance your Corrosion Resistance to the third tier, you may do so.

- Lava Magic Resistance

You trained with a Trakorov. Why?

- Light Magic Resistance

Not many have witnessed the combined effort of Elder Sun Sprites, and even fewer have lived to tell the tale. It is beyond anything the second tier would provide protection against, making you ready for the third tier.

- Wind Resistance

The Storm Griffin is an ancient and proud creature. Your survival is a grave insult to it and proof enough that you deserve to reach the next tier of Wind Resistance.

- Sand Magic Resistance

It's been, like, a week. Please slow down with these. A Lightning Elemental and a Sand Elemental. I think it's time to accept that you will not learn. Sand Magic Resistance can be increased to the third tier, should you wish to do so.

Corrosion and Wind sounded like good options as well. Perhaps better than Lightning, which she had already chosen to advance.

That Lightning Elemental swayed me, she smiled. *Well, there's plenty of levels and thus third-tier points to gain in the coming weeks and months. Starting tonight.*

She checked her map again and started flying in the direction she thought the dungeon was located.

And soon, she spotted a distant light source thanks to her enhanced eyes and the aerial view.

She sped up, air rushing by as she lowered her altitude, landing about a hundred meters away from what she could now identify as a building.

It stood three stories high, half-carved into the stone adjacent. There were a few other buildings, some similarly placed into the rocky hillside. Some were simple and unassuming, little more than single rooms with roofs. Others were larger and looked to serve the various needs one might have in a small community.

They were all strangely uniform, carved directly into – or out of – the stone of the mountainside. Nothing was rough-hewn or showed any sign of man-made tools. Everything was smooth and flawless, yet also rudimentary in nature.

A village? Ilea asked herself, unsure if this really qualified.

She walked up to the multi-story mansion she had first spotted, feeling arcane power emanating from the ground around her. *Runes?* She checked her sphere and quickly found a number of runed stones lazily strewn in the general vicinity.

Ilea couldn't discern what they did and decided to move on, quite sure the amount of magic she felt from the stones, coupled with their simple design, didn't pose a danger to her. She stepped onto the dirt road that led past the large building. None of the runes changed their behavior.

As far as she could tell, at least.

She could already hear some people talking, the faint sounds of a piano, and the clinking of glasses. Her entrance to what she assumed was an inn was met with little reaction. Ilea was still dressed in casual clothes, her ash armor hidden near her neck but under her shirt and leather armor.

"Greetings, traveler," the barkeep said as she approached the counter.

"Evening. An ale, if you would," she said.

"Coming right up. What brings a healer to Karheim? Here on an Order's business?"

[Mage – lvl 138]

Pretty high level for a barkeeper. Maybe he's like Walter, just trying to find a quiet place somewhere.

"I'm looking for a dangerous dungeon nearby. Am I in the right place?"

"Sure are. With your level, you should be fine if you take a team with you. Just don't go into the cursed hall," he said, placing a mug down near her.

Ilea grabbed it and drank. "Cursed hall?"

"Powerful spell kept in place by the Golems that occupy the dungeon. It isn't worth it. Many have tried. I'm sure you'll find a group willing to take in a healer, though. In case that's what you're looking for?"

"Not exactly. I just follow the road, I presume?"

She could tell that more than a few people were listening in on their conversation by now. Many of them were trained warriors and mages, able to make out the words despite the other conversations and music in the dimly lit room. Two groups were already discussing hiring her.

“Yes, just follow the road. Do you need a room for the night?” the man asked.

“That won’t be necessary. I’ll take the mug, though.” She summoned a piece of silver, placing it on the counter before walking out, cup in hand.

“Ah, ma’am! We th—” one of the mages called out to her, standing up.

Once outside, Ilea blinked away. *I love that the ale is still here*, she thought, looking at the swirling liquid in her wooden mug. She drank deep and sighed. *And he continues the tradition of well-brewed ale in fuck off no man’s land.*

Two blinks later, she had crossed the distance to the dungeon entrance. It was closed off by what she assumed to be stone or earth magic. A steel gate was placed in the middle.

There was a small stone structure to the side of the entrance with a window and a door. Looking inside the domed structure with her sphere, Ilea saw someone was sleeping inside.

And he has the keys. Probably the usual way to enter the dungeon. And they request a fee as well?

She ignored the snoring man and blinked through the entrance, no enchantments placed to prevent the easy entry.

I’ll pay some other time. When he’s awake.

‘ding’ You have entered the Karheim dungeon.

A new dungeon.

She smiled to herself as she walked into the damp darkness of the cavern.

Ilea assumed the dungeon would be busier during the day. At this time, most adventurers had likely gone to the inn, celebrating whatever victory or find they had achieved during their delves.

Most of the patrons had been between level fifty and one hundred. It was no wonder they were looking for a healer. Ilea had decided not to inquire about the dungeon residents. It felt more interesting this way.

Her ash armor spread and covered her as she walked deeper into the cave system.

The first monsters she encountered seemed more surprised than she was.

[Vicious Bat – lvl 25]

Magic? she sent into their minds with the added ability from her third-tier Mental Resistance.

The creatures didn't react to the thought, some rushing at her while others tried to get away as quickly as possible. Ilea let them approach to see if they could provide a resistance.

The bats landed on her and started – thoroughly unsuccessfully – to nibble on her armor. She didn't feel any magic coming from them either. Gently grabbing one of them, she looked at the cute and angry furry thing.

Someone I know would like you. But you're just bats. Makes me feel kind of bad to just slaughter you. There's no point at all. I would even take away the other adventurers' dangerous adversaries.

She chuckled at the notion, enhancing the sound with mana.

The bats dropped to the ground, motionless.

Who's the monster now?

Ilea spread her wings and flew past, making sure not to step on any of them. After that, she found the bats didn't pursue her anymore, showing some sort of primitive survival instinct.

To think they even attacked me in the first place is ludicrous. That'd be like me fighting an Elemental.

Ilea wondered if there was a transported bat from Earth just decimating the local wildlife, becoming the first sapient bat.

Manbat.

She almost expected some divine being to appear and smite her down for that thought. She even hoped for it, already on the hunt for new resistances.

Now, what else other than angry bats does this place offer?

FIVE

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Rotten Treasures

Ilea found something a little more interesting than the bats a while later. It didn't notice her at first but turned as soon as she clapped.

[Decrepit Golem – lvl 71]

The being was a solid meter taller than her, made entirely of stone or clay, perhaps even metal. It was difficult to tell. It was humanoid in shape, like a heavyset skeleton. The Golem reminded her of one of the missions she'd been on with her team.

Eve was still around back then. I wonder what she'd say if she saw me now.

It felt like a long time ago.

"Hello," she said to the Golem, greeting it with her telepathy as well.

The Golem didn't speak to her, instead slamming its fist down with surprising quickness.

Ilea raised her arms and blocked the heavy strike. She didn't budge.

"Wondrous, isn't it?" she asked with a smile and watched the creature take a step back. Something glinted from within a crack in its torso. A green gem.

Perfect, come on, show me your magic.

Arcane power manifested, and vines rushed out from the cracks, entwining her where she stood. Sharp thorns scraped against her ash.

Ilea strained against the magic before the vines gave in.

“Let me help you,” she said, the Golem hitting her head while she talked.

Her ash armor dissolved, and she let the creature attack her as she explored more of the tunnels. The thing didn’t understand that she was an enemy it couldn’t possibly beat. Even without her armor, the vines had a very hard time piercing her skin.

“Too much Vitality, hmm?” she asked, finding another of the creatures. This one had a yellow stone embedded in its skull and shot concentrated beams of light out of it.

A third one had a blue stone, using pressured streams of water to attack. It reminded Ilea a little of the power-washing tools that existed on Earth.

If all of them provide even a single resistance level, I’ll have to thank Claire for suggesting this place. Not sure why it’s supposed to be one of the more dangerous ones, though.

She assumed it had to do with the spell or curse the barkeeper had mentioned.

Her movement was somewhat inhibited by the group of Golems that slowly followed her, continuing their mindless attacks.

Me and my pet Golems, strolling through the Karheim dungeon.

She hummed a tune, spending the next two hours walking through the place.

By that point, a dozen Golems were following her. The group’s arsenal had been added to by an area attack stemming from a Golem with a red gem, a spherical arcane attack that did more to inhibit the other Golems than her.

The damage they inflicted wasn’t enough to provide additional skills for now, but she was sure they’d succeed in time.

Finally, she came upon the hall the barkeep had mentioned. Ilea had been able to smell the vile stench for a while already, leading her to the source.

Rotten and half-overgrown corpses. Humans, bats, and a few animals. All littered the rather expansive hall that led deeper into the dungeon.

The main thing of note was the architectural difference. This was worked stone, not a natural formation like she’d assumed the previous sections of the dungeon to be.

Finally, an actual ruin.

What little was left of the settlement that had once been here looked simple and practical. Ilea couldn't make out much from her immediate surroundings. Ahead, the previous cave-like system became a grim-looking hall, about the size of a barn, that positively vibrated with ambient magic. That looked to be an entry point leading deeper into the ruins.

Ilea thought it a waste to destroy the Golems. She turned to them and charged Monster Hunter, all the while activating her armor again, as well as summoning her bone set.

The spell was unleashed as she shouted, "Leave!"

To her surprise, the creatures turned around and slowly shuffled toward the various tunnels leading away from this central place. She wasn't sure if they actually understood or if it was a similar phenomenon as with the bats, simply making them realize their efforts were in vain.

The pressure and magic she felt from the hall was obvious, but she couldn't quite place it. *Guess there's no way around it*, she thought, taking a step forward.

Nothing happened.

Another couple of steps brought her into the range of the magic. It felt similar to the curse magic she had experienced before, but somehow, she knew it was different.

"Fuck," she said and stored her armor, puking on the ground as she stabilized herself on her knees. Another retch brought forth the remaining contents of her stomach. The next one came out bloody.

Her natural regeneration wasn't enough anymore, and she started healing against it. Ilea watched in fascination as her skin turned a sickly green color, and something began growing on it as well. Her healing pushed against it, turning it back to normal.

Healing works. Good.

Ten minutes later, she took a couple of steps forward, finding the spell growing considerably stronger. She disabled her perception of pain entirely. The added focus made it all worse. It just felt disgusting, as if her innards were convulsing, decaying, and spurting growths at the same time. Kind of fascinating, but mainly disgusting.

After half an hour and making it nearly halfway through the hall, she was finally rewarded with a notification.

'ding' You have learned the General Skill: Blight Resistance

Blight Resistance – lvl 1

A rare phenomenon often caused by ancient curse magic colliding with naturally poisonous, unclean, or corrupting environments. When wielded by a mage, it can turn into a dangerous weapon.

Blight? That's why I thought it felt somewhat familiar. Maybe?

As soon as she deactivated both her poison and curse resistances, the effects of the magic around her increased immediately. Not to a significant amount, but noticeably so.

Does that mean I can level the others too?

Ilea decided to stay for a while to experience the beauty that was blight. The smell especially was a marvelous mixture of rot, death, and decay.

If there was a smell resistance, I would have it by now.

She continued to advance through the hall, finding some spots where the blight's influence was less powerful. In other places, it was several times as intense.

Strange.

When she was out of the hallway and into a larger chamber, she found that the magic was still present. As if it was part of the ruin itself.

I guess that's good. I can level it up coupled with whatever magic the creatures that can survive down here have. If there are any at all.

Much of the ruins were overgrown, and their design and architecture were much simpler compared to the Taleen or Tremor. It made her think it was more an underground laboratory or shelter than a town.

'ding' Blight Resistance reaches lvl 2

One small step closer to ultimate indestructibility! she thought with joy, retching up some more blood and likely malformed and destroyed organs.

Soon, Ilea found traces of recent activity, massive footprints that suggested Golems or something of similar size. Using Sentinel Huntress, she followed the steps as she continued to heal herself against the blight damage.

"There you are," she said as she waved at a new kind of Golem. It turned toward her, moving faster than any before it, the two yellow gems set

into its stone skull focusing on her. The creature was three meters in height. It looked ancient but not quite as decrepit as the ones she had met so far.

[Gem Golem – lvl 252]

“Do you understand me?”

Greetings, she sent.

The Golem replied by firing two concentrated beams of light magic into her armored chest.

“Guess not,” she said and began testing her defenses against the creature.

It looked like this version had more than a single gem type set into its body. She could see a red glint near its torso, two clear gems on its hands, as well as two green gems set into its legs.

Vines spread from its legs and entwined her as the concentrated light beams continued to cut into her armor. It didn’t approach, remaining where it stood.

Ilea found the magic subpar. Laughable compared to the Sun Sprites or even Lucas’ power.

She kept up her defenses and approached the creature, using a couple of her ashen limbs to slash through the vines. *Roots are better, my friend*. She closed the distance at walking speed. The blight was mostly in the background now that her ashen armor was active, as well as her new resistance.

As soon as she reached a point about five meters from the creature, its lasers stopped, and translucent blades appeared from its arms.

“Blade arms. How original,” she said with a smile and raised her arms. The Golem’s blades reminded her of what diamond looked like.

Perhaps the gems set into its massive hands were actually made of diamond.

It slashed at her with slow-moving attacks that she made no attempt to dodge. They cut deep into her ash.

She stepped even closer and smiled when the red stone in its chest started glowing, releasing a spherical arcane wave that pushed her back and burnt away a tiny bit of her ash.

Alright, I think I’m safe, she thought, deactivating her ash armor. Her resilience was immediately reduced considerably, the blades now cutting

deep into her flesh and the thorns ripping large chunks away, similar to a Shredder's attacks.

Deactivating her Heat, Light, Wood, and Arcane Magic Resistances, she found the damage increased significantly. Her healing dealt with it all, skin and muscle reforming faster than the Golem could destroy it.

"We should find some of your buddies, big guy," she said and continued her exploration of the ancient ruins, whistling a tune to herself as she went.

Ilea soon found a second Golem, adding to her training regime. Her healing still outperformed the beings' combined damage, though she did leave behind a trail of blood, cut-off chunks of meat, eye sauce, burnt hair, and bloody sludge vomited up from inside her body.

She supposed that, if anything, it added to the flair of the dungeon.

The third Golem she found had blue gems set into its skull, adding pressured water attacks that came as quite a help, cleaning everything off her.

She found three to be the optimal number, choosing a random section of the corridor where she sat down and focused on her Meditation to pass the time. She still occasionally hummed to herself but soon calmed into a meditative state.

She checked her gains sometime later.

'ding' Meditation reaches 3rd lvl 3

'ding' Monster Hunter reaches 2nd lvl 3

'ding' Arcane Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 11

'ding' Blight Resistance reaches lvl 3

'ding' Blight Resistance reaches lvl 4

'ding' Blight Resistance reaches lvl 5

'ding' Blight Resistance reaches lvl 6

'ding' You have learned the General Skill: Diamond Magic Resistance

Diamond Magic Resistance – lvl 1

A considerably hard substance capable of channeling powerful mana if the user understands its properties. Rarely seen due to the required gems

and necessary fundamental understanding and connection to its composition.

‘ding’ Diamond Magic Resistance reaches lvl 2

...

‘ding’ Diamond Magic Resistance reaches lvl 9

‘ding’ You have learned the General Skill: Emerald Magic Resistance

Emerald Magic Resistance – lvl 1

Vine magic is a magic school closely associated with water and earth, often used to entrap creatures where trees and vegetation are naturally abundant. Emeralds have the ability to create vines from magic. Acute control and high understanding are necessary to achieve a viable result.

‘ding’ Emerald Magic Resistance reaches lvl 2

...

‘ding’ Emerald Magic Resistance reaches lvl 5

‘ding’ Heat Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 4

‘ding’ You have learned the General Skill: Ruby Magic Resistance

Ruby Magic Resistance – lvl 1

A magic school that harnesses the arcane connection of rubies. Rarely seen among living creatures, it is unstable and difficult to control. Golems are one of the few exceptions who do not face problems when using such magic.

‘ding’ Ruby Magic Resistance reaches lvl 2

...

‘ding’ Ruby Magic Resistance reaches lvl 4

‘ding’ You have learned the General Skill: Sapphire Magic Resistance

Sapphire Magic Resistance – lvl 1

Sapphires are closely related to water in a way few natural stones and gems are, fusing focused arcane energies and water magic to create devastating and precise attacks.

‘ding’ Sapphire Magic Resistance reaches lvl 2

...

‘ding’ Sapphire Magic Resistance reaches lvl 6

‘ding’ You have learned the General Skill: Topaz Magic Resistance

Topaz Magic Resistance – lvl 1

Topaz gems are especially capable of channeling light magic, focusing beams to an extent otherwise impossible. If used separately, their fusion of arcane and light energies releases attacks slower than light magic but with greater effects. The understanding and craftsmanship necessary to create usable gems are vast, and minute mistakes will cause dangerous malfunctions.

‘ding’ Topaz Magic Resistance reaches lvl 2

...

‘ding’ Topaz Magic Resistance reaches lvl 6

‘ding’ You have learned the General Skill: Vine Magic Resistance

Vine Magic Resistance – lvl 1

The versatility and abundance of vines have caused many hunters to specialize in their use. Often coupled with venom, this at first glance less dangerous magic becomes the last thing many a creature experiences. You have avoided that fate. For now.

‘ding’ ‘Vine Magic Resistance reaches lvl 2

A separate resistance for vines? But there isn’t one against my healing or Kyrian’s metal magic? There is one for silver, though. I wonder how that

works.

‘ding’ Water Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 2

‘ding’ Water Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 3

‘ding’ One third-tier General Skill point awarded

Claire, thank you for the tip. This dungeon is perfect.

She waved at the Golems, activated her defenses, and started blinking through the dungeon, following her own blood trail back to the entrance.

I wonder when the Drake starts serving breakfast.

* * *

“Hey! You there!” the man in the small bunker-like structure called out.

“How much is it to enter?” she asked, already knowing what this was about.

“Fifty copper,” he said. “Did you sneak past?! You shouldn’t go in there alone, woman! It’s dangerous.”

Ilea rolled her eyes and summoned a single gold coin, finding that she didn’t have any silver coins on her. “This should suffice for the next couple of weeks,” she said, putting the coin into the slit-like window.

“Wh... that’s gold! Why a—”

Ilea vanished, blinking several times until she was out of sight of anybody that would be near the dungeon. Then, spreading her wings, she charged them and shot off.

* * *

Should have left earlier to relax for a little while, she thought, not wanting to be late for her first resistance training session in the arena. Some might even leave or not come back. The potential loss of those resistance points would be devastating.

I can just eat breakfast during.

She grabbed a couple of street food dishes as she walked to the arena complex.

Does it still count as breakfast if I didn't sleep?

Or does the fact that this isn't breakfast food change the answer to that question?

A dozen adventurers were already waiting in the arena, their levels ranging from eighty to one-fifty.

Let's see what we're working with today.

The result a few hours later was adequate but not quite as impressive as her gains from the dungeon.

'ding' Earth Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 4

'ding' Earth Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 5

'ding' Water Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 4

Now, lunch, and then lessons with the Sentinels. I could get used to this.

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Truly Enchanting

Nathan couldn't quite believe that he was still here. That he had chosen to return to this afternoon's class.

Two people were notably absent. He had counted. They had remained in their respective rooms.

He certainly understood. Still, there was something about all this. Something exciting. They were part of something special.

That's what all the cults and magic orders tell you. That's how they get you.

He tried to distance himself and figure out what exactly this was. One thing he knew for sure was that the results were undeniable.

He now had so many skills he hadn't had before. Nobody sugarcoated anything. They would have to work hard, endure a lot, and they would get stronger through it. That was the deal.

"Is she not coming?" Luke whispered behind him.

Most of the people around him were quiet, some even shaking. He didn't know if it was from fear or excitement. Aftershocks, perhaps.

"She said she would. She will," Celeste said with confidence.

"You should get used to disappointment, girl," Lorelei said, the older woman casually standing with a mug of something hot.

"I grew up in the gutter, lady knight," she replied in a mocking tone. "This place is anything but disappointing."

"Here we go. Hello again. I see nearly all of you have chosen to come back into the hall of pain and blood!" Lilith exclaimed. She had appeared from nowhere already speaking.

Trian stood close by.

“So, ready to be sacrificed in a blood ritual?” she asked.

Nathan glanced around, unsure how to react. *She’s joking.*

Celeste chuckled. Some others did as well, though not all of them as casually.

“I’m kidding, of course. Kind of. Today, we will start with something called Blood Manipulation. With the potential dangers and how to get rid of it,” Lilith said as a glass container suddenly appeared in her hands.

Everyone remained silent. *A storage device and not even a murmur.*

* * *

Ilea brandished the container. “This substance was actually considered a very dangerous threat by some of my colleagues, capable of wiping out entire settlements or even worse. It is made with what I assume to be blood magic or alchemy. The result is an orange ooze that corrupts, damages, and ultimately takes over the host.

“Don’t worry, you won’t be alive by then, just a ravenous monster. If this substance was splattered on a random citizen outside, the results would be potentially devastating. Not just to this city but the Human Plains as a whole,” she explained, casually moving the glass container around in her hands.

“Now. What do you think one can do against such corruption?”

A few students lifted their hands, and she pointed to one at random.

“Burn it out,” he said.

“That’s an option. Potentially more painful than others,” Ilea said, then pointed to another.

“Healing?” the girl said.

“Healing stops it from further spread... sufficiently powerful healing, that is. However, because the ooze is somehow not considered an invasive body, healing will only stop it, not get rid of it. The method we initially used was to simply cut out infected tissue and regrow it.”

Some of the students looked at each other and gulped.

“What about a resistance?” one of them asked.

“That... is the right answer. Now, any sane adventurer, even a Shadow, wouldn’t administer this to themselves for the required period of time. It is

painful, deadly, and spreads quite quickly. So, do we have any volunteers who aren't quite that sane?"

A few students raised their hands.

Nice, I wasn't sure I'd get any volunteers for this.

Ilea picked one. "Lorelai, right?"

"Yes, ma'am," the woman said, stepping over to join her.

[Warrior – lvl 60]

"Have you ever lost a limb, Lorelai?"

The woman shook her head. "Not so far. I've been among the lucky ones."

"You were an adventurer before?"

"I worked at a castle in Stormbreach. Came to the Empire after the elven attacks. Picked up many things in my time."

"Then I trust you'll share your inputs and opinions wherever applicable. Now, ready to test the Blood Manipulation?"

The woman looked a little uneasy, then seemed to steel herself and nodded.

"It's going to be painful. If you reach critical condition, I'll cut off your arm. I'm already healing you to stop the spread for now. Ready?" Ilea said.

"Get on with it," she said.

Ilea nodded and put a drop of the corruption onto the back of Lorelai's hand. It stayed and didn't change at all, Ilea's healing making sure of that. "How does it feel?"

Lorelai's face was distorted. "It hurts," she grunted.

"I'll have to let it spread for a moment to see how much it affects your health. Are you okay with that?"

She nodded.

Ilea stopped healing and watched as the corruption immediately spread out. Faster than with the level two hundred beings she had seen in the north, but not as quickly as she had expected.

Possibly still limited in growth speed no matter the host's level, she thought, healing again as soon as half of Lorelai's arm had been covered by the ooze.

The woman was barely holding on by now, panting hard with gritted teeth.

“Can you endure it?” Ilea asked, crouching down next to her as she healed.

“With... h... heal... y... yes...”

She’s still focused. Yeah, they’ll get to the second tier in no time.

“Perfect. We’ll do this for as long as you can, then. Just tap me when you need a break,” Ilea said and straightened herself. “The second tier of the resistance lets your body fight the corruption. Without healing, it would still be dangerous, but you won’t turn into a frenzied monster by the end of it.”

She looked at the others, ashen limbs spreading from her back. “I think it’s safe for more of you to join, if you feel ready.” Ilea smiled when she saw several of them making to stand up. “One at a time, please.”

Oh yeah, these are my kind of people.

The next two hours were spent carefully spreading the corruption and monitoring the students. Compared to Trian’s lightning from the previous day, this method was more rewarding skill-wise but, at the same time, much more dangerous.

Everything depended on Ilea’s ability to heal and monitor the students. Luckily, she found it quite interesting. With her ash spread in a mist that came up to everyone’s waist, she found it trivial to keep the corruption in check. The difficulty was in simultaneously providing encouragement, monitoring pain, and taking care of the people who lost consciousness.

She stopped after the two hours were up, mostly because she wanted to try out some other things. *Now that was a success*, she thought as she piled up the severed limbs, replenishing the corruption she had used up with fresh ooze. Activating Heart of Cinder, she disintegrated everything that remained of the vile substance.

“Check your clothes, each other’s clothes, the ground around you, your hair, or anywhere else where corruption might remain. I don’t have to tell you how deadly and dangerous it is. Be thorough,” Ilea said, checking too with both her eyes and her sphere.

Nobody spoke as they carefully looked each other over. Ilea watched them, and when they were done, she cleared her throat.

“How are you all feeling? I know my healing has an effect on the mind, but I don’t want to push you too hard or overwhelm you.”

“That was pretty bad,” Celeste said. “But I somehow feel better after all that.”

“I feel the same. The healing helps, but it’s also really easy to endure when you see all the skills and levels that are unlocked,” one of the others said. Vienna, if Ilea remembered her name correctly. She was quiet and focused, about as old as her.

A third one grunted in agreement. He was the tallest of them and looked to weigh twice as much as everyone else. *Gael or something? I should really know these names by now.*

“Good. We’ll continue with ash magic,” Ilea said.

The Fae had given her a few tips on how to potentially get her Sentinels a Class that resembled her own. Ash was a big part of it. And how better to get close to an element than to build a resistance to it?

She thought about her time in the Calys mines, the fiery wings of Jirayu fresh on her mind. Ilea smiled. She wouldn’t mind wings of fire, but ash was just as good.

“Let us start.”

* * *

Done with her afternoon lessons with the Sentinels, Ilea saw Trian waiting for her near the exit of the training hall.

“Things seem to be going well. I’ve heard whispers and curses about Lilith among the students,” Trian said.

“They’re doing great. And the healing helps. I just hope the first ones get to the second tier of Pain Tolerance soon and maybe even unlock a Class as well.” She leaned against a wall outside the training hall and looked up at the ceiling. “I do wonder what they’ll get. Will they have wings as well? I hope so.”

Trian smiled. “We’ll see, but yeah, I hope so too. Any plans after this? Iana asked about your availability. I think they may be looking for help.”

“I’m not particularly good with enchantments, but I did want to visit them.”

“As far as I understood, they don’t need someone good with enchantments. They need someone who can survive them.”

“Where do I find them?”

“Follow me,” Trian said as he started down the unfinished stairway.

“You’re coming as well?”

Trian glanced back at her with a smile. The look reminded her of their time training together. "I'm interested to see how you'll do."

"Sure you are."

They reached the bottom of the stairwell, where the stone rubble suggested that this part of the headquarters was unfinished. Ilea detected something strange, but she couldn't quite discern what it was. There were definitely faint traces of enchantments nearby.

Trian walked up to the pile of rubble and touched one of the boulders, sparks from his lightning flaring for a moment before a set of runes glowed on the rock. The rubble shimmered before it vanished, revealing a large metal gate beyond.

Now she could feel it – and see it. Bright, shining enchantments beyond anything she had seen from humans before. She wondered if she could punch her way through.

"Don't," Trian pleaded.

"I didn't do anything."

"I know that look."

"What look?"

"That look before you do something stupid," Trian said, walking up to the gate.

"So how do we enter? Do you have a fancy key, or is there a secret password?"

Trian knocked on the gate. It opened moments later.

Beyond was an entire facility. Broad halls of stone filled with various items, workbenches, and machinery. It all shone with the magic of enchantment, a spectrum of colors assaulting her eyes.

Iana had bags under her eyes, scribbling on a massive sheet of paper with a pen, Christopher commenting on some of it from the side.

"Hello," Ilea said as she and Trian joined the two in what seemed to be the main hall.

Iana looked up from her work, barely meeting her eyes. "Oh... you're back."

"Yes. You two look like you need a break." She formed an ashen table and placed some food and water onto it. "Come on, maybe some healing will help too."

"It does feel pretty nice," Iana said as she took a deep breath, focusing on the healing mana that flowed through her.

“This is from the Golden Drake, right?” Christopher asked, filling his mouth with food.

“Yeah, Keyla is a fantastic cook,” Ilea said and smiled.

He nodded and grinned back, mouth still stuffed.

“You say that like it’s a curse,” Trian said, sitting down on a chair as he too ate some lunch.

“In a way, it is,” Ilea whispered, closing her eyes as she chewed on a bite, savoring every bit of it. Yes, she was cursed to never be able to go long without such fantastic food.

“We haven’t succeeded yet,” Iana said, a little defensively.

“The teleportation gate? And the key?”

“Yes. I mean no, neither of them,” Iana said with a sigh, continuing to eat.

“There have been complications,” Christopher said. “And it’s difficult to test anything without endangering someone’s life.”

Iana gave her a questioning look.

Ilea glanced at her, then over at Trian. She saw him smile and wink at her.

She smiled as well. “Sure, I can be your test dummy.”

“I told you she would help,” Iana grinned.

“We are dealing with fluctuating arcane and space magic, runes and enchantments that are highly experimental. It would rip you apart,” Christopher said, shaking his head.

“I have third-tier Space and Arcane Magic Resistances. I doubt whatever you created can seriously hurt me. And if it can... all the better. I need better resistances anyway.”

* * *

When they had agreed on a time for testing, Ilea looked at the enchanters and nodded to herself. She had wondered about when to show them the Tungsten key. The one she had found in her first Taleen dungeon.

Previously, she had thought it to be a powerful ancient relic but not of particular relevance to her. But now that she had heard about the sun and the war so long ago, fought one of the Ascended, and met various Cerithil Hunters, she thought it pretty relevant to find out what it was.

“There’s something else I’d like to show you.”

“What is it?” Iana asked, her eyes glowing with runic magic.

“It’s another Taleen artifact. I found it a while ago. Didn’t think it was relevant before. As far as I understand, it’s not related to the teleportation stuff, but maybe it’ll be helpful anyway.”

She summoned the piece of metal that reminded her of a small pyramid. To her perception, it glowed brighter than anything else in the vicinity.

Iana yelped. “Put it away!”

Ilea stored it again immediately.

“Not here. Follow me.”

The group followed Iana as she walked off, soon reaching a hallway that led to a dead end. She activated various sets of enchantments that made the ground and walls glow, a pathway and set of stairs leading downward forming in the solid stone, a soft blue glow of magic light illuminating the side walls.

They came into a spacious hall shaped like a sphere. Floating bridges led toward two platforms at its center. Each had what looked like a circular teleportation platform, known as a gate, built onto them. The two gates were about a dozen or so meters apart. Both the spherical walls and the two circular platforms were made from marble, inlaid with metals and runes, some of them glowing. Blueish and white magical light illuminated everything.

“This... is the core,” Iana said as she waved them inside.

“This looks expensive,” Ilea said.

“It was,” Trian nodded. “You’re very rich.”

“So I’ve been told.”

A secret underground laboratory. A bit tacky. She smiled. I like it.

Iana turned around, her eyes glowing within Ilea’s sphere for a brief moment before the hallway behind them closed again, a thrumming sound of energy flowing out right after.

“Now you can show me that thing again,” she said.

Ilea summoned the Tungsten key, quickly formed an ashen altar, and placed the key atop it.

Iana took a step toward the thing and just stared at it. Christopher walked around it and activated a few spells with unknown effects.

“Remarkable...” he said.

“Is it?” Iana asked. “It’s covered in enchantments that serve a similar purpose as this very facility. Below... the... no. I see...”

“You see it too. One of many.”

Iana nodded, the glow in her eyes intensifying. “Twelve.”

“Twelve seems unlikely... impossible, even,” Christopher said.

“Anything else is illogical. I agree, the fourth layer makes it seem impossible, but anything else doesn’t make sense.” Iana looked up at Ilea.

“This is a key. One of many.”

“A key? For what?” Ilea asked.

“I haven’t the faintest idea. Something important enough to have a key with more complex enchantments than any I’ve encountered, besides maybe the teleportation gates, made to open it, and then eleven more, with all of them needed to unlock whatever they’re made to unlock.”

“It doesn’t really sound like something intended to ever be unlocked,” Trian said.

“I agree,” Iana said. “All the more interesting to find out what it is, then. They left behind the machines and teleportation gates we cannot understand yet. I wonder how this ties in with them. With everything you’ve uncovered so far, I have a few theories.”

“It was in a random dungeon. Dumb luck,” Ilea asked. “How are we supposed to find the other ones?”

“Hold on,” Trian said. “Have we already decided that we want to look for these keys? Maybe this is the kind of thing you find buried deep in some long-forgotten ruin and the best idea is to go and bury it somewhere deeper.”

“Maybe if it really was an entirely forgotten ruin that had no impact on the world. But the machines are still around. There are production facilities in the north that make new Centurions who then go on to attack the elven domains.”

“And how is that bad?”

“You know I met a bunch of Elves. I would even call a few of them friends. I at least want to find out if this could help them somehow.”

“There should be no harm in studying it, at least,” Iana said. “It’s the most complex artifact I’ve ever seen, and while there may be hidden features, it seems almost ridiculously focused on a single purpose. I suggest we focus on the Gate Key and the teleportation network for now, but this

could give us insights as well. If you both agree, we'll devote some time to studying this key."

Ilea nodded, and Trian reluctantly agreed as well.

"I'm just not sure what kind of powers we're meddling with here," he said.

"We work with what we have." Ilea smiled. "Your words."

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SEVEN

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Lessons

Nathan grabbed a plate and piled it with food, turning around as he searched the hall. *There he is*, he thought, approaching the table with its lone occupant.

“Mind if I sit here?” he asked.

[Mage – lvl ??]

The man nodded, though it was barely noticeable. The food on his plate looked cold, but he stabbed his fork into a steak anyway.

“Your name is Ford, right?” Nathan asked.

The mage looked up and met his eyes. “What do you want?”

“You left for a bit earlier, right? I’m just interested in what they told you, or did to you, as a result,” Nathan explained, the last part in a whisper.

Lilith and the other instructors made sure to let them know time and time again that they could leave whenever they needed a break. Few of them ever did. Of course, they said it was okay, but Nathan wasn’t sure that was actually true.

He had considered taking a break here and there, more so in some of the combat lessons rather than the resistance training ones. There, the controlled environment and Lilith’s healing made it all feel surprisingly manageable, but the combat lessons were different. They actually felt dangerous, and the injuries were often not healed immediately. The delays were for good reason. He understood that, but it didn’t make it easier.

Still, he had never left a lesson. If he was honest, he was scared of being seen as a coward or excluded from the Sentinels because he wasn't good enough. Even looking at Ford, it confused him to know that he had left one of the lessons. He wondered if Ford just wasn't cut out to be a Sentinel, but at the same time, he thought it was brave of him to leave, to admit that he needed a break.

Ford looked at him. "Nothing happened. Just told me to relax and take it slow. That it's alright and that I should join again as soon as I feel ready. Trian even checked up on me again a few hours later."

"What?" Nathan asked in shock. *No subtle threats? No veiled suggestions that taking a break means weakness? No repercussions at all?*

"I agree. It's... confusing. I don't exactly have a better place to go, so I'll just follow their advice. Watching the corruption grow on my arm... I felt... helpless. Like an insect. Lilith just stopped it, ripped it out. Like it was nothing."

"She's quite something, isn't she? I feared you would be exiled... or worse."

"With what you hear of healing orders or other training... facilities... yeah. I want to push myself, but not to that degree."

Nathan quieted when he noticed Celeste and Luke approaching.

"Still think this is a cult and Ilea will eat your heart?" Celeste asked as she sat down next to Ford, not paying him the slightest attention.

Nathan gave the man an apologetic look, noting that he didn't seem to care.

"They're the smart ones," Luke said as he sat down next to Nathan. "Weird," he said, flexing his hand. "This isn't my arm, right? It's a new arm. My old one is gone."

"Didn't you listen?" Celeste asked. "As soon as you can do that yourself, your body is just another thing to use. I can't fucking wait until I can turn off pain and regrow limbs. Can you imagine the stunts you could pull? You could whack someone with an arm. Or you could feed a whole family!"

"That's cannibalism."

"That just tells me you've never been truly hungry. Plus, is it really still cannibalism if you can just regrow it?"

"You could argue that you're just eating mana," Ford said as he cut his steak, looking intently at a piece he held up with his fork.

“See?” Celeste said with a smile, “This guy gets it. Did you get Ash Magic Resistance earlier too?”

“I did,” Ford said.

“Awesome. Ilea is so cool,” Celeste said before she started eating with her usual joy.

“You shouldn’t call her by that name... Lilith is more honorable,” Luke said.

“Honorable? I don’t think she gives a rat’s ass about what we call her.”

“I agree,” Nathan said. “I believe we should keep the second name to ourselves, though. Otherwise, potential enemies will know more about her. There’s a reason she has two names.”

“She doesn’t seem to care much,” Ford said. “I agree, of course. Either she doesn’t deem any enemies to be a concern, or she just doesn’t care.”

“Why would you care when you can regrow your arms?” Celeste asked with a full mouth.

“There are dangerous people out there. Regrowing arms won’t be enough to deal with everyone,” Nathan interrupted.

“Eh... I like her lack of concern. Makes me think even higher of her,” Celeste said. “I won’t use the name outside, though, alright?”

“Should we bother Aki later for some training?” Nathan asked, changing the subject.

“Your obsession with that creepy machine knows no bounds,” Luke said.

Celeste chuckled. “You wouldn’t understand the advancements of technology, farm boy.”

“Want to learn what this farmer can do?” he asked, raising a muscular arm.

“Show it to Aki,” she shot back.

“Want to come as well? More interesting than sitting here,” Luke said, looking at Ford.

The man glanced at the group and nodded.

Nathan smiled to himself. He wasn’t obsessed with Aki. He was terrified of him. Terrified of what else was out there. That was why he wanted to face him. That was why he was here.

* * *

“Just follow my lead,” Claire said, one hand on Ilea’s hip and one holding her hand.

“I’m trying,” Ilea said, distracted by the giggling of Cless.

At least the music made it less awkward.

I thought Dexterity helped with this stuff.

“You’re blushing,” Claire said. “Focus.”

“I’m sorry. You’re just very close.”

“Keep your natural desires in check. You would be doomed at a ball.”

“You grew up noble, right?”

“I did. However, I enjoyed runes and explosions more than lessons on proper dining and dancing. Though I still excelled at them.”

Cless clapped as the music came to a stop.

“I think that’s enough for now,” Claire said. “It is truly striking how little your finesse in battle translates to your ability to dance.”

“There are just too many rules to think about. Isn’t there something less... structured?” Ilea asked.

“None that would be danced at a ball. Learning these structures and rules will get you the skill, and then you’ll do a passable job at an official event.”

“Do you expect me to attend any?”

“With your personal power, I think it’s just a matter of time. And as the manager of Lilith, it’s my responsibility to make sure you don’t embarrass yourself. And trust me, once you’ve got the basics down, it’s actually quite fun.”

“Alright. I’ll do my best. Same time again tomorrow?”

“Yes, but I won’t have as much time. Now, I’m glad you found the dungeon to be so fruitful. Your arena training left an impression too. I already had the rewards for tomorrow lowered based on the flood of interest. I’ll be excluding the elements you mentioned. Do let me know once you advance any to the third tier so I can read them.”

“Sure, will do.” Ilea formed an ashen armchair, sitting down as she glanced at Cless. “You enjoy this, don’t you?”

The girl looked away in clearly feigned innocence.

“Is there a resistance to her magic as well?” Ilea asked.

“Potentially. She’s painted you many times already. If anybody could test it, it would be you.”

“Cless... can you paint me more regularly? And really focus on your magic? It will help both of us enhance our skills,” Ilea said.

The girl opened one eye and glanced at her with crossed arms. “We can set up a contract.”

“Really now? Claire?” Ilea said.

The woman gazed at Cless with obvious pride. “She’s learning so fast. Remarkable. I’ll set up the contract with you, Cless.”

“I have no say in it?” Ilea asked.

“You always do,” Claire said.

Cless returned to painting now that the dancing lessons – and her entertainment – were over. Ilea watched her for a while and relaxed.

“There was something else I wanted to mention,” Claire said after a while. “You’ve been to Dawntree before, right?”

“I have. What of it?”

“It seems the economic stress put on the city because of the elven attacks has finally caused too much tension. A group of rebels has turned on the nobles, supported by a large part of the populace as well as adventurers. It wouldn’t have been possible if a large part of the previous nobility hadn’t fled eastward after the initial attacks.”

Ilea nodded. “What about the Corinth Order? Isn’t it based there?”

“Many of its members relocated to Nipha and Kroll in the wake of the elven attacks. I’m keeping an eye on the situation amongst the healing orders to make sure the Medic Sentinels aren’t blindsided by the developments. Currently, they’re more focused on each other. The Corinth Order themselves might even try to retake Dawntree.

“Riverwatch, on the other hand, had some success in rescuing and taking in ex-slaves who fled the Empire’s war. I received a letter earlier today saying they’re expanding downward. We lent them a number of our best architects and engineers. Large sums of gold too – mostly from you.”

“Sounds like you have your hands in a lot of things.”

“I’m doing my best,” Claire said and smiled.

“Done!” Cless showed off her newest creation. It was a painting of Ilea holding up a severed arm. “Is that your arm?”

“It is. Want to see?” Ilea asked.

“YES!” Cless replied excitedly.

“No,” Claire said.

“Cless, I’ll show you when you’re a little older, okay? It’s dangerous, and it hurts. Plus, it’s pretty gross,” Ilea said.

The girl was obviously disappointed but accepted the reply, already starting her next painting.

“I should get going to get some more levels,” Ilea said.

“Same dungeon?” Claire asked.

“Tonight, yes. Might try another one in the next few days. Thanks for the work and info.”

“Sure. And make sure you don’t enjoy yourself too much. Don’t get yourself killed out there,” Claire said as Ilea opened the door to her office.

“I’ll do my best,” Ilea said before she blinked out.

She spread her wings and shot up, charging them as soon as she was several hundred meters above the city. Now that she knew where the dungeon was located, the travel time was reduced. If only a little. She skipped visiting the inn this time and instead approached from behind the dungeon entrance, running over the hills.

“Hey,” she called out to the man inside the little building.

“Ah! Oh... Ah, it’s you, from yesterday? Yes... wait, let me get the keys,” he said as he got up.

“Don’t bother,” Ilea said, blinking through the dungeon entrance.

She rushed through the tunnels and soon found the blighted section of the dungeon once more. The Golems had sadly spread out through the tunnels again, but it didn’t take her long to gather a group of them together.

Should probably explore a little more. See if this place has anything else to offer.

She started to examine the walls and corridors, but few rooms remained that weren’t completely overgrown, many only recognizable by the suggestion of a door frame. Ilea’s sphere pierced those too, of course, but other than fungi and whatever other dank growth occupied the halls, she didn’t find anything useful.

What an absolutely rank place, she mused as her body was cut apart by the Golems following her smoothly through the corridor. Well, fairly smoothly. Five of them struggled to fit.

Ilea spent about an hour casually strolling through the dungeon, occasionally retching up blood and guts. The trail would lead her back outside.

“Now this is different,” she murmured before her jaw was separated by a diamond blade.

A rather large building had been carved into a particularly spacious cavern ahead. It was just as moldy and overgrown as the rest. A few glowing mushrooms illuminated the parts she could see. Still, it was far bigger than anything she had seen so far and a little more intact.

A town hall, maybe? Or a temple?

Two Golems were guarding the main entrance. Luckily, the large double doors were made of stone, otherwise they would have rotted away.

Ilea blinked twice and left her entourage behind, appearing in a hall dimly lit by mushrooms glowing a pale blue. Enough for her enhanced eyes to see the surroundings.

Much of the furniture that once adorned this place had joined the growth, but she found at least a dozen skeletons, most of them buried and half-rotten within the fungi.

Arranged in a circle? Around this? she thought as she looked over at the sarcophagus in the center of the hall. Runes and glyphs unfamiliar to her covered the overgrown stone.

Her sphere informed her that a person remained inside. Neither a skeleton nor void of magic. *Rouse the old unfamiliar being, or let it sleep?*

The answer was quite simple, really.

Ilea tapped the top of the stone with an ashen limb. “Hello, anybody there?”

Nothing happened.

“Do you want to join a group of rogue necromancers? I know a guy.”

This time, the thing opened its eyes. It looked around before slamming its hands into the stone.

Dust and spores spread from the sarcophagus, and the lid lifted a tiny bit.

Didn't break it in a single hit. Guess it focused on Intelligence rather than Strength.

Ilea waited as the being grunted and gurgled, slamming its fists into the stone. Cracks soon formed before chunks of rock fell to the side.

“You’re really taking your time,” she said, noticing the being now had enough space to bend its elbow and grab the longsword lying next to it.

A brief slash imbued with powerful magic ripped through the stone. The being pushed the two remaining large pieces of stone away and rose.

[Undead Gem Sorcerer – lvl ???]

Ilea felt the pressure of his magic spreading as he focused on her.

Large chunks of flesh still clung to his body, which was mostly covered by a black tunic. Both had partially resisted the decay. Various yellow and near-golden gems glinted on the hilt of his sword.

Parts of the man's face remained, but he was noticeably less charming than Maro.

"Still in there?" Ilea asked.

The sorcerer replied with a slash of his sword, the blade glowing with bright white light as its range was enhanced.

"Not a talker. That's also fine," she said, dodging by taking a step back.

The undead didn't relent, instantly following up with two more slashes, the latter a feint that caught her off guard.

Ilea raised an eyebrow and took the hit, trusting Azarinth Fighting to inform her about the potential damage. Her ashen armor was cut through, but the blade didn't penetrate particularly deep into her skin.

The magic was used up as soon as it reached my body. As the attacks continued, Ilea grew hesitant about just killing the undead. He wants to kill me, can cut through my armor, and his technique...

She dodged another three steps back before he caught up, forcing her to blink.

His technique is incredible. Definitely much faster than me, even with my buffs. I doubt he could stand against my attacks for very long, but this is already enough.

Ilea focused on her skills, spreading her wings to dodge and weave through his attacks. It wasn't perfect, but coupled with the Golems, she could now train a variety of skills without killing anything.

Leveling up my offensive skills is a bit of a problem. I'd have to find something resilient enough to take a bunch of my attacks without dying. A quadruple mark would probably do...

Ilea continued for a while, deciding that this dungeon definitely wasn't the worst when it came to training, especially for her resistances. Her main skills, however, could benefit from something a little more powerful. More so than this undead.

There's no path that leads deeper. Guess this is the extent of the Karheim dungeon. New dungeon tomorrow, then.

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EIGHT

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Steady Climb

Ilea returned to Ravenhall the following morning, this time a little earlier to allow for a nice and extended breakfast as the sun rose over the mountains.

The luxury of a buffet served solely for her on a beautiful terrace certainly made up for the rancid smells and blight in the Karheim dungeon. A quick bath in the lake near the city helped clean off most of the dirt and blood. The ice was gone, but the water hadn't been exactly warm. To Ilea, though, it hardly mattered.

Biting into a croissant, she looked through the steady advancements in her skills with a smile.

'ding' Sentinel Sphere reaches 3rd lvl 13

'ding' Sentinel Core reaches 3rd lvl 23

'ding' Azarinth Fighting reaches 3rd lvl 26

'ding' Azarinth Perception reaches 3rd lvl 12

'ding' Ashen Wings reaches 3rd lvl 14

'ding' Eyes of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 7

'ding' Avatar of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 21

'ding' Keeper of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 22

Though the undead was dangerous and quick, his fighting prowess was nothing against her healing, defense, and regeneration, but if she simply let him come and attack, it was enough.

She didn't know how long this would work so well. Even with the creature's high level, which she estimated to be in the high five hundreds or low six hundreds, at some point, her skills would slow down, if only due to her familiarity with the being. For now, she could benefit from the obvious experience the creature retained.

The Fallen Hero she had killed in the Descent really would have been a prime candidate for leveling. That thing could take all of her attack skills without dying. She could have just returned whenever she had time. But that option was gone now.

Ilea didn't regret it exactly, knowing that her Class levels had been the main focus at the time. She just had to find an equivalent. The undead was a start but not a replacement.

Could inquire about more dangerous creatures. Or that Werewolf thing I fought with Edwin and co. Hmm, might not be enough at this point.

She continued eating and read the rest of her notifications.

'ding' Monster Hunter reaches 2nd lvl 4

'ding' Arcane Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 12

'ding' Blight Resistance reaches lvl 7

...

'ding' Blight Resistance reaches lvl 10

'ding' Diamond Magic Resistance reaches lvl 10

...

'ding' Diamond Magic Resistance reaches lvl 13

'ding' Emerald Magic Resistance reaches lvl 6

...

'ding' Emerald Magic Resistance reaches lvl 9

'ding' Ruby Magic Resistance reaches lvl 5

'ding' Ruby Magic Resistance reaches lvl 6

'ding' Sapphire Magic Resistance reaches lvl 7

...

'ding' Sapphire Magic Resistance reaches lvl 9

'ding' Topaz Magic Resistance reaches lvl 7

...

'ding' Topaz Magic Resistance reaches lvl 12

'ding' Vine Magic Resistance reaches lvl 3

...

'ding' Vine Magic Resistance reaches lvl 5

'ding' Water Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 5

Ilea sighed, enjoying the early morning sun on her face. She finished her hot chocolate with closed eyes, uncaring about the scalding heat pouring down her throat. Some of it was absorbed by her third-tier Heat Resistance to provide some warmth.

Heart of Cinder could certainly be used to absorb excess heat as well, but Ilea currently didn't have a way to get rid of the spell safely once activated. And she didn't plan on sending a beacon of bright energy up into the sky, especially with the flying guards and birds.

She left several gold pieces to pay the two hundred and ninety silver piece bill. The waitress tried to reassure her that payment wasn't necessary, but Ilea had already vanished.

Once you're rich and influential, you apparently don't have to pay for anything anymore, she thought with a smirk. As if it was an affront to ask the famous Lilith to pay for services or goods provided. Ridiculous.

* * *

Jerry, the arena attendant who had replaced Lyza, looked relieved when Ilea finally showed up, his expression quickly turning to fear as he approached her.

"What's the matter, Jerry?" she asked with a smile, ignoring the looks from dozens of people hanging around in the arena.

Some of them were trailing the attendant, but their questions died down as soon as they spotted Ilea.

"Ah... yes. Greetings, my lady," the attendant replied. "Erm... it seems word of the session from yesterday has done the rounds. I'm nearly done with categorizing. Claire informed me to lower the rewards from five silver per hour to two. Nobody left after the announcement, so I suggest we lower it further tomorrow. Would that be agreeable to you?"

"Sure."

Ilea covered herself with ash. She thanked the man and went into the arena, walking past the people who stepped away at her approach.

Several hours later, Ilea checked through her messages as she strolled through the city toward the headquarters of the Sentinels. A total of ten levels in various resistances. Her reputation had certainly helped attract more powerful adventurers.

‘ding’ Blood Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 16

‘ding’ Crystal Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 2

‘ding’ Crystal Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 3

‘ding’ Dark Magic Resistance reaches lvl 16

‘ding’ Dark Magic Resistance reaches lvl 17

‘ding’ Earth Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 6

‘ding’ Heat Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 5

‘ding’ Mist Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 11

‘ding’ Pain Tolerance reaches 3rd lvl 3

‘ding’ Water Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 6

None of her Class skills had leveled, but at least she found Pain Tolerance to be manageable here, unlike in the blight dungeon. She didn’t turn her perception of it off, nor did she remove the resistance with Avatar of Ash altogether. Instead, using the third-tier bonus, she let it help her focus.

It was still a painful experience, but it let her see the spells move within her sphere better, let her try and trace the magic. To understand how it formed, how the projectiles impacted her, and how her body regenerated.

Her face had been covered by ash, but as soon as the attacks started, it proved an unnecessary precaution. The various explosions of elements not only prevented her face from being seen but also meant it wasn’t actually present most of the time. The combined effort of around seventy mages of various levels proved enough to at least injure her with her resistances and armor deactivated.

It came as a surprise that none of them had any new magic to show her. But then again, Ilea understood that a lot of adventurers learned from others, and the more established schools of magic were also often a far safer choice for someone looking to become an adventurer rather than risking something new and different. To her, it wasn’t a surprise that a lot of Shadows wielded exactly those kinds of rare and unusual types of magic.

She reached the headquarters of the Medic Sentinels and opened the door, feeling the magic of several enchantments dissipate as soon as she channeled her mana into the entrance. They fell back into place behind her, the defensive magic activating once more.

Ilea huffed out some air from her nose, feeling some unexpected nostalgia. *It wasn't too long ago that I walked into the Shadow's Hand headquarters and explored Viscera. And now I'm entering the headquarters of our own organization. Training our own students.*

She thought of Kyrian, somewhere far away, of Trian and Claire, working with her to build all this and more. And she thought of Eve. Her chest still felt a little tight at the thought, but less so, less than before.

Ilea waved at Aki, who sped out from an entrance at the top of the stairs, checking on the new arrival he had either felt or been informed of by one of the enchantments.

Greetings, she sent through the mind magic she had gotten from her third-tier resistance.

"What? How did you do that?!" the dagger-turned-Taleen-machine asked in confusion.

Secret, she sent.

"Of course. You are early," he said, his eyes glowing a bright green.

Ilea smiled, thinking of the Praetorians and the danger they had posed to her.

"I'm here to see Orthan and Iana. Do you know where I can find the former?"

Aki glided down the stairs with lethal precision, his six legs in perfect control. "He is teaching a class at the moment. I shall take over if you wish."

"You've improved considerably, even though your level remains the same. I hope my display a few days ago didn't dishearten you too much."

The machine turned to look at her. "I appreciate that you worry about me." He paused. "I can move, Ilea. That is more than enough. More than I ever hoped for."

Ilea smiled. She gave him a nod and watched him continue down the stairs.

"As for your suggestion, I'd appreciate talking to Orthan now."

Aki led her to the fourth floor down, where several training halls were located.

“Do you enjoy it here? Now that you can move so well. I don’t want you to feel obligated to stay.”

“I do not feel an obligation to stay here, Ilea. If anything, I feel gratitude. Toward you, toward Iana and Trian. But that’s not why I choose to stay here and help train the Sentinels. I saw you visit the Vultures after what happened in Salia. You were looking for something. A place where you could learn and train. But more so, I think, a place where you belonged. I didn’t know, back then, how that would feel.

“I guess I feel more whole now. I can move. I can influence the world around me. And I’m no longer influenced and bound by the mana of my wielder. It was surprising that I suddenly understood how you must have felt. And that what you were looking for, I now already had. I’m not here because I feel indebted. I’m here because I choose to be here. I am a Sentinel, and so are my students.”

“I see. Sorry that I didn’t get it.”

“Don’t mention it. I know you mean well. It’s good to have you around.”

“You too, Aki.” Ilea smiled and waited as he went to get the other teacher.

Guardian of Akelion, I’m glad I found you in that dungeon.

Orthan joined her a minute later, and Ilea could see some of the students trying to glance out before he closed the large wooden double doors of the training room behind him.

More rumors for the pile, she thought, unsure if Maro would remain the only one to form a cult in Ravenhall.

“Greetings, Ilea. Or should I say Lilith?” the old man said. His age didn’t show in his movements or the way he held himself.

“Whatever you prefer, Orthan,” she said as she walked back to the stairwell, sitting on one of the steps.

Surprisingly, Orthan followed suit, sitting down next to her with a sigh. “What can I do for you?”

“There are two main things. You’re a bone mage, right?”

He nodded. “Bone and blood magic are my main tools, yes.”

“That’s good. I thought about potentially supplying the students with bone armor. Maybe mixed with metal, but I’m not entirely sure yet. Can you shape bone?”

His eyebrows quirked up as he considered. "It is unusual. Bone is normally quite brittle... and not exactly easy to come by, either. Anything worthwhile in terms of durability is even harder to get and difficult to carry back to cities. And its various uses in alchemy and other sectors make it generally less profitable to sell to the few armorers that are interested.

"I doubt my capabilities are enough to produce full-fledged armor, but perhaps if I work together with a smith, we could figure something out. Metal is easier to come by, however, especially if you are looking for a uniform design," he explained. "Did you have a creature in mind that you could hunt for its bones?"

"I see. And yes. Well, not exactly." She pointed at herself.

"What?"

"I'm the creature. My bones are pretty sturdy, even though they lose a lot of resilience when no longer part of my body. The uniform design wouldn't be an issue, though. Not that I think we have to make all of them look the same."

Orthan breathed in deep, turned away, smiled, and then slowly nodded to himself. "Perhaps I've been here for too long already."

"You don't want to do it?"

"No. I like the idea. Let me know when you want to start."

"I like the idea as well, and we would save a lot in terms of material costs, but we could also just use high-quality steel instead. I don't want to equip the Sentinels with sub-par gear."

"No, no. You shouldn't underestimate bone. We would have to test yours, but seeing how powerful you've gotten, I think it will be more than suitable. Bone is generally far easier to enchant and is naturally more resilient against many schools of magic than most kinds of steel, notably against mana intrusion.

"I think it would be both suitable and fitting. Depending on how easy it is to create armor, given the ease of access to new materials, they'll be able to train with it without any worries about damaging it."

"Awesome, now I'm getting excited," she said with a smile.

NINE

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Displacing Circumstances

Ilea left the man to his planning and joined the enchanters for her scheduled testing. The heavy enchanted doors opened when she knocked, Iana and Christopher welcoming her with tense expressions. She didn't miss the glint of excitement that both of them had in their eyes.

"You're really excited to finally have a test dummy."

"Of course we are. I just hope you're as durable as all the stories make you out to be," Iana said. She motioned to Ilea to follow and led them down into the core with the teleportation gates.

"This really is a fucking cool setup. I hope I don't die in these tests and all of this was a wasted effort," Ilea said.

Iana gave her a look. "Why do *you* sound excited now?"

Ilea smiled. "Oh, no particular reason. I'm just really excited about science and research and stuff."

And maybe finding a lost friend along the way.

"I sometimes worry about you," Iana said.

"You're supposed to reply with a dry remark or something like that. Either way, we're here to test your teleportation gates. Let's get started."

Christopher gestured for her to get onto one of the platforms.

Ilea spread her wings and landed on it, taking in the bright enchantments covering the marble circle, various lines and runes made from different metals reflecting the light in multiple colors. She wondered how long they had worked to create this.

"Now, just relax and tell me what you see and feel, both with your eyes and magic perception," Christopher explained. "Signal me verbally, or with

a raised hand, if the strain is too much.”

He spoke each word with careful deliberation. It was clear they had been working toward this moment for a long time.

Understood, she sent directly into his mind. “Telepathy might be better if I can’t move anymore.”

He seemed flustered but nodded a moment later. “That... yes, that works too.”

Ilea relaxed, her ashen armor covering her bone set. She was ready for whatever was to come.

The whole core sprang to life, magic flaring with light in the sphere around her, rushing through the enchantments and finally into the two platforms at the center. She heard a faint thrumming noise.

Ilea felt the space around her fill with mana, the area distorting. A heavy pressure built, pushing down on her from all directions. She smiled. It was familiar. Space magic. And it wasn’t powerful enough to be a concern.

Yet.

The mana density kept increasing, focused on the center of the platform – right where she stood. Something pulled on her left side, raising her arm slightly without her intentionally moving it. And then the magic faded.

“Are you ok?!” Iana shouted.

“You don’t have to be so loud,” Ilea said. “I’m fine. I felt both space and arcane magic pressure, but it was manageable. My arm rose slightly, but other than that, I didn’t notice anything.”

“You really are durable,” Iana whispered.

“Can you turn it up? I’m ready.”

“There is no turning up or down. It’s about calibration. Knowing that there was a tug focused on your arm does help, but is there a way for you to be a little more specific? Or maybe to be more sensitive to the magic?”

Ilea thought about it for a moment and then nodded. “I can turn off my resistances. That would probably lead to more visible results.”

“If you think that’s safe to do,” Iana said.

You should have seen Violence and the Superfae.

“It’s safe. Pretty sure this isn’t going to kill me. Okay, resistances are deactivated.”

Iana gave Christopher a nod.

A moment later, Ilea could feel the pressure build again. Again, there was a focus on her arm, but this time, it was slowly ripped out at the

shoulder. She watched as it hovered next to her for a moment before it fell to the floor with a splat.

Iana screamed, and Christopher looked away.

"I'm fine! It's fine," Ilea said as she regenerated her arm and spat out some blood. She could both see and feel that the others were in distress, so she kept talking. "The pressure was focused right next to the shoulder. Felt different than an offensive space magic spell. And my arm hovered for a second or two after. Any idea what that means?"

"Some ideas, yes," Iana said. "Many ideas, actually. Can you... take the arm with you? And then can we do it again? After some adjustments."

Iana wiped a bit of sweat from her brow and visibly tried to calm her breathing. Now that they knew Ilea wasn't in danger, they both seemed relieved and excited.

"All right, okay. Christopher, vision control."

"On it," he said, a few spells activating around him as they approached the platform.

As Ilea waited and tried to wipe away the blood with some of her ash, she glanced at Iana, whose eyes glowed a bright blue.

Less than five minutes later, they commenced. First with resistances active again.

Ilea felt a pulling again, this time more central. As if she had issues with digesting. It was a little difficult to breathe as well. She reported the findings, and they resumed the test, her resistances deactivated this time.

I wonder if someone with third-tier Space Resistance can use teleportation like this if it prevents me from being moved, she mused – right before her innards vanished.

"Oh," she exclaimed with the air that was left. "The aim is better, at least."

When an hour had passed, the enchantments being modified several times in that span, Christopher once again read out the next test sequence, looking visibly aged. The magic activated, and Ilea instantly felt the pressure build.

Then it peaked and ripped out a section of her chest.

She reformed it and looked over to the other platform, where an unidentifiable sludge of red had splattered to the ground.

"YES!!" Iana exclaimed before she covered her mouth in horror.

Ilea laughed out loud. “You did it! The disembowelment platform will be quite the shocker!”

“That isn’t its purpose! We don’t understand why that’s happening!” Iana exclaimed, quickly turning to Christopher with a broad grin. “But still, the connection was established!”

“It was. We did it,” Christopher said in disbelief. He started laughing as Iana hugged him tight.

Ilea looked over at the lump of flesh.

You did it? I feel like this is gonna take a while.

Her part with them was done for the day. Now that they had established a connection, they told her they would need time to recalibrate everything and change up some of the runes.

* * *

Ilea’s next session with the Sentinels yielded something new. She had been practicing with her heavy bow whenever there were breaks.

‘ding’ Heavy Archery reaches lvl 6

The message made her miss the target, appearing in her mind as she aimed. She quirked an eyebrow when another message appeared.

‘ding’ You have learned the General Skill: Sage of Torment – lvl 1

Sage of Torment – lvl 1

You have helped others reach strength through pain and struggle. As long as you train willing subjects, they shall find comfort and resilience in your presence. You are an example of what is possible through sheer tenacity. Also, you inflict a lot of pain.

Neat. That’s going to help them even more!

She could sense a spike of distress in many of them when they saw her smile, but before she could register it, she was surprised to receive another notification.

***‘ding’ You have learned the General Skill: Divination Magic Resistance –
lvl 1***

Divination Magic Resistance – lvl 1

Be it seers, oracles, or madmen, that some are gifted with the ability to pierce the veils of space and time is undeniable. You must be important enough to warrant special attention, leading to a resistance to such magic. If anything, this new ability will increase said attention, but at the very least, your most private moments might not be so easily perceived.

Finally. Well done, Cless.

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TEN

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Seeker

For her nighttime activities that evening, Ilea chose a new dungeon. If only to switch things up and maybe find something a little more interesting than the golems she'd been fighting recently.

The map led her to the west of the Ravenhall, to the Kingdom of Kroll. The dungeon was supposedly located on the mountain range separating the Navali Forest and the Human Plains from the Isanna Desert to the south.

The flight was a little longer than visiting the Karheim dungeon, but with her third-tier wings, long distances were now much easier to traverse.

Her eyes picked up distant light sources as well as movements illuminated by the setting suns. She found hunting parties and soldiers, lone adventurers, and even a few farms.

When she reached the mountainous area indicated on the map, Ilea decided to land near a campfire partially hidden between a group of large boulders. She landed far enough away that she doubted her approach would be noticed. She would appear like any other road-weary traveler.

Ilea decided to don her casual clothes and leather armor. Yes, she wanted to find out exactly where the dungeon was and what else was going on in the region, but she also wanted to have some fun. Training with the Sentinels, training in the arena, and working with the enchanters was all enjoyable, but it felt quite... serious.

Lots of different responsibilities were weighing her down, coupled with her growing reputation as Lilith, which made it hard for her to engage in her usual methods of blowing off steam. At night, at least, she wanted to be just another adventurer somewhere out in the wilds.

Several figures sat around the small fire, talking in subdued voices. They had well-made and well-worn weapons. Nothing that looked particularly fancy, but nothing cheap either. They likely knew what they were doing, but nothing in their bearing said they would be particularly dangerous.

A woman stood guard on top of a boulder, spotting Ilea as she closed in on foot. A whistle from the lookout made the others scramble to their feet, looking wary as they emerged from behind the rock formation.

“Who goes there?!”

Ilea waved, keeping her pace. “Lone healer, looking for a dungeon nearby.”

“A healer... hey, Edgar, maybe she could fix your leg,” one of them said as he looked at one of the men.

Ilea identified them as she approached, finding them to be between level one twenty and one forty. Two mages, a warrior, and a ranger.

The latter approached her with a friendly smile. “Good to meet you, I’m Sean. We were also on the way to a nearby dungeon.”

The man was wearing light armor, mostly leather, with steel plate protecting some of his vitals. He had short brown hair and a short beard, neither particularly kept in check. He had an easy-going vibe but the air of a man who knew how to get serious when the situation demanded it. There was a bit of steel behind his eyes. Ilea thought he was likely in his early thirties, perhaps a little younger.

“Ilea. Nice to finally find a group,” she said, noticing that the mage, Edgar, had trouble standing upright.

He had dark skin and green eyes, and apart from a little stubble on his chin, his head was otherwise clean-shaven. He was dressed in similar gear to her own, with various bags and compartments tied to several belts he wore both on his waist and around his chest.

Other than a small knife, he didn’t seem to carry any weapons. As was often the case with mages. But where Sean had appeared relaxed, Edgar was full of quiet intensity.

“I planned to visit the Caverns of Rot,” Ilea continued. “That the same one you’re looking for?”

Sean nodded. “Yes. It’s just another hour up the mountain. Are you here on Order business?”

She waved him off. “No, no. I was in the area and heard about it. Thought I might find a team already there. I’m not with an Order, and I don’t stay with any team for long.”

Sean whistled. “An independent one. That’s a rare sight. Probably smart too, to not stick around anywhere for too long. The Corinth Order has been more active in Kroll recently. Wouldn’t want to get their attention.”

“More active?”

“Rumors, mostly.” He leaned forward slightly and glanced at the others. “You know they’re based in Dawntree. Some people say something is brewing there. Was told it may be dangerous to visit for the time being. Maybe they’re feeling it too, moving some of their troops around.”

Troops?

Ilea wondered what these rumors were about. It had been a while since she had visited Dawntree and delved into her first Taleen dungeon.

“You give Hendrick’s words too much value. He’s half as experienced and well-traveled as he pretends to be,” the other mage chimed in.

This mage had medium-length brown hair bound into a single braid that vanished under her padded robe. It didn’t look like one of the fancy robes Ilea had seen on some high-level mages; instead, it was made out of treated hide and had a light brown color. Visible repairs and patches showed that the woman either really liked the duster or simply didn’t have enough gold to buy an upgrade.

Her dark brown eyes moved between the party and their surroundings with trained ease, casually scanning for threats. A short blade sheathed on her hip made it clear that she didn’t rely solely on her magic. She looked fun.

Sean shrugged. “Sure, maybe. But now that most of the western independent cities have fallen, Dawntree stands alone and is even farther removed than it was before. Probably easier to start something with everyone else distracted with the war.”

The new mage glanced at Ilea and shook her head. “Don’t take all that too seriously. He just likes to see more than there is. I’m Sophia, by the way.”

“Nice to meet you.” Ilea glanced back at the seemingly injured mage, Edgar. “Should I have a look at his leg?”

“Was just about to ask,” Sean said, giving the others a questioning glance. He got some indecipherable looks and a couple of nods. “Were you

looking for a team to go into the dungeon? I can tell you're not a run-of-the-mill healer, but if you are looking for a group, we're here. We explored the caverns several times in the past months and know our way around."

Ilea smiled.

This should be fun, joining a team again for a little while. Good way to test my capabilities in protecting a group, helping them level. If the dungeon has something on a similar level to the Golems.

"Sure. I'll join for the night. How do you share loot, or are you here on a quest?"

Sean clapped his hands. "Awesome! We mostly protect Edgar over there as he collects herbs. If we manage to catch some Mist Butterflies, we sell the parts and split the rewards. Same with the herbs. Bloodroot and Maar Grass sell quite well in Utach."

"Ah, I see. That sounds good to me," she said with a smile as she sidled up to Edgar.

[Mage – lvl 142]

Collecting herbs and catching butterflies. Is this what normal adventurers do? They don't seem worried or concerned about my high level either, or the fact that I'm a battle healer. Guess being a healer gives a lot of goodwill.

"Let me have a look," she said, crouching down and touching his knee. It was swollen and slightly bent. "What happened?" she asked as she poured healing mana into it. A trickle, really, to make sure it didn't immediately pop back into place. She would have already been identified as a higher level than them, but she didn't want them to think she was too far beyond them.

The man looked at her with a bit of suspicion, his demeanor changing at the question as he scratched the back of his head.

"He lost a bet," Sophia said.

"Didn't make the jump," said the warrior, the fourth member of the group, with a wicked smile as he finally sauntered into view, chuckling.

He was twice as beefy as the rest of them, his long blond beard braided. Coupled with his unkempt blond hair, the man looked more like a Viking than most. Then there was the two-handed battle axe. His face seemed

jovial, but there was an edge to his smile that suggested he'd be happy to draw said axe at a moment's notice.

"His skin is colder than it should be," Ilea said as the knee slowly healed.

"Used some magic, helps with the swelling," Sophia said, forming a crystal of ice in her hand.

Ilea nodded and continued with her subdued healing. The knee soon returned to normal.

Edgar sighed and sat down on a nearby rock. "Carrots, that's a relief. Thank you," he said with a sigh.

Carrots?

"I'm glad I could help." She glanced at a heavy black pot nearby in which a delicious-smelling broth was cooking. "Did I interrupt your dinner?"

"Joined more than interrupted. Care to have a plate?" Sean asked.

"I'd love to," Ilea replied with a smile. She noted Sophia giving her another glance before she climbed back onto the boulder, resuming her watch.

Yes. This definitely looks fun.

ELEVEN

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Adventuring

“So, what brings a lone healer up to the Caverns of Rot?” Sean asked as he filled a bowl with broth before handing it to her.

“I’m looking to pick up some general skills, mostly. Resistances and whatever else I can learn,” Ilea said, thanking the man as she received the food.

Sean nodded. “For your next evolution, I presume? Or just to become more durable?” he added with a chuckle.

“I approve,” the Viking-like warrior said in a deep tone.

Ilea nodded. “For evolutions, yes. It’s reasonably simple to get resistances as a healer. No permanent damage,” she said as she started eating. A hearty stew with carrots and some other vegetables, potatoes, and meat. Rabbit, judging by the bones that she saw near the fire.

“Except for the pain,” Sean said. “I’ve entertained the thought of getting a healer class, but at this point, it’s just too risky. With all the work I’ve already invested.”

“You’re really not part of an Order?” Edgar asked, an unreadable expression on his face.

“No,” Ilea said simply.

“Are you lying?” the man asked in the same tone.

“No,” she said again and smiled, chewing on some meat. She wasn’t part of an Order. She was part of an organization.

“I like her,” the Viking man said. “My name is Colt.”

“Nice to meet you, Colt,” Ilea said and casually continued eating.

“Can you fight?” Colt asked as he filled his bowl. “Never seen a battle healer before.”

“I dabble,” Ilea replied.

“You want to spar?”

Ilea smiled. “Maybe later, but I don’t know if I can hold my own against a full-blown *warrior*.”

Edgar whistled, and Sean smiled. “Sounds like a challenge,” Sean said.

“Just between the two of us, what level are you at?” Colt asked as he leaned forward a little, whispering the words.

She smirked and leaned closer as well. “Three forty,” she whispered sheepishly before slurping up the rest of her soup.

Sean chuckled, and Edgar smiled.

“Really?” Colt asked with wide eyes.

“No, you damn idiot,” the ice mage said from atop the boulder.

Good ears, the lot of them, Ilea thought. *Instincts, maybe not as much. But nice cooking.*

“What? Because you don’t think it’s possible? You fight, you get stronger, you kill, you get stronger. It’s simple. You get injured, you die. You’re a healer, you survive,” Colt explained as if it was the most logical thing in the world.

Edgar laughed, and the others joined in. Ilea chuckled, mostly because of his deadpan delivery. She couldn’t agree more with what he’d actually said.

“You should think about getting some healing skills, then,” she said to the man.

Colt nodded. “Yes. Can you teach me?”

“I’m not sure if I can. I didn’t exactly learn it in a formal way. Try to ask some healers in town later. I’m sure some will be willing to give you a few pointers.”

“You overestimate the generosity of the Orders. They would rather let you die than have more people capable of healing,” Sean said. “You’d have a better chance asking one of the guards. Not that there are many.”

“Just pay them,” Edgar suggested.

“I will simply grab one of them. Healers are weak,” Colt said with a wide grin.

“Well protected too, most of the time,” Ilea nodded.

“Not now,” he said and pointed his spoon at her.

Ilea smiled back. "I assure you. I am."

"She's right, Colt. I will personally freeze your dick off if you touch her," Sophia said as she jumped down from the boulder.

Ilea wondered if the woman didn't have a teleportation spell or if she simply chose not to use it.

"You never let me have any fun," the warrior said, but his smile remained.

"I'm not the boss. You're free to try," Sophia said as the air around her grew cooler.

Ilea could see the woman's magic form within her sphere and smirked. She noted that Edgar had kept his gaze on her.

Not one to trust a healer, hmm?

"Table it for later, you two. Everyone has eaten, and Edgar's leg is fine. Now that we can all move again, let's leave," Sean said, grabbing his bow and quiver and shouldering his pack. "Before any nearby monsters start getting ideas."

"You're quite brave," Sophia said to Ilea, carrying her pack now too. Ahead of them, now that the suns had set, Edgar carried a small lantern whose metal casing clinked with every step. "Even with your level. I wouldn't travel alone. Not even if I was past two hundred."

"I enjoy the freedom," Ilea said. "And it's easy enough to find a group if I need one, being a healer and all. There are dangerous situations here and there, sure, but at the end of the day, I just have to make sure I can escape."

The woman nodded. "Your second Class is more combat-oriented, then? Warrior or ranger?"

"Magic, actually, but yes." Ilea formed an ashen lance that looked considerably less deadly than her usual creations. She made sure to form it very slowly.

"Hmm. Ash, isn't it? I would say it doesn't look particularly impressive, but you are a creator... That changes things."

"Yes. It's quite useful. Especially to create a diversion and escape," Ilea said with a smile. It wasn't technically a lie.

"I can imagine that. Ice is a little less useful when it comes to that. Quite deadly, on the other hand," Sophia said, winking.

"It's quite pretty too."

They quieted down soon after, trekking up the mountain and reaching the supposed dungeon town a little under an hour later. A number of torches

placed atop a two-meter stone wall flickered in the cool wind, illuminating a guard patrolling on top.

“Adventurer team coming up,” Sean spoke loudly, making sure the guard heard him.

“Level?” the question came back.

“Ruby,” Sean said, approaching the wooden gate set into the stone.

“Ruby,” the guard muttered before he turned away. “Open the gates.”

Ilea looked on as the gate was opened, not by an enchantment or mechanism but by the sheer strength of a single guard, a level one hundred-and-five warrior.

He grunted as he watched them pass through the gate, his eyes shifting between them, opening wide when they fell on Ilea.

“Lilith...” he whispered, but then he shook his head.

Ilea didn’t look back, but she was surprised someone out here in Kroll would make the connection. An assumption, really. She wasn’t showing her ash, after all. She was simply a high-level battle healer. A rarity in its own right.

Various structures had been built inside the walls. A dirt road led to the dungeon entrance at the end of the makeshift village, which sat against the mountainside. It looked like the same mages who had put up the wall had worked on everything else, as if the whole base had been poured from the same mold.

Lanterns and oil lamps placed on the buildings provided illumination, aided by dim lights behind the windows. The sounds and smells of an inn indicated the most popular spot in the vicinity. One adventurer had passed out to the side of the entrance, and another was currently puking out his dinner.

“Lovely place,” Ilea said, smiling.

“Right,” Sophia murmured.

“Hah, just wait until you see the dungeon,” Colt said. “Beautiful creatures.”

“Quite deadly,” Sean said, continuing with a short explanation of what was waiting for them. They should avoid the blood magic ravens, usually around level one fifty. The herbs they were after could be found deeper inside, where Mistwings, a type of mist magic butterfly, sometimes showed up.

“Level one hundred? Nothing worse down there?” Ilea asked, not quite able to hide her disappointment.

“There are creatures lurking in the deeper dark. Those who tempted fate lost their lives,” Sean said.

“How insidious. Any real information? They’re just monsters,” Ilea said.

“A few have reported abominations out of nightmares,” Sophia replied. “The teams who actually went deeper and survived haven’t shared their findings with the public. The local guild only cared enough to warn people below Emerald rank not to go into the deeper sections. But that’s past the two hundreds, so we’re talking about Shadow territory.”

“Yeah, two hundred and higher is what I heard as well,” Edgar said.

“With the people that vanished, I can believe it,” Sophia commented.

“Not that you can compare an Emerald with a Shadow. Shadows actually enjoy fighting those kinds of creatures,” Colt said. He looked at the ranger. “Can we stop by the inn?”

“After our delve, it’s always the same, Colt,” Sean said, obviously not for the first time. And it wouldn’t be the last, according to the grin on Colt’s face.

“Sophia, can you arrange the usual two rooms?” he said.

The woman nodded and walked off, entering the inn.

“For later tonight, whenever we return,” Sean explained as he looked at Ilea. “Depending on your contribution, it may be on us.”

Ilea smiled. “That’s generous, Sean. Thank you.” But she had plenty of gold, and depending on what happened, she would likely be happy to pay for them instead.

They proceeded to the entrance of the dungeon, where Sean paid a fee for each of them to enter. Sophia rejoined them a few minutes later.

“I trust you know how to work in a team?” Sean asked.

Ilea nodded. “You fight, I heal.”

“Simple enough,” Sean chuckled. “I like you, so I won’t ask about your specific abilities. Don’t make me regret that, okay?”

She just smiled. *If I were a man-eating demon, you would be such an easy target, Sean.* She liked him because of that.

It surprised her how little suspicion they leveled at her. Dale hadn’t really questioned her back in Riverwatch either. Just a random unaffiliated

healer showing up in the wild. Anybody else's interrogation would have been a little more extensive, she was sure of it.

Cruising through as a healer, she thought, smirking as they entered the dungeon.

'ding' You have entered the Caverns of Rot

Nice. Let's collect some herbs and butterflies. I'm so excited.

* * *

Sophia positioned herself behind Ilea, if that really was her name. She agreed with Sean. The benefits of a healer outweighed anything she could do to them. They would move farther, feel safer, and make more with every run. If she was trustworthy, that was, and knew what she was doing.

Alone in the dungeon, the healer would be overwhelmed. If she wasn't much higher in level than two hundred. Sophia had considered whether the newcomer's level could be as high as she claimed, but the notion was so ridiculous she dismissed it. Not because a healer of that level wasn't a possibility, but simply because someone like that wouldn't join a random group of adventurers they came across in the Kroll mountains.

They would be an influential figure, a noble, the head of a healing order, or perhaps a high-ranking mercenary or adventurer. None of that fit with Ilea. Sophia had met plenty of those kinds of people, throwing their weight and power around like they owned whatever street they were walking down. People who'd been destined to become powerful from their birth into whatever wealthy family they had the luck to be a part of.

No, powerful people weren't like Ilea.

At first, she had assumed Ilea to be an outlaw, with the rest of her group waiting somewhere nearby for her to poison, slow, or trap them somehow. But she knew she was a little more paranoid than Sean. And so far, his intuition had steered them well.

She had also inquired with the innkeeper and the guard, asking about Ilea and potential troublemakers. But nothing had come up.

"Stay low," Sean said as they entered the trenches in the familiar vast, open cavern, littered with bones and a few burnt trees.

The system of excavated and reinforced pathways that had been dug here was extensive. They ran through the floor of the dungeon like veins, allowing parties to traverse the space without ever being fully exposed. Moonlight shone in through a few cracks in the distant ceiling.

“Why the trenches?” Ilea asked, looking around.

“To avoid attracting a flock of ravens. A few we can handle, especially with Sophia’s ice. Blood attracts more, however... We’d be picked clean in seconds without cover,” Sean explained in a whisper, head constantly swiveling side to side as he kept watch for the creatures.

Maybe not with a healer, Sophia thought as she gauged Ilea’s reaction. She didn’t seem to care at all. A few glances into the dark and a slight smirk Sophia nearly missed. *What was that?*

She tried to follow Ilea’s gaze but couldn’t find anything. *She likes being in danger... Is that it? Maybe that’s why she chooses lower-level teams. Her type usually doesn’t make it very long. Might just be her healing that prevented an untimely death.*

Sophia preferred the slow and steady approach herself. In time, she would hit the two hundreds, her aging would slow, and she could finally retire with all the gold she’d saved up and be done with dangerous dungeons and monsters for good.

They made it through the labyrinth without catching the attention of a raven. A few occasionally circled overhead, but either none noticed them or none bothered to engage.

“Those the blood magic ravens?” Ilea asked as soon as they had passed through the main cavern.

Sophia carefully surveilled the dimly lit cave. By now, she knew nearly every nook and cranny, but it never hurt to make sure nothing was lurking for them.

“Yeah,” Sean said.

“Saw someone getting ripped apart by them. Nasty buggers,” Colt grunted. He too was scanning the area with a casual grip on his axe.

“Interesting,” Ilea said absentmindedly, scratching her chin as she glanced back the way they’d come.

“We won’t battle them,” Sophia said.

Ilea looked her way and tilted her head a little. Sophia felt her breath get stuck in her throat as she took a small step back.

What?

The moment passed as Ilea walked by. "Shame."

She tried not to let her reaction show.

Goosebumps, really? What was that?

Not trusting one's instincts was a sure death down in a dungeon. She just didn't exactly know what to do with this information.

Is it even new? She's a higher level... maybe that's enough? No, Sophia... you've met Shadows before. Only two made you feel anything close to goosebumps. And that was while they were fighting and using magic. She's not doing anything. There wasn't even anything there just now...

Maybe a healer thing?

"So, should we find some butterflies? I'll heal you if you get injured," Ilea said to Colt as she joined him at the front of the group.

The dull blue light from common mushrooms illuminated the way ahead, interspersed by lanterns, some still holding burning oil.

Sophia signaled Sean with a hand gesture. The man slowed and joined her.

"She's dangerous," Sophia whispered when she thought they were far enough away.

"I know. I believe she's trustworthy. Your call, though."

Maim and escape, attack to kill with all we have, or trust her and go on. Or talk to her about it.

She was sure the last option was the worst. The first two were risky, but so was the third.

"I trust your judgment. Let's continue. Just be prepared," she whispered.

TWELVE

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A Test?

Ilea had really thought the day-to-day life of adventurers was more exciting. Maybe she and the Shadow's Hand really were outliers. Still, she was enjoying the little side trip. And she got the feeling that this dungeon was a little more dangerous than her last one.

The others were protecting Edgar, who was collecting herbs in the various caves they explored. The group knew their way around, checking for hidden monsters at every corner.

It was certainly efficient, if the goal was to collect herbs and not fight a single creature for the duration of their delve. If that was how things turned out, she would simply split off at some point and wish them farewell.

Or I could just Monster Hunter me some creatures out of the depths... No, Ilea, don't risk the lives of some honest adventurers because you're bored. It'd probably be considered rude.

* * *

She's bored, Sophia thought. This isn't the time to be bored... it's the time to be vigilant.

They were past the trenches, down in the cavernous tunnels of the dungeon where they usually looked for anything valuable to sell or single monsters to take out.

A muffled scream echoed out from one of the tunnels. Everyone turned toward the sound. Sophia checked the opposite direction in case of an

ambush. Nothing was there.

"That sounds in... very worrying. I'll go check it out," Ilea said as she started walking.

"No... wait!" Sean called out as he dashed up to her.

"Someone may be in danger, and I can help. I will go. Stay if you like."

Then Ilea vanished.

Sophia opened her eyes wide and looked for her but found herself unable to locate the woman.

How far did she go?

She looked around frantically.

"What do we do, boss?" Colt asked, axe at the ready.

Sean was unsure, so he glanced toward Sophia for input.

"You want to go after her?" she sighed.

A thin layer of ice formed on top of her skin, below her duster and clothes. She felt a little better with her defensive spell up. She could feel magic from her companions too, their skills activating.

"Someone is in danger. And *she* may be in danger. We run if it's too much to handle. Besides, you're curious, aren't you?" Sean asked.

I am.

Edgar sighed, bits and pieces of rock shooting up from the ground to form stone armor on his body. "Let's just be very careful."

Sean motioned them toward the scream and sped up, making a few gestures with his hands.

Quiet, leave space, potential trap, Sophia interpreted. There were many reasons the ranger was their leader. She agreed with the assessment and followed behind, leaving Edgar to protect her back. They had worked together for so many years that no further words were needed.

As the tunnel led downwards, fewer mushrooms remained to provide light. The guild's warning was on Sophia's mind – and likely on those of her companions. They were going deeper than usual. But she couldn't help but feel excited.

Excitement is what gets you killed.

She gritted her teeth, pushing the feeling aside. Even if Ilea wasn't who she said she was, she had still joined their team. They wouldn't just let her get killed.

She's not going to die.

It was just a feeling, but for some reason, she wasn't worried.

A distant light source illuminated a small cavern ahead. *Fire. A torch.* She felt her mana flowing through her body, the air cooling around her.

Burnt flesh, she realized, sniffing the air. It was getting warmer, despite her ice.

Her eyes widened as their group came into the open space. Blood, limbs, and guts littered the ground, most of it partially burnt. Bones peeked out from various globs of viscera. It was as if someone had thrown a butcher's leavings into a furnace.

It took everything Sophia had not to puke out her dinner. This was worse than anything she'd seen, and she'd seen a lot.

She spotted movement behind a large mound of scorched meat and focused on it, blades of ice forming on her arms as she crouched on the balls of her feet, ready to spring up.

"It's me," a voice came from across the space.

"Ilea?" Sophia asked.

"Yep... Found a group of adventurers. Only one survived." She paused. "More coming, prepare to fight."

They were all prepared. "Colt, get the survivor, and let's—"

A gurgling sound washed through the area.

Fuck.

'ding' You have heard the call of a powerful beast. You are paralyzed for two seconds.

A creature shuffled into the light, multiple limbs scraping and slithering over the ground.

[Rotten Abomination – lvl ??]

Sophia counted eight eyes in various places and just as many limbs of differing sizes, some ending in hands and others in bone. She tried taking a step back but found herself unable to move.

Two question marks. We can't face this thing.

Someone appeared in front of them.

Ilea looked over her shoulder and grinned. "Do you think you can handle this one?"

Pieces of bone lashed out from the creature, intercepted by ashen tendrils that instantly sprouted out of the healer's back.

When the two seconds elapsed, all four of them jumped or teleported back to put distance between themselves and the creature.

"What are you—" Sean said as he looked at Ilea.

"Get away from that monster!" Colt shouted.

Ilea stood in a casual stance, entirely covered in ash, more than a dozen tendrils moving behind her back like arms or tails.

Elemental armor wasn't rare. Sophia had ice armor herself, currently active under her clothes. But this looked different, like it was part of her, moving and lethal.

She gulped, unsure who she should attack with her magic. *She tricks and kills adventurers, eats them*, she heard a voice say in her mind, but she ignored it. *She would have killed us already, why wait?*

"You don't want to?" Ilea said, looking back. "They're pretty slow, and it would definitely be good experience for you. I can help as well."

Good experience? What is she talking about? This thing could kill us!

The creature lashed out at Ilea, attacking with a storm of limbs and bone, blood and flesh splattering around as it moved. It might as well have tried to attack a solid block of steel, its attacks scraping against her armor without any visible effect.

"Stop it," Ilea said and whistled at it in annoyance.

'ding' You have heard the call of a powerful healer. You are paralyzed for two seconds.

"Ah, that's not what I wanted. Sorry," Ilea said, lashing out with her limbs. The Rotten Abomination was left without arms, squealing in rage as it recoiled in surprise.

What the fuck is going on?

"Kill it," Sean said as soon as he could speak again.

"Sure?" Ilea asked.

No. No. What if...

"Wait," Sophia called out.

She would help us? Help us kill these monsters? I could get a level out of this, maybe more. But...

“Well go on, I think it’s regenerating,” Ilea said, a series of bone spikes smashing into her armor without visible damage.

Sophia grimaced, then summoned and released her ice spears, the blades digging into the creature’s flesh. Rocks and arrows followed until it stopped moving.

‘ding’ You have defeated [Rotten Abomination – lvl 312]. For defeating an enemy one hundred and eighty levels above your own, bonus experience is granted.

One hundred and eighty.

She could feel her hands shaking, then looked at the insane healer.

What are we doing here? This is crazy. Did she set us up? Something to play with? Something to eat? Is it a test?

A plethora of questions ran through Sophia’s mind as she prepared her most powerful spells. Escape would be difficult. Ilea could teleport and had medium range, and in a closed space like this, she had an advantage. Worst of all, she stood between them and the exit.

But what if she’s really just helping us? But why? On a whim? Just like that?

“Oh, four levels for that? Hmm.” The healer stepped closer. “I’m getting an idea.”

What does she want?

“Oh my god, relax, guys. It’s still me.” Ilea wandered off to the side, grabbing an unconscious adventurer and lifting them onto a small bed of ash. “Now, come on. That was fun, wasn’t it?”

* * *

Ilea couldn’t believe it. One monstrous abomination dead and a lightly paralyzing ability and boom, she was the villain, apparently.

“Okay, maybe I was a little misleading about all of this, but come on, we’re here now, and you all just leveled up!”

“Who are you? And what do you want, exactly?” Sean asked.

“I’m Ilea. I’m looking for resistances and powerful monsters to fight. And I joined your group because you seemed interesting.”

“You weren’t lying...”

“What?” Sophia asked.

“About being here getting resistances. And your level...” Sean trailed off in disbelief.

“Three hundred and forty,” Colt said, then laughed heartily at Sean’s queasy expression.

* * *

She didn’t lie? She’s past three hundred? Someone like her?

“That’s ridiculous. You’re a healer,” Sophia said. *And not a noble or some queen or something.*

“Honestly, that’s probably why I’m still alive,” Ilea said. “I’ll go deeper now. Those abominations make me want to find out what else is down there. You can join if you like.”

“Any reason?” Sean asked. “You made us believe you were just a traveling healer before. I hope you understand that we’re suspicious of your intentions, given your level.”

“I *am* just a traveling healer. You all knew I was at a higher level. Don’t act like I was the only one looking to get something out of this,” she said and smiled.

She’s not wrong. Maybe I ignored it. Did I hope for something like this? An easy break? Someone to get me closer to two hundred?

“As for why? That fight just now might have been dangerous for you, but because I was here, none of you got injured. I’m wondering how far we can push that. See how many levels you can get out of this with me here. It won’t be as effective as if you’d fought them as a group without me or entirely alone, but it seems it’ll be at least somewhat effective.”

Sophia didn’t like how excited Colt looked as Ilea spelled out the idea. *But I did just get more levels than I got in the last few months combined.* She bit her lip.

“Just out of curiosity?” Sean asked.

Ilea smiled. “I may or may not have a few students I’m helping train. And this kind of field trip may come in handy for them. None of them are experienced adventurers either, so this would be a good starting point for me to test the theory.”

“To see if we die?” Sophia asked. She was scared. Scared of the prospect of facing dangerous creatures, but also of something else. She wasn’t sure what.

“There is some risk involved, but far less than there would be if you were here alone. As long as you don’t get killed in a single hit, I should be able to get you back. What do you say?”

Sophia glanced over at Sean. She didn’t know what to say. The risk was there, of course, but it was very alluring. They had never gotten an opportunity like this, and she knew that if they wanted to play it safe, they could reject her.

How far could she get us? And how much gold could I make with a few more levels? How much time would I save?

She could see herself then, level two hundred, evolutions to strengthen her, once unthinkable risky missions now easy and just another way to make some gold. And then, her own inn, an easy life, safe and known by the locals. It felt almost like a dream, but with this insane healer here to help them, maybe it didn’t have to be?

She breathed out. And signed to Sean.

I fucking hope this is the right call.

THIRTEEN

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Abominations

Sean and Edgar brought the unconscious adventurer back out of the dungeon while the rest waited in the cavern.

When they were back, Ilea led them farther in, the group quickly switching to the serious and trained behavior they had employed earlier.

If only they had a little more ambition and a healer. They'd be Shadows in no time. I guess they just don't really see a point in facing danger. No point in risking it when there's nothing pushing you.

She smiled to herself, thinking of the Sentinels. They didn't have any new Classes yet, and only a few had adventuring experience, but she knew already how easily they would push through the two hundreds once they were ready to go out there.

Just a matter of time.

"Incoming," she said suddenly, forming some ash around herself.

Another abomination. This one had more arms than Ilea with her ash and just as many eyes.

She wondered if the creature could match her spherical perception. *Probably not*, she thought as she used the same ability to guide the enemy's projectiles toward her own body. Not that much intervention was necessary. The creatures didn't seem to be particularly smart.

Ilea let it attack, let it bite and tear into her ash and then her body with all the appendages and projectiles it could throw out and move in a coordinated fashion. She focused on her ability to keep an eye on the team behind her, their thrumming heartbeats, the fear in their eyes. And the spells they shot out.

I feel calm. Is that strange? These are normal adventurers... and they're terrified. But for me, this has become... routine?

This creature was nothing but a monster. Just a creature here to deliver experience and possible skills to her and those she called allies.

It's probably why I enjoy my time with the Sentinels so much. It feels like they have that same drive and interest in pushing further. Maybe I can take some of them on expeditions like this in the future. Yeah, I think I would enjoy that.

She experimented with her sphere, using it to move both the abomination's spells and her allies' abilities toward herself. She stood between the monster and the team of adventurers, and she was unmovable.

Ilea watched with fascination as appendages grew and formed on the abomination, some shooting out to strike her, others flailing uselessly.

And she was prepared to intervene should they be flanked, despite the simple tunnel they had found themselves in. She was ready to respond to any hidden abilities or allies that might spring up to help the creature.

She smiled to herself ever so slightly, thinking back to her first fight against a Drake, her first fight against a demon. She couldn't have imagined herself facing a monster like this then, but now? It felt like just another beast.

'ding' You have learned the General Skill: Deviant of Humanity – lvl 1

Deviant of Humanity – lvl 1

You have faced creatures most other humans have nightmares about, call beings that occupy the pages of legends told by your kind your friends. You have reached a level of power that few humans will ever call their own. And yet you push onward, knowing of the dangers that wait in the dark. You anticipate them. Welcome them. Those who would dismiss you may now take notice, should you wish them to do so.

'ding' You have learned the General Skill: Flesh Magic Resistance – lvl 1

Flesh Magic Resistance – lvl 1

Not perhaps the prettiest of magic schools nor the most sanitary. Its ability to disturb and maim at the same time makes it quite effective

against those of conscious thought. For the same reasons, it is rarely used by humans or those who preach purity. You have stood unwavering against its power, unimpressed, with the intent only to learn this skill. Perhaps it would fit you.

Yeah, alright. You know what? Maybe it would!

She liked the first skill very much. Perhaps it was just a pride thing. Its actual use seemed cryptic, like many of her recent skills.

Would the Fae treat me differently now? Wouldn't my level alone already make me quite special? Or is it closer to Veteran at the second stage?

She could feel the ability to exert a new presence, a warning perhaps that others might pick up on. Another thing to add to her growing list of tools.

A spike of bone slashed into her face, stopped by her skull, but Ilea was sure the abomination was close to dying when a large chunk of rock hit one of the faces it sported on its constantly regrowing and shifting body.

'ding' Your group has defeated [Rotten Abomination – lvl 330]

'ding' You have learned the General Skill: Bone Magic Resistance – lvl 1

Bone Magic Resistance – lvl 1

The ability to shift, grow, and use one's body to gain an advantage in battle is as old as magic itself. A skill that many humans mastered in a time long past. Now, most of that knowledge is gone, and few remain to practice these arts. You have faced it in battle and survived. Of course you did. Sigh.

A sigh? Really? Why don't I just have a conversation with myself at this point? Hmm? Maybe if I see my own soul, we'll be able to duke it out.

"Another level..." Sean said, his knuckles white as he gripped his bow.

"Yep, good job with the attacks," Ilea said. It had taken them a while to down one of the creatures on their own, but it had been a solid attempt.

She could tell the group was getting a little more stressed. Their jaws were clenched tight, and sweat beaded on their foreheads. They were

walking deeper into the dungeon now, the only light source the torch in Ilea's hand. It was a credit to their professionalism that none of them were shaking.

"This is crazy," Sophia murmured under her breath.

"I suggest you try to fight one yourselves. It would benefit your evolutions greatly," Ilea said as she led them farther into the dungeon, choosing a direction at random. She noted that Edgar was sketching a map of the place. Quite intricate too, based on the movements of his pen.

"They would overwhelm us," Sean said. "We don't have a good answer against the projectiles, let alone the sheer brute force they can muster."

Ilea glanced at him and waved her torch around. "I didn't mean you as a team. I meant you individually. But I suppose it might be too much of a risk without self-healing."

Sophia lost the last shred of color on her face. "Alone?"

"Most of my class evolutions had high-level kills as requirements, both in groups and alone. It's not like you guys couldn't accomplish something like that. Granted, the abominations here probably aren't the best creatures to face that way."

"I've been wondering," Edgar said. "You really aren't part of a healing order?"

"Why ask now?"

"You sound as crazy as some of them."

Ilea smiled. "Well, technically, I'm one of the founders of a new organization, but it's not exactly a healing order."

"Knew it."

"Doesn't mean what I'm saying is crazy," Ilea said and walked on.

"Sure, Founder," Edgar said and followed.

* * *

Ilea spent the next several hours guiding the adventurers through the maze of dark tunnels, helping them survive the encounters with the various abominations inhabiting the dungeon. There weren't as many as she'd hoped for, but enough for each of the team to gain a few more levels.

She didn't inquire about their skills, but watching their ever brighter and more expansive spells through her sphere told her enough about their

progress.

The dungeon itself wasn't ideal for something like this. The creatures were too powerful and hard to deal with. The Sentinals could maybe use it to send teams of healers down to gain Fear Resistance, bond them as teams, or perhaps gain some kind of dark vision. But even Ilea would have likely had to run if she'd faced one of these monsters before reaching two hundred.

She checked her levels as they entered a vast cavern.

"What..." Sean said as he began to cough.

Ilea spread her limbs out and healed all of them, barely noticing the damage she was taking herself.

Interesting. Some kind of damaging effect like curse or blight? Or a spell, maybe? Seems like it's going directly for my organs.

"Stay calm, I'm healing you all," Ilea said. "Just spit the pieces out – they're regenerating continuously."

'ding' Bone Magic Resistance reaches lvl 2

...

'ding' Bone Magic Resistance reaches lvl 4

'ding' Flesh Magic Resistance reaches lvl 2

...

'ding' Flesh Magic Resistance reaches lvl 5

'ding' Sage of Torment reaches lvl 2

'ding' Identify reaches lvl 12

Quite the haul, she thought happily and clapped her hands together.

"Now I believe this..." She coughed, and a slab of bloody innards slapped on the stone floor with a wet sound. "This is a new one."

She was a bit worried about the others.

They fought hard to keep themselves together. None of them replied, either on their knees or stabilizing themselves on the walls to stay upright. Their drawn faces informed her, quite vividly, of the pain they were going through.

"Are you hanging in there?" she asked. If they didn't have Pain Tolerance at a reasonable level, they could get it here pretty easily with her help. "We can leave if you want to. Otherwise, I suggest camping here for the remainder of the night. I can keep healing you."

“...leave,” Sean croaked out, his eyes bloodshot as he stared at her.

The others nodded slowly.

“Sure,” Ilea said, immediately spreading her ashen limbs. “I’ll carry all of you. It will be faster.”

They looked at each other, but none had the will to disagree. Or perhaps they welcomed the offer.

They could’ve unlocked a bunch of skills here, but I guess not everyone is fond of my ways.

* * *

Sophia watched the monster approach, her gait confident and relentless. She gulped.

An ashen appendage lashed out faster than she could comprehend, the pain within her body too much to use her spells. It wouldn’t make a difference anyway.

As she was carefully hoisted up behind the woman, a quick glance at Sean told Sophia he wasn’t quite as confident as usual either.

Ilea spread ashen wings – because of course she had wings too. If death really was a person, they would be envious of the ashen specter rising into the air beside her.

A loud screech echoed through the cavern, reaching their ears as they sped up.

‘ding’ You have heard the challenge of the Specter of Rot. You are paralyzed for 19 seconds.

‘ding’ Veteran reaches lvl 11

Fuck...

‘ding’ Fear Resistance reaches lvl 12

Sophia wanted to scream and run, but she remained calm, thanks to the healing magic that flowed into her. She was aware that Ilea continued to

move, only glancing back before she resumed the ascent.

“Specter of Rot... any clue what it might be?” the woman asked.

With such a casual tone. She wants to fight it.

Sophia gritted her teeth as soon as she could move again. Was this what it took to become a Shadow? That or the resources of a noble House?

Or do they have to fight like that too? No. No, I won't believe that.

“Please... haven't we seen enough abominations for one night?” Edgar asked, downright pleading.

“I haven't heard of that creature,” Sean said.

“I see. I'll investigate alone, then,” Ilea said. “It would be too dangerous for you with that aura or whatever it is that's causing our insides to turn to shit.”

Sophia gulped, thinking back to Ilea's earlier words. *She wanted to camp out for the night, with that magic tearing us apart.*

She felt revolted by the idea, her only thought that of a cold beer and a warm bed.

“Are you sure it's safe for you?” Colt asked. He looked a little comical, wrapped up in a couple of ashen tendrils, carried as if he weighed but a single pound.

“Hmm... it'll be interesting to find out. I do hope it isn't,” Ilea said, her smile practically visible, even with her face covered in ash.

Sophia kept herself focused, her expression schooled. *She's gone... a complete lunatic. But she's so powerful.*

She looked through the many notifications she had received during their horrifying delve, her emotions a conflicting mix.

‘ding’ Glacial Core Enhancer has reached lvl 127 – Five stat points awarded

...

‘ding’ Glacial Core Enhancer has reached lvl 131 – Five stat points awarded

‘ding’ Scholar of Frost has reached lvl 116 – Five stat points awarded

...

‘ding’ Scholar of Frost has reached lvl 119 – Five stat points awarded

Why did we meet this woman...

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FOURTEEN

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Blood

Sophia had to focus not to retch. They were near the exit, dropped there by the monster that called itself Ilea. Edgar was touching her back and whispering soothing words to her.

“Hey, don’t you fucking puke here,” the guard said as they approached.

Sophia bristled, mana rising within her as anger flushed away some of the nausea.

Sean caught her eye and shook his head. “Leave it. I don’t want to have to explain a corpse,” Sean said as he handed a coin to the man.

“Fucking rookies. At least prepare before going in,” he muttered to himself before resuming his post in silence.

Prepare? For that? Sophia turned around, rubbing her stomach as the surroundings grew colder. Ice began to form on her fingertips. *Someone like her wouldn’t have to explain a corpse. Someone past two hundred...*

Sean was already there, placating her with a gesture. “Calm down. He doesn’t know. Nobody could know.”

It would be so *satisfying* to show that guard who was ‘unprepared’. Powerless. Weak.

I can’t do it.

I can’t do what she does.

What they do. The Shadows, the high-level mages, the fearless warriors.

The realization hit her like a tree. She had believed it to be her circumstances, a matter of chance. Sure, she hadn’t been born into a rich family, hadn’t had the best trainers, didn’t have the best gear. But even now

that this healer was offering her everything she had ever wanted, she didn't have the will to go through with it.

"Are you alright?" Sean asked.

"I'm very far from alright, Sean," Sophia said and sighed, staring down at her hands as she opened and closed them to shake off the gathered ice. She wasn't a Shadow. She would never be a Shadow. She slowly breathed in and out. "What the hell was all that?"

The man just shook his head. He hadn't been speechless many times since they'd met. Usually, he was eager to offer some words of support. "Come on, let's have ourselves a drink."

"Good idea," Colt said as he joined them. "You think she'll come back tomorrow?"

"You're kidding, right?" Edgar said.

"What? Got more levels from this than the last year of adventuring," the warrior said. "It was pretty fucked up, I'll admit that much."

"Fucked up? I never want to see anything like those abominations ever again. And that last part? I thought I was getting *eaten*... from the inside."

Sophia was quiet.

The warrior nodded. "It was crazy. And her healing just took care of it... Sean, I tell you, we really have to get us one of those healers."

"I've fought with healers, but I've never seen one who just stood there and took direct hits from level three hundred creatures," Sean said.

"Why are we talking here? Come on, let's go," Sophia said and stalked off toward the inn.

"Agreed," Colt said and followed. "Did you see her wings? I want some of those."

"Good luck with that. With your weight, you'd need ten times that size," Edgar said.

"I'll show you something else ten times that size."

Sean sighed. "That doesn't make any sense, Colt."

Edgar just laughed and shook his head. "What a night."

* * *

'ding' You have heard the challenge of a Specter of Rot – You resist its effects.

Ilea received the same message as earlier. She had dropped the group off near the dungeon exit, the flight there quite simple with Sentinel Huntress and her sphere picking up remnants of where they had used their magic on the way in.

The reward came when she used the same skills to return to the deep cavern.

‘ding’ Sentinel Huntress reaches 3rd lvl 3

Another locator mark to give to someone.

She could feel it again, the blight damaging her from the inside. *Not blight*, she thought. It was less strong than the power she had experienced in the Karheim dungeon.

Still enough to kill the others.

Her healing had canceled it out, but fighting creatures while focusing on keeping them alive wasn't on the cards. Not if she wanted to guarantee their survival.

It had been fun, and maybe she would go back in with them if they were up for it, but she was itching to fight something herself as well.

“Specter of Rot... Let's see what that's about,” Ilea said with a smile as she hovered farther into the vast cavern.

The place was pitch black and silent. If it hadn't been for that screech, nothing suggested the presence of a being other than herself.

If you'd been quiet, I might have left you alone... to rot in this god-forsaken hole in the ground.

Then it was there.

Ilea didn't know where the creature had come from. It might as well have been birthed out of the void itself.

Two swords made of bone slashed out, their weight, power, and quality enough to cut through her ash and deep into her skin. According to Azarinth Fighting, that was.

Ilea didn't know quite enough yet to let the creature close.

It was flying, like her. It had wings made of skin and bone. Two dead eyes set into a malformed skull. The creature was three meters in height, with talons on both hands and legs at the end of lean but muscular limbs. Its swords were over two meters long.

[Specter of Rot – lvl ???]

Yes, you will do, Ilea thought with a smile.

* * *

“I tell you, she just stood there. Level three hundred. She’s at least that high,” Colt repeated.

A group of five were hanging on his every word near the bar, the innkeeper leaning in closely too.

“What skills did she use?” asked a wiry man with deep purple scars on his neck. This inn saw a lot of adventurers.

“Do you think this is a good idea?” Edgar asked Sean, the two of them sitting with Sophia at their usual table.

“She didn’t tell us to keep it to ourselves,” Sean said. “Besides, who would believe him?”

“We shouldn’t share anything else. About the healers she wants to train... or about how she helped us out,” Sophia said. She had calmed down, but her fear and excitement had been replaced by something else. Dejection, annoyance, frustration.

The ranger stood up. “Okay, alright. Colt!”

The warrior looked back, then spread his arms apologetically to his audience. “Boss is calling. Looks like that’s all, lads... Just keep away from the dark, or she’ll snatch you away.”

Some of them laughed, but others shivered and talked nervously amongst themselves.

“Sounds like that song. Lilith, was it?” a nearby patron said before changing the subject.

Colt brought four mugs to the party’s table and sat down with a satisfied sigh. “There you go, lads. Something to rehydrate ourselves after we lost all that water by shitting ourselves.”

“And we survived another day,” Sean said, grabbing his mug. “To Lilith.”

“To my crush,” Colt said.

Sophia silently tapped their mugs with hers. Edgar did the same.

Looking up, Sophia saw the barkeeper had switched with someone else and was approaching their table.

“Sean, right?” he said, nodding to the man. “Couldn’t help but overhear your story. Mind if I join in?”

“Take a seat, Hudson. It’s been an exciting night,” Sean said.

Sophia glanced at the man. She had seen him before and was pretty sure he owned the place. He wasn’t very tall but made up for it in sheer density. In fact, Hudson nearly reached Colt’s levels of muscle. He sported a short gray beard and hair of the same color bound in a bun, visible scars on both his face and arms telling of his time of adventuring or the military, and the wrinkles added into the mix gave him a grizzled look.

[Warrior – lvl 82]

Not at two hundred either. Sophia slowly raised her eyebrows. *What the fuck am I doing here?*

“What do you know?” Sean asked in a hushed tone, getting straight to the point.

Hudson leaned back, the chair groaning under his weight. “I heard the songs. More than that, I talked to someone who met her.”

“Songs? There’s more than one?” Edgar asked.

Sophia found herself interested too. A morbid curiosity, perhaps.

“Yep. Pretty much the same thing in every song, however. One goes into more detail on why she’s such a bloody good thing for Ravenhall and its people. Sounds to me like she has a cult following. Mind magic is a possibility.”

Sophia rolled her eyes.

“You disagree, lass?” he asked.

“Bards need money too. You pay them, and they write a song,” she said.

“Well... you ain’t wrong. Songs are one thing, but the man I talked to... he swore he had met her. The Shadow wielding ash. Apparently she paid people to attack her. To train resistances, people said. But the magic did very little to injure her at all. And if it did, she was healed back up in mere instants.”

Yeah, that does sound like something she would do. And I wouldn’t.

“That’s why I thought it was her. It sounded the same to me when the big guy over here talked about it. But three hundred? I’ve never heard of

someone that high,” Hudson said, shaking his head.

Sean nodded. “I think she has to be thereabouts. At least that. With what she showed. They’re out there, you know? They have to be. People at that level. Higher, even.”

Sophia was idly swirling her beer, forming a tiny whirlpool in the mug.

“Nobles hiding in their estates and castles,” Edgar said, taking a sip of his drink.

“Hiding won’t bring you to those levels. You can torture and kill slaves and captured prey all you want,” Sean said.

Sophia would’ve disagreed before tonight. Now, she wasn’t so sure anymore.

“Aye. That one... she enjoyed it. Not a shred of fear in her. You saw it too,” Colt said, leveling a glance at Sophia.

She nodded absentmindedly.

“What do you think she found down there? You think she really went after it?” Colt asked.

“She did,” Sophia stated. There was no doubt in her mind.

Hudson was wise enough not to ask too many questions.

“Do you think she’ll make it?” Edgar asked.

Sophia turned her attention to the mug in front of her, lifting it toward her mouth. “I don’t care.”

As long as she stays far away from wherever I am.

* * *

Ilea felt the magic condense, choosing not to blink as it manifested this time.

The rupture went through her, her blood exploding in a flurry of heat and movement. Half her chest was ripped out. She let it reform as she drifted backward.

Having a hard time, are we?

The creature had to focus on her for quite some time to manifest its spell. It had occasionally changed its pattern of attack and how fast it manipulated her blood.

None of that mattered in the end as Ilea didn’t exactly want to dodge the attacks. Granted, she didn’t know precisely when they would manifest, but

she was getting better. So far, she hadn't retaliated in any way, simply observing the creature as it attacked.

The Specter varied between a flurry of bladed attacks and various forms of blood magic. Projectiles, ruptures within her body, enhancement for its swords, and vine-like blood tendrils shot out from the ground.

Ilea only avoided the last variant, not about to let herself get trapped.

Suddenly, the creature vanished. It reappeared in a mist-like state behind her, blades slashing through her armor and skin. She avoided the thrusting attacks, just in case she ended up impaled and thus trapped.

Ilea didn't yet know if the swords would give her Bone Magic Resistance levels, but it was worth a shot. It was difficult enough to avoid the slashes entirely already. She was glad they didn't cleave through her limbs as easily as the Ascended had taken her apart.

She decided to find out how durable the Specter was.

Ilea twirled backward, a blade slashing through the air below her. She sped up and used her wings to maneuver herself around its moving blades. She took the hit from the blood sphere that surged out a moment later, burning a layer off her armor right before her fist landed.

Absolute Destruction and Storm of Cinders rushed into the being as she pulled back, taking two slashes that drew blood. Thick red liquid flowed down her body and ignited, goutts of red flame licking upward as her wounds ripped open. And closed.

Didn't die yet. That's good. But you'll have to try harder than that, my friend.

She watched it vanish and turned to where she felt the newest available mark. Promptly using it against the creature had seemed like a good way to work on the skill. Ilea could feel its effect weaken as the seconds went by, another surge of magic emanating from the monster.

Talk?

She sent the thought toward the being floating in the dark, but nothing answered her. Instead, it teleported in and out of her sphere's range with its continuous attacks.

Ilea continued to fight the creature, her body cut and ripped apart in the process, getting more and more aggressive in her approach. She found that her punches and skills were having less of an effect than she had expected. Something was wrong. This one was regenerating too.

Perfect.

Ilea could even see the creature now, the embers burning within its body and on its skin lit like a torch. The effects waned quickly, but she reapplied them just as fast.

She added other skills to the mix, burning the Specter with Heart of Cinder and finally whistling at it with Monster Hunter.

The creature stopped in its tracks... and forced its magic into her blood.

No reaction? Guess my level just isn't high enough, Ilea thought with a smile, the echo of her whistle reaching her a moment later.

She dodged another two blades that slashed her way and, to her surprise, suddenly found the weapons doubling in number. Blood magic made her shoulder explode an instant later.

Ah yes, the increased range of Monster Hunter. Looks like I called for friends. Maybe I shouldn't have used the skill after all...

Her smile betrayed how she really thought about the situation.

There were five figures now. Ilea struggled to completely avoid all of their attacks – their coordination was striking. The constant blood magic posed more of a problem too, now that the physical attacks no longer stopped while they used their magic.

Her third-tier healing was working overtime as whole sections of her were ripped out and splattered onto her ash or the ground. Her wings maneuvered her up and into open space, allowing her enough wiggle room to avoid most of the enemy strikes. But finding openings proved difficult.

Ilea's limbs spread out from her back, interconnected with her wings. The tendrils lashed out and struck the beings three at a time, or even all five when they were close enough.

The magic slamming into her was both leveling her resistance and enabling her to recover her mana, allowing her to keep up with the creatures even after nearly ten minutes of constant battle.

She was sure by now that these things were close to level seven or eight hundred. *Good regeneration too, and they're pretty resistant to mana intrusion. Doesn't feel like—*

Her thoughts were interrupted by a blade nearly slashing through her throat. Ilea kept her head as the tissue reconnected.

—the mana goes in. They just heal the damage.

She wondered if they were on the Vampire's level. And against five of them, she had no way to find out.

Heart of Cinder charged to higher levels, and she didn't hold anything else back. As blood vines moved closer from above, Ilea finally let go of the stored heat. A spherical wave of fire and energy expanded, momentarily illuminating the space.

Dead eyes stared back at her, the Specters' skin nearly as pale as the swords of bone they held, before Heart of Cinder burned through the blood magic and parts of their bodies.

Ilea watched within her sphere as the burnt skin healed, missing parts reforming and the scorched sections shed away. There was not a hint of fear or pain, just a single focus, a single goal. To cut down the unknown intruder in their midst.

She blinked back to avoid a thrust attack, jolting her head backward as a chunk of her face exploded outward and reformed. As long as her brain didn't go, she wouldn't be taken out of the action. Her third tier prevented her from dying, but even a fraction of a second could mean being pinned down and potentially reduced to a continuously regenerating soon-to-be corpse.

She took a deep breath and focused on the fight.

Now this is more like it.

FIFTEEN

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Worthy Adversaries

Ilea was sure an hour or two had passed already. She would have to leave soon to join her resistance training. If she didn't show up, there would be fewer people tomorrow. Fewer potential skills and levels.

The Specters, however, would remain down here.

The attacks kept coming, and by now, she had a good idea about their speed, range, and magic. Even when they manipulated their blades with the help of blood magic.

Her Heart of Cinder had been charging for a while now. Longer even than in the core of the Descent. If she killed a few of them, she could certainly get a few levels. It was tempting to go for it and potentially unlock her third Class.

But she had already thought about it. The Specters would be here whenever she felt ready. And she felt like she could get a few more skill levels before advancing her Classes.

I want to know how much they can take, though. And killing one or two won't hurt.

She chose one of the Specters at random and blinked in.

Ilea dodged the blades and punched, all her limbs smashing into the creature. She ignored the blades cutting into her back and the blood magic ripping through her body.

Reversed healing mana flowed into the Specter as her attacks kept going, culminating in the release of her stored heat. The blast ejected the blades still stuck in her body, burning through the skin and muscle of the Specter she had chosen.

The others moved in again as she smashed down one last time, fire surging from hundreds of thin orange-red veins where Storm of Cinders had accumulated.

A ding resounded in her mind, and she blinked out just as three blades closed in once more. Three more blinks brought her out of the cavern, and another five took her up through the dungeon.

Finally, Ilea stopped and turned around, steadying her breathing. Her mana was half full, despite the constant blood magic attacks. It would regenerate.

If they follow, I'll have to kill them all.

She waited. A minute. Two. Five.

When twenty minutes had passed, she was reasonably sure they wouldn't follow.

Defending their cave.

She checked the kill message and raised her brows.

'ding' You have defeated [Specter of Rot – lvl 621]

Holy fuck they're strong for that level.

Ilea slowly flew backward through the tunnels, once more following the traces of ice and earth magic used by Sophia and Edgar.

They're as tough as Praetorians with their shields but have faster regeneration. Plus, their movements are multiple times as quick. What a find... What a night!

She flew back with the occasional twirl and bob, giggling through the dark tunnels like the madwoman some thought she was.

Turns out the dungeons here are indeed very dangerous and interesting, if you dig deep enough.

Ilea was a tiny bit worried about her other notifications.

'ding' The Azarinth Sentinel reaches lvl 347 – Five stat points awarded

'ding' The Azarinth Sentinel reaches lvl 348 – Five stat points awarded

'ding' Kin of Ash reaches lvl 347 – Five stat points awarded

'ding' Kin of Ash reaches lvl 348 – Five stat points awarded

Can't kill another one or I'll reach three fifty.

Her skill advancements from the dangerous battle weren't a letdown either. And now she had a general idea of how much they could take.

'ding' Absolute Destruction reaches 3rd lvl 23

'ding' Blink reaches 3rd lvl 21

'ding' Sentinel Sphere reaches 3rd lvl 14

'ding' Sentinel Core reaches 3rd lvl 24

'ding' Azarinth Fighting reaches 3rd lvl 27

'ding' Azarinth Perception reaches 3rd lvl 13

'ding' Armor of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 29

'ding' Aspect of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 26

'ding' True Ash Creation reaches 3rd lvl 24

'ding' Heart of Cinder reaches 3rd lvl 17

'ding' Storm of Cinders reaches 3rd lvl 17

'ding' Ash and Ember Unity reaches 3rd lvl 22

'ding' Ashen Wings reaches 3rd lvl 15

'ding' Eyes of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 8

'ding' Avatar of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 22

'ding' Keeper of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 23

'ding' Deviant of Humanity reaches lvl 2

'ding' Meditation reaches 3rd lvl 4

'ding' Monster Hunter reaches 2nd lvl 5

'ding' Monster Hunter reaches 2nd lvl 6

'ding' Veteran reaches 2nd lvl 18

'ding' Blood Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 17

'ding' Blood Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 18

'ding' Bone Magic Resistance reaches lvl 5

...

'ding' Bone Magic Resistance reaches lvl 10

'ding' You have learned the General Skill: Rot Resistance – lvl 1

Rot Resistance – lvl 1

With your regeneration and healing, it was unlikely that such a resistance would ever manifest. However, you have found a powerful source of unnatural rot. Perhaps fueled by a curse or magic. Congratulations on yet another painful and horrific experience.

Hmm... maybe just a few more exciting nights with my new Specter friends. I have a new source for levels, Class skill levels, and resistances now.

Ilea grinned to herself.

She retracted her wings when she reached the upper part of the dungeon and, with it, the exit. The suns weren't out yet, but her flight would take some time. Not hours anymore, thanks to her third-tier wings, but enough to endanger her extended breakfast.

* * *

Sophia turned in her bed. The benefit of joining an otherwise male party was usually getting her own room. It wasn't always possible, but the last two years had been good on her purse.

Sean sometimes got a room on his own, but the other two didn't care much. Edgar needed very little sleep, and Colt was often found passed out in the common room. Most innkeepers either couldn't physically move him or didn't care to risk it.

Tonight, she would have preferred some company. Even with that brute's annoying comments. She had been liberal with her drink, but her Poison Resistance was just as high as that of her team members. Contrary to Colt, she wasn't about to spend her last coin to keep herself inebriated.

Maybe I should have.

And now she was here. Awake and dejected.

Sleep usually wasn't difficult to find. Sure, the sheer visceral nature of what she had seen was part of it. It had been a while since she had seen anything even close to that.

Half a year, maybe? The werewolf... She shuddered. It's weird, though. Objectively, this was much worse, yet I seemed to handle it much better. Maybe I'm imagining things. Or I've grown more resistant to it.

She noticed her thoughts focusing back on the Abominations, their squeals. The ripped-apart bodies of the adventurers in that small cavern. Ilea getting slashed apart, her innards coloring the ground and walls, the wet sound of bone hitting flesh.

She sat up and rubbed her eyes. *What a fucking nightmare.*

Yet that wasn't what bothered her. Not really.

She had been lying to herself, thinking herself as capable as a Shadow, but tonight, she'd seen what kind of mindset was necessary. And that just wasn't what she wanted. What she wanted was to live simply, without stress and risk to life and limb. To own an inn. It felt so obvious now. She didn't even know why she had become an adventurer in the first place.

You were scared of failing. You thought that if you got to two hundred and had a bunch of gold, that would make things easy. Because it seems so easy for all those high-level snobs.

She sighed and got up, then opened a window to let some fresh air inside.

Hudson wasn't at two hundred, not even close, and he owned this inn. She noted that the windows weren't clean.

What exactly am I waiting for? Today, Lilith of all fucking creatures offered to help me level, and I couldn't take it.

She looked out at the stars and closed her eyes, breathing slowly before she opened them again.

Sophia had a slight smile on her face. It hurt to think about leaving the others, about going into the unknown. But fuck it, she wanted that inn, and tomorrow, she would take the first steps toward getting it.

She grinned now, feeling as if a haze had lifted from her mind. It felt scary, and exciting, but in a way that pushed her forward.

SIXTEEN

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Reputation

Ilea enjoyed the sunrise as she flew back to Ravenhall at a leisurely speed. Her breakfast consumed, she strolled to the arena, finding even more people than on the day before.

She spotted a few people in entirely black gear, their levels in the two hundreds. Not people she remembered, but according to their body language and the looks they gave her, they at least knew about her.

She needed six more levels for another third-tier point. Blood would soon reach the end of the second tier, but she still needed Void. Veteran was close as well.

I should probably spend them all before advancing. Ten third-tier general skills seems like a good number for a potential achievement.

One of the Shadows vanished and appeared closer to her before anyone could start to fling spells at her. She wore light armor, intricate carvings covering large sections of it in a language unknown to her. Her hair was gray, but it seemed to be a natural color rather than being caused by age. Her posture was formal.

[Mage – lvl 226]

“I would like to start, if you would allow me to?” she said in a gravelly voice.

“Sure. If you think your spells powerful, step forward,” Ilea said.

The other Shadows, as well as a few of the others present, came closer.

The first woman was the highest-level person present. She demonstrated her magic on the ground, a chunk of stone vanishing in an instant. Many of those present recoiled and started murmuring amongst themselves.

“Void. That’s perfect. You are very welcome,” Ilea said with a wide grin. She moved closer to the woman, who remained motionless, and dropped her voice. “I hope you don’t have plans for the coming weeks. I’ll pay you handsomely for your continued participation.”

The woman turned toward her ever so slightly. “I am sure we can find an agreement.”

“Good. Very nice to meet you. Don’t go for the head and we’re golden.”

Ilea looked at the next person in line. Another Shadow. She wore light armor, mostly treated hides. Very little metal. A hood covered her head, and a scarf was wrapped around most of her face. Dark orange eyes stood out from the otherwise dark aesthetics of the level two-fifteen mage.

The woman lifted a hand, and black smoke formed above it. It looked similar to Ilea’s ash but much less dense and defined. It was quite literally just smoke.

Ilea smiled. “That would be a new one.”

“That is what I hoped,” the woman said and giggled, though the joy didn’t reach her eyes.

A crossbow appeared in her hands, a heavy one that she handled with ease.

“I will use this too, for the price of the bolts,” she added.

“Jerry, can you handle that?” Ilea asked the attendant.

“Of course,” he replied.

“Good. What do you have?”

“Poison, explosive, fire, lightning, paralyzing, and a few more that I will not declare,” the Shadow said.

“Perfect. Use everything but explosive. Ah, and... feel free to throw in some of those mystery bolts. Would be interesting to see.”

“Hmm... I just might do that. Oh, before we continue, I usually use my smoke to choke and disorient my prey. The attacks are less direct.”

“Even better. I have Oxygen Repository, so there’s no need to hold back.”

“Oooh, I like this,” the woman whispered to herself. She leaned in. “Do you perhaps have a spot free in your team?” Her tone was breathy, excited, but her eyes remained impassive.

A new Shadow? Or she wants to switch. “Not at the moment, I’m afraid.”

Ilea nodded to the last Shadow. A level two hundred and four warrior. He was tall, over two meters. His gear had to weigh as much as or more than the man himself. A large sword was strapped to his back, the form reminding her of a katana, but its size was closer to that of a greatsword. It was two meters or more in length as well and currently sheathed.

His armor was made of black steel, dents and scratches telling a story of their own. Four horns adorned his helmet, and two small sockets showed the eyes behind. Simple, brown eyes.

Ilea evaluated the others, but they were all below two hundred, and none of their skills were new to her. She suspected that the majority of them simply overestimated their abilities or didn’t believe the stories of those who had already participated in the arena.

The large Shadow looked at the waiting group and spoke. “Cover your ears.”

He then focused on Ilea, took a deep breath, and shouted.

She felt the power reverberate through the hall, hitting her as if it were a wall of stone.

Sound magic... That’s good. I’m pretty low there. And there’s something else. She tried to place it. *Ah, yes. I can even tell he’s not particularly good at it.*

“Mind magic too. Interesting combination. I suspect you confuse your enemies and cleave them apart with that thing there?”

A few of the people present had gone to their knees, some even bleeding from their ears. But the other Shadows hadn’t even reacted.

“You noticed. As expected from someone with your reputation,” he said. The magic he exuded meddled with her sphere, if only a little.

“Can you focus it more? I don’t want spectators to get hurt.”

“If you stand farther away, yes. I will use another angle. If someone can put up a wall of stone or ice, that should do it.”

“Earth mages,” Ilea said, looking at a few she knew to be practitioners.

Two of them nodded and raised a wall in mere moments.

“May I ask something?” the large Shadow asked.

“Of course,” Ilea replied.

“I sense the presence of your mind. The only time I felt something similar was when I met a powerful mind magic-wielding creature ten years

past. A part of the attack was even thrown back at me.”

“Hmm... that is a little secret of my own. Maybe you’ll find out more if you continue,” Ilea said and winked.

Resistance.

She sent the thought to him and smiled when she saw his eyes widen.

“You...” he stammered, but he focused again quickly. A genuine laugh filled the air as he walked to his spot. “I expected much, and it still wasn’t enough.”

“Wait until you see her just stand there,” one of the other Shadows said, shaking his head as he avoided looking directly at Ilea.

As if that would protect you, Ilea thought with a grin.

“Well, that settles it. Shadows, please start with low-power attacks. We will find an effective system.”

* * *

Lorelai frowned when she reached the large table, eyeing the corpse laid out on top of it. She had seen bodies before, but this one was missing its head. A clean cut too.

Sidney had asked someone to show her what they had learned about anatomy in the previous week. On a real body. With a dagger.

“What is it?” the teacher asked from beside her. “I can give you a sword or axe if you prefer. Just don’t make a mess.”

“That’s not it,” Lorelai said. “I’m sorry to ask, but... where did you get that body?”

The woman leaned closer and smiled. “That is classified. If you don’t want to do it, I will ask someone else.”

“It’s fine.” Lorelai gulped.

No, no, it can’t be. Or can it?

She took the dagger and glanced at the waiting class. Everyone was attentive. Sidney had made sure of that since the beginning.

“First, the heart,” Lorelei said, touching the cold skin with a hand. “Protected by the rib cage, there are a few places where a stab can reach it. If you can get under the arm.”

She pushed the arm away, then did a double take as she squeezed the skin.

It feels like steel.

With that, Lorelai stabbed the dagger into the corpse's side. Or she tried to, at least.

A little more effort and an awkward glance at the others were followed by the activation of a few skills. The blade only penetrated a few centimeters into the body.

Sidney stepped over and grabbed her hand, ramming the blade inside. "Better?"

Lorelai only nodded dejectedly. She couldn't even stab through the skin of a corpse. She knew why, but it still felt like a slap. But if anything, it reaffirmed her choice to stay here and train as hard as she could.

Sidney continued. "If you can manage to hit this spot, it can be deadly. However, an injured or destroyed heart doesn't always lead to death. As you have all seen with Lilith."

"We didn't actually see her lose her heart," one of the students said.

"She could probably lose her bloody head and live," Celeste said and chuckled, leading to a few laughs from the group.

Lorelai looked down at the body, her eyes moving to the neck.

"That's enough for now, I'll take it from here," Sidney said, patting her on the back. "Don't," she whispered in her ear.

Lorelai nodded and stepped back to her seat. *Yeah. That's her.*

"You look pale," Luke said. "Must be scary to stab a body."

"Leave her alone," Nathan said.

"It's just like cutting meat, stab, stab, stab. I don't see the problem," Celeste said.

She can regenerate from just a head.

Her response to the realization was a giggle that turned into a full-blown laugh.

"Lorelai, please. If you can't control your laughter, calm down outside," Sidney said.

As Sidney continued the lesson, Lorelai calmed down, but a grin stayed on her face, likely freaking out some of the other students. Or maybe not. If she could achieve it, she wanted to be able to survive a beheading too, and she knew the others would agree.

* * *

Four hours passed in the blink of an eye. Ilea learned that choking inside smoke is worse than simply choking due to a lack of air.

Void magic was still void magic, but once again, she could put into perspective just how insanely powerful that school of magic really was.

With everything deactivated, the Shadow got close to what Maria could do back then. And it was immensely helpful. Sadly, there weren't any competent blood mages involved, but with the Specters, it was just a matter of time.

The warrior mostly focused on his sound magic, the mind aspect not quite powerful enough to raise Ilea's level.

The rest of the group, close to a hundred and twenty people, delivered as well. Many were below level one hundred, but their combined contributions accumulated to quite a few skill levels.

Afterward, Ilea enjoyed some lunch and checked through her notifications while she waited for Iana and Christopher to adjust the enchantments again.

'ding' Oxygen Repository reaches lvl 3

'ding' Oxygen Repository reaches lvl 4

'ding' Crystal Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 4

'ding' Crystal Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 5

'ding' Dark Magic Resistance reaches lvl 18

'ding' Divination Magic Resistance reaches lvl 2

'ding' One third-tier General Skill point awarded

'ding' Earth Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 7

'ding' Lightning Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 2

'ding' Mist Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 12

'ding' Sound Magic Resistance reaches lvl 5

...

'ding' Sound Magic Resistance reaches lvl 8

'ding' Void Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 12

'ding' Void Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 13

'ding' Water Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 7

'ding' Water Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 8

'ding' You have learned the General Skill: Smoke Magic Resistance – lvl

Smoke Magic Resistance – lvl 1

Usually the result of fire magic, this school focuses on smoke itself. Wielded by a master, it can be just as deadly and destructive, if not more so.

‘ding’ Smoke Magic Resistance reaches lvl 2

‘ding’ Smoke Magic Resistance reaches lvl 3

The third-tier point was welcome, and Ilea chose to finally advance her Wind Resistance.

‘ding’ Wind Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 1

Wind Resistance – 3rd lvl 1

The elusive magic of wind can cut from any side. You’ve learned that it might’ve been a good idea to become a void mage. This skill helps you resist the power of wind a little more.

2nd stage: The mana flow inside you has acclimated to the air around you, making you more aerodynamic.

3rd stage: As you adjust to the flows of powerful wind magic and natural torrents, you often find yourself capable of using some of this power.

Perhaps to propel yourself forward or stop abruptly. Wind mages might think you one of their own.

Nothing too crazy, it seems. But potentially a nice surprise for the Griffin.

The main benefit, of course, was that she could now continue leveling the resistance.

Before she left the arena, the attendant let her know that Viscera’s librarian was looking for her.

SEVENTEEN

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Request

“Olivia Sarken.”

Ilea said the name out loud as she left Dagon’s office. She had asked him and Elise to look into Eve a while ago. And now, they’d let her know that they’d found a lead. A girl who had vanished from a small fishing town called Farport and presumed dead over ten years ago.

She wasn’t sure about it. She didn’t know exactly what she was trying to find out. Did she want to understand Eve better? Or was she just chasing ghosts, unable to let go? Either way, she had a lot of things to work on, and it didn’t make sense to look into this right now. She had classes to teach.

The testing with Iana and Christopher wasn’t quite as successful as the previous day. Something definitely worked, but other than chunks and pieces of Ilea, nothing else was teleported.

Ilea’s lessons in the afternoon went well, on the other hand, with nearly all the students participating in the endeavor. She wondered why Lorelai watched her with such an intense glare, though. Ilea decided it had to just be a difficult day for the kid. Or she overcame her fear and pain by channeling her anger at Ilea.

Trian was waiting for her when she was done and handed her a note from Claire.

Request for you came in. Visit me if you have time. Unsure on urgency.

“An important mission for Lilith?” Trian asked.

Ilea smiled. “You know how it is. The more famous you get, the more work you get.”

"I thought it was the more work you do, the more you get. But I'm glad you're the one with the famous title. Let me know if I can help in any way."

"Will do."

She went to meet with Claire right after.

"Ilea. Good to see you. I take it you got my note?"

"I did," Ilea said and sat down. "What's this about?"

"We got a message from Riverwatch. Came in less than an hour ago."

"Riverwatch? What's going on with the city? Elves again?"

"No mention of Elves. A request from Governor Alistair himself. It only mentions a potential danger to the city in the region and a request for a Shadow team to investigate. Before that, however, he asked specifically for Lilith."

"Hmm. You think this has anything to do with the smugglers I helped with?"

"Possibly, but it could also be unrelated. It's clear that he trusts you, or he simply appreciates the power you wield. Either way, it seems like he could use your help again. I know you have a connection to the city, but I also know you're busy with training and the Sentinels, so I could send a Shadow team if you prefer."

Ilea thought about it for a moment. With her enhanced wings, she could be there in less than four hours, and she could just teleport to get back. A Shadow team would likely take at least a day or two to get there. Plus, Alistair had asked for her directly. If this was anything to do with her last visit to the independent city, she wanted to check it out herself.

And I could also do a few other things while I'm in the area.

She tapped her chin and smiled. "Yeah, there are a few things I can think of. Have you been in touch with Alistair? He's the governor already?"

"I have been. And he is. Your recent involvement certainly had something to do with that. There's no concrete collaboration between our cities yet, but it's in the works. Not much more I can say on that."

"I'll go and check it out."

Claire smiled. "Perfect. I appreciate it. Let me know what came up when you're back."

Ilea stood up. "Will do. In case I'm not back by tomorrow morning, can you handle communication with Jerry and Trian? Might have to cancel the arena and classes."

"I'll handle it. Good luck, and be careful."

Ilea gave her a nod and blinked outside. She spread her wings and charged them. Mere seconds later, she was flying over the mountains of Ravenhall.

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EIGHTEEN

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Problematic Conflicts

Ilea only slowed down when she saw Riverwatch in the distance. She could make out the walls and the river flowing past with her enhanced eyes.

No rising smoke or ringing bells. Unlikely to be an emergency, at least. But I'll make sure they have a way to contact me now that I'm here.

She looked around at the forest below. Hidden somewhere within was the temple she had found what felt like ages ago. That was another reason she'd wanted to come back here.

Perhaps it was just nostalgia, but she wondered how much Iana and Christopher could learn from the fountain she had used to heal herself and the teleportation circle that had brought her down into the cellar. If she came back again, she would bring the two of them to check it out.

She looked at the towering form of Karth, the mountain that dominated the surroundings. Even after her adventures in the north, it looked massive.

Now, let's see what Alistair's got going on. Maybe I can squeeze in a bit of training with the Specters if I get this done quickly.

To her disappointment, she landed in Riverwatch without being confronted by a squad of guards or arrows and artillery flying her way. Walking through the city, she wore her leather armor and casual clothes, her ashen armor receding to her back, just below her neck.

Ilea found Alistair in the city hall, where she had met him a few months before.

"The request could only have arrived earlier today. How come you're here already?" asked a guard as she checked her badge.

"I'm pretty quick," Ilea said.

The woman knocked on the door, calling, “A Shadow is here to see you.”

A moment later, Alistair opened the door wide. “Ilea. It is marvelous to see you.” The man had bags under his eyes, and he moved a hand through his disheveled hair as he looked at her. “Come in.”

The guard stood aside.

Ilea grinned at him. “Congratulations on becoming governor. You look terrible.”

Alistair sighed and then smiled ever so slightly. “I’m well aware. And thank you. Your... intervention, let’s call it, contributed a lot to me securing this position. I’m glad you could come, and so quickly. How have things been on your side?”

He offered a seat for her to sit down, and she did.

“Tea?”

Ilea nodded. “Yes, thank you. I’ve been busy, to keep it short. A lot going on, but I’m enjoying myself.”

He poured her a cup and handed it to her before he sat down behind his desk. The new position of power didn’t seem to have changed his tastes – the office was still offensively plain.

“I can imagine. And I appreciate even more that you showed up personally. Following your intervention with the smugglers and your findings, we have persecuted and exiled quite a few previously high-standing nobility, merchants, adventurers, and all manner of personnel in the city.

“To prevent chaos and potentially open warfare within the city, we opted not to outright attack many of the corrupt parties and traitors. We were aware of the potential incentive for vengeance, but perhaps we underestimated their resolve and connections. Are you aware of the current state of Baralia?”

Ilea sipped her tea. “I know that the siege around Virilya was broken and that the Empire is now pushing into the lands of Baralia.”

He nodded. “Exactly, which has put a lot of pressure on every influential figure and Order in the Kingdom. To put it bluntly, they’re panicked and scared shitless. King Baron is trying to hold onto whatever power he can, but as far as we understand, his reach doesn’t extend far beyond the capital anymore.

“Despite that, it seems some forces have been deployed here now. We don’t know who got them involved or who exactly we’re facing, but they’re wearing Baralia colors. I wouldn’t call them more than a group of bandits at this point, but they still have resources and numbers behind them.”

“So, you’re involved in the war now?” Ilea asked.

“That’s the problem. Not directly, and I don’t plan to expose our city and look for an unknown target beyond what we consider our lands. But we are extending our defenses and preparing for an attack, however desperate it may be.

“I don’t know how likely such a scenario is, but I wouldn’t put it past a city lord or even King Baron himself to take whatever remaining troops they have and attack an independent target like us. Whatever lies and information the people we exiled have shared would put us at a disadvantage.

“So far, they’ve been blocking roads, riling up monsters, and attacking caravans and hunters that leave our city toward the north and east. We’ve already lost a few scouts, and I’m afraid that, in terms of pure military power, we are outclassed.

“I’d like to put more resources toward this problem, but we’re stretched thin as it is. It’s paramount that I keep this city and its most important leaders unified, especially now that we’ve been weakened. Nipha and potentially other players are ready to use any opportunity they can get.

“And with the Empire busy in the east, I doubt many would question or oppose the integration of Riverwatch into any of the larger nations. Especially with how turbulent the last years have been for our city and the independents in the west.”

“And that’s why I’m here?” Ilea wasn’t particularly keen on getting involved with this conflict, but she cared about Riverwatch and its people. If someone from Baralia came here to take power, she could already see the chaos and destruction it would cause.

Dale had helped her out when she’d first arrived, as had the adventurers she’d traveled with right after the elven attack. She liked the city, and after what she’d seen from the smugglers, she was happy to fuck up the day of anyone who was involved with them.

And she liked Alistair. Like Claire, Dagon, Sulivhaan, and Dale, he seemed sincere and appeared to genuinely care about the people he was

tasked to govern. She was also keenly aware that he was ashamed of asking Ravenhall for help. And she respected that he still did it.

“What exactly do you want me to do?”

* * *

Alistair had given her a map of the surrounding forests, with various locations marked as compromised. Her goal was to get information, to find out who was behind this and what kind of capabilities they had, but Alistair had made it clear that she was free to make her own judgments. He no longer treated her as yet another Shadow.

As Ilea strolled through the forest, Sentinel Huntress and her sphere picked up every movement, scent, and living being around her. It was early evening now, and the sky was overcast.

She spotted a few wolves that promptly sprinted away upon sensing her. One nimble bear-like creature climbed a tree as if its life depended on it.

Is it my new aura? Ilea wondered. *Deviant of Humanity.*

After she'd turned it off, another pack of wolves avoided her but didn't outright run for their lives.

She found tracks and magic residue, following the confusing trail until she glimpsed dull torchlight in the distance. It was still hundreds of meters away, but with her eyes, it might as well have been a couple of feet away.

She noticed movement within her sphere. *Oh? Already found?*

‘ding’ Sentinel Huntress reaches 3rd lvl 4

The person stalking her stayed at a safe distance, shrouded in something that obscured them. Well, from most people.

Eve, you would be disappointed, she thought as she vanished.

Her hands shot out and grabbed, finding purchase in thin air before she felt an attack coming.

The blade scraped against her armor. A throwing knife.

“Stop it, or I'll snap you like a twig,” she whispered, putting Monster Hunter into the mix.

Her captive froze, then the air shifted before a man in dark brown robes appeared, his face covered by a steel mask.

[Rogue – lvl 191]

Ilea removed the mask, revealing a man in his thirties with various scars on his clean-shaven face. He was bald and didn't have a tongue.

"Great. The silent assassins. How fucking original. Hmm... what's that?" she asked as her healing mana examined his body. Her sphere helped too. "Interesting. What do they do? The things in your teeth?"

His eyes opened wide, and he slowly shook his head.

"Explain it to me, or I'll just rip them out. Your choice."

The man made a noise, but talking proved difficult without a tongue. The injury or maiming seemed too old to be healed.

"Do you want to gesture?"

He nodded.

She held him with several ashen limbs and let go of his arms.

The man made two fists and then opened them quickly, moving his hands away.

"Explosion?"

He nodded.

"Same happens if I remove them?"

He nodded again.

Explosive teeth? I don't suppose he put them there himself if he's explaining it to me.

"How powerful are we talking?"

The man shook his head.

"Do you trust me?"

He shook his head.

"You're forced to do this, aren't you?"

He didn't reply.

"You're with Baralia?"

He didn't move.

Ah, what the hell. I have survived Elementals, I think I'll be fine. And so will he.

She filled his mouth with ash and hardened it to keep it open. "I'm pretty sure this will hurt. I suggest you think of something pleasant."

Didn't think I'd become a dentist too. Life leads you on interesting paths, she thought as her healing mana flowed into him, two ashen limbs wrapped around the relevant teeth.

She unceremoniously ripped the teeth out. The explosions were muffled by her ash, unable to penetrate the encased space she had created. Ilea was sure her Blast Resistance had helped tremendously.

His jaw had broken, but the wounds had already healed, new teeth grown to replace the old ones.

“There you go,” she said, watching the man grasp at his jaw with both hands.

His eyes were wide as he looked at her and the ash holding him in place.

The sound of the explosions had been pretty muffled, but she wouldn’t be surprised if someone else showed up. She’d experienced enough shit situations to not underestimate other humans, but it was unlikely another level 300 person was part of a forest camp that attacked merchants and caravans.

“Care to share some information now? You can write?”

He looked back and touched his jaw once more. Ilea felt he was in great distress, but not because of her.

“I don’t have all night. I don’t want to kill someone who had explosion enchantments in their teeth likely forcing them to be a dick, but I need you to cooperate with me.”

He closed his eyes, his breathing speeding up before it slowed down. When he opened his eyes again, he looked resolved.

Ilea spread her wings and grabbed him, then flew a few kilometers away with him and landed. She summoned some water and food and handed it to him before summoning her notebook as well.

When he was done eating, she handed it to him and asked her first question.

“What’s your name?”

His name was Ario, a slave, now former, trained to be an assassin and fighter for one Lord Harken, the noble in charge of Wynehold, the largest city in southwestern Baralia. Alistair’s assumptions had been correct. Perhaps it was even worse than he’d expected.

She asked whatever questions she could think of, and Ario added plenty of his own volition. She could tell he was angry and afraid.

“You still got people in there?” she asked, gesturing in the direction of the camp she had found.

No. In Wynehold, he wrote.

“What do you want to do? I could take you to Riverwatch, or you could go to the Empire.”

He wrote, his hands steady. *Kind warrior of ash. My path is clear. I will go back to free my brothers and sisters. Any other silent ones, you should free. Many will fight by your side. Others, you should send to Asha's smithy. They will know where to go.*

“Sounds good,” she said, giving him a thumbs-up. “Before you run off on your revenge quest, can you sketch me a plan of the camp, how many soldiers there are, and who I should be wary of?”

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NINETEEN

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Infiltration

The camp wasn't just made up of soldiers. There were prisoners too. Ario had said that anyone who survived the attacks or encountered a roadblock without sufficient hired guards or gold to pay off the attackers was taken prisoner.

Ilea had been surprised to hear about all that. It was clear that Alistair thought of these forces as merely bandits with funding, but the more Ario wrote down, the more she really believed they were something more.

If he wasn't misleading her, then something rather sinister was going on. She was going to investigate herself to confirm his story. If they had captives there, either to be used as bargaining tools or to be brought back to Wynehold to be sold into slavery, she wouldn't leave them to their fate.

It was one thing to know that there were countries out there that practiced slavery, but this was Riverwatch. There were people here she cared for, and she had the power to do something about this. So she would.

According to Ario, Luis Harken was an officer and the leader of the camp. A level one sixty-two mage and a cousin to Lord Harken. Normally, she would have hesitated to intervene in noble politics, but his men had already attacked and killed civilians.

Once Ario had understood that she would infiltrate and potentially attack the camp, he agreed to join.

"You think it will work?" she asked, having suggested a rough plan.

He nodded and wrote down a single word. *Arrogant*.

"Dress or roughed-up leather armor?"

Armor. More believable, he wrote.

“Right,” she murmured, letting her ashen armor flow to her back. A few rough passes through her hair, with both hands smeared with a little ash, left it disheveled enough. She added some dirt to her face and glanced at him. “How do I look?”

Rugged, the man wrote.

“Rugged works. I hope they’ll ignore my high level because I’m a healer. Now, let’s get a move on. I’ve got places to be.”

* * *

The camp was vast. Trees had been felled to provide space for tents; some were luxurious, but most were quite simple. The suns had mostly set, but torches held by the guards and some braziers near the tents gave the camp a warm glow.

At the sight of Ario, the guards clasped their weapons a little more tightly. They didn’t question the man as he led her into the camp, but they gave her plenty of side glances. One of them rubbed her the wrong way.

“You find something interesting?” she asked, meeting his leering gaze.

He grinned. “Just fresh meat.”

Ilea made sure to remember his face.

With Ario by her side, it was comically easy to walk around the camp. Nobody questioned their presence, so she could happily check out what she was dealing with before deciding her next move.

There were two large tents that held the prisoners. In the first tent were a number of large, empty iron cages as well as a few full ones. Such equipment didn’t leave a lot of leeway in terms of what the soldiers’ purpose here really was.

Within the second tent, two soldiers were playing cards. Twelve prisoners huddled within a cage nearby. The soldiers didn’t pay them much attention, so Ilea slipped a thin strand of ash through the bars and checked on the prisoners. Whatever clothes they had been dressed in before had been replaced with simple rags that would do nothing about the cold night’s chill.

Not enough food, sanitation is shit, bruises on a few of them, and three of them have a fever. Good thing I decided to come here.

The prisoners shivered and shook from both fear and lack of warmth.

Ilea stood there for a long moment. It was just baffling. People could acquire magic here, wings of ash and fire, to fly into the skies, explore the lands, and fight interesting creatures.

And instead, some of them did this. Used their power to control and abuse others. Why? Was it just insecurity? Was it some brainwashed idea that they were superior to others? Or just plain old greed?

Did people who grew up in a society where personal freedom was not guaranteed not question such orders? Or were they afraid of those in power, unable to fight for change, so instead accepted it as part of the world?

They likely have plenty of ways to justify it to themselves. Just like on Earth.

She wondered about the motivations, but ultimately, she was appalled. It went against everything she had been taught, against basic human compassion.

“Do you not care about their suffering?” she asked, looking at the two guards. “Pretty sure most of them are going to get sick or die if you leave them like this all night.”

One of the guards, a man of medium build with long, oily, gray hair, snickered and looked at her. “They were weak. And now they are here.”

Ilea turned to the other one. This man was younger, perhaps early twenties, with a mustache and busy eyebrows. He didn’t meet her eyes, instead looking at the ground. He shook his head ever so slightly, then gulped and looked at his cards again. Both of them were close to level one hundred.

She walked up to them and looked at the one who had snickered. “They were weak? What does that even mean?”

She gritted her teeth and met his bored gaze. A moment later, blood splattered against the tent canvas directly behind where the long-haired man was sitting, his skull pierced by a tendril of ash.

Ilea turned to the younger guard, who sat frozen in his chair, eyes wide. “You should be quiet,” she said in a cold tone.

The captives had frozen up too, at least those healthy enough to recognize what had happened. Ilea blinked inside the cage. “I’m with Riverwatch, and I will heal you now. Stay quiet, or we’ll have the whole camp to deal with soon.”

She then healed them all, breathing hard as she tried to keep her anger down. It wouldn’t do well to explode and get everyone’s attention.

Not yet.

A few whispered, desperate questions were thrown her way, but she shook her head. "I'll come back for you once I'm done. Don't try and escape on your own. You're safer here for now. There are still soldiers in the area as well as monsters."

She teleported out of the cage again and motioned to the young guard.

"You, what's your name?"

"M... Mivo."

"Mivo. You will join me for a walk through the camp. I'd like to have a word with your commander." She looked at Ario and gave him a nod. "Let's check the other captives. Can you stay in the area and protect them afterward?"

He seemed slightly disappointed but nodded anyway.

Only a single guard was stationed in the other tent. The man had pock-marked skin and a wicked-looking curved knife in his belt. He was leaning against the cage, speaking to the captives. It sounded like he was enjoying himself.

Before Ilea could even do anything, Ario walked up to him and sliced clean through the guard's neck. He watched the man bleed to his death with wide eyes.

"Not a good man?" Ilea asked Mivo.

The young soldier had paled even more. He stared at her and then shook his head slowly, eyes on the quickly cooling corpse.

Ilea blinked into the cage and repeated what she had done with the other hostages, then gestured for Mivo to follow her outside.

"Where will I find Harken at this time of day?" she asked, hearing quite a few conversations, laughter, and even muffled music from somewhere ahead.

Mivo gulped. "He eats and drinks with the troops in the central square. He's probably there now."

Ilea clapped her hands. "Fantastic. Let's join them."

Mivo led her through the camp. She got quite a few more looks and comments from the passing soldiers, but they seemed more amused than anything. Quite a few of them seemed to be drunk.

She didn't even bother pretending to be a prisoner anymore, simply walking past everyone toward the festivities in the center of the camp. The

atmosphere was boisterous; some soldiers had formed a rough circle and were howling and shouting.

Inside the circle, two men were fighting with their fists, one a hulking soldier with well-oiled muscles, the other a lean, red-headed man dressed in rags. The latter was bloodied, but he was holding his own.

Ilea looked for the supposed leader of this camp. She didn't have to look particularly hard.

Luis Harken was sitting on a large throne-like chair, one leg resting on the other and a satisfied smirk on his face. He waved a hand, and the muscular soldier who was fighting grinned, unsheathing the sword on his belt.

Ash flowed out from Ilea's back as she stepped forward, pushing past some of the soldiers as her armor moved into place. She watched as the massive soldier advanced on his weaponless foe, the result now a forgone conclusion.

She could see the fear and anger in the eyes of the unarmored, red-haired fighter. She smiled when he raised his fists anyway to fight one last time.

It wouldn't come to that. When the behemoth soldier charged with his sword raised, his compatriots cheering him on, Ilea appeared between the two fighters. She caught the blade with her bare hand and held it there.

The cheers turned to boos and confused shouts. Some of the crowd were still laughing, while others were calling the big soldier names now that he had become the victim.

Ilea grabbed his cuirass and pulled the large man closer. She took the sword from his hand, held it for a moment, and then rammed it up under his chin. The blade went through his skull, exiting the top of his head. His enormous body went limp, but she held his corpse there for a long moment as the crowd around her quieted.

Luis looked on with interest. He was classically handsome, with curly brown hair, unblemished skin, and a strong jaw. He wore armor trimmed in gold and held an ornate sword on his lap. He didn't seem particularly concerned.

The young commander clapped his hands and leaned forward. "How inspiring. What an interesting turn of events. And who might you be? A Shadow?"

"I'm Lilith," she said, letting the dead soldier fall to the dirt.

She turned away from Harken, a slight ringing in her right ear as her vision narrowed. She breathed in deep and let some healing magic flow through her brain, calming her down.

Alright.

When her anger disappeared, replaced by cold dispassion, she addressed the watching crowd. "I will ask your commander a few questions, and then I will kill him. If you leave this camp now—"

"Kill me?" The commander cut her off, his voice full of condescension. "Oh, little Shadow healer, I think you have gotten ideas above your station. A pity, as you would have made an entertaining addition to our little bouts."

Blood magic surged from Luis' form as he raised his hand and cast a spell.

Ilea simply turned around and walked up to him, his spell entirely negated by her resistance. He seemed confused when she reached him uninjured, grabbed his neck, and reached into his mouth. She grabbed his tongue and ripped it out, then let him go and threw the bloody flesh on the ground.

Putting people in cages to sell into slavery. These weren't humans. These were just more monsters to kill.

Turning back around, she heard him groan in pain behind her. "As I was saying," she continued calmly. "If you leave this camp now and return to where you came from, I won't hunt you down. But if you come back here, I will kill every last one of you. Make your choice now."

Several people charged at her or teleported close with raised weapons. They didn't get far. Ashen limbs punched through their heads and chests, immediately halting their advance.

Ilea wiped some blood spatter from her face and eyed the crowd from amid the dozen or so new bodies that littered the ground around her. "These aren't your lands or your people to take. Leave."

She watched as what was left of the crowd turned and ran, some of them falling over to half-crawl, half-run, others spilling their drinks on their fallen comrades in their haste to get away. A few were too inebriated to react at all.

She turned around and grabbed the commander, healing his missing tongue. She didn't ask any questions and simply let him talk.

First came personal attacks about her appearance, her character, and, of course, her gender. Then came more structured threats with the names of

Harken and Wynehold thrown in to back everything up. And last came offers to pay her off or even employ her in the service of Lord Harken.

“Are you done?” she asked.

Luis just glared at her, more confused than anything else, it seemed. He moved his hand and cast another spell, but again, it didn’t have an effect on her.

“I could be fighting Specters of Rot. But instead, I’m here,” she said in almost a hiss. She waited for a few seconds and then continued talking. “You’re here on the orders of Lord Harken?”

He nodded.

“To attack anyone coming from Riverwatch? To capture them and to gauge how the city would react?”

He nodded again.

“To what end?”

“He said it would be an easy target. He said that it was necessary, that they stole our slaves, that they were harboring them and hiding them from us. It was his idea, his hubris! I was only following orders. He is a mad, sick man! In fact, if you let me go—”

Ilea punched his head, her fist going into his skull. He went limp instantly.

She pulled her hand out of the commander’s skull and cleaned off the blood and bits of bone. Then she checked the body’s hands and took a ring from his finger.

[Silver Vault Ring - Rare Quality] - [Storage capacity at 25/28]

Good find, this.

She turned around to find the square had mostly cleared. She could still hear shouts throughout the camp, but they sounded farther and farther away with every passing moment.

Ilea breathed in deep and then screamed. Then she flowed healing magic through herself. “What a mess.”

The rag-clad warrior still stood in the empty ‘fight ring’ and was watching her with an intense glare. Mivo was still there as well.

She glanced at the latter. “Why are you still here?”

He threw his sword down and started taking off his armor. His voice shook when he spoke. “I will not fight with them. I will not return. Will you

take a prisoner?”

“Like you took prisoners?”

He gulped. But he didn’t say anything for a while. Once his hands stopped shaking, he seemed to come to a decision. “I have much to atone for. It will be as you will it.”

The warrior in rags shook his head. “Lilith, was it? You saved my life. What will happen now?”

Ilea sighed. “I was wondering the same. Let’s get all the former captives together first, I guess. Get everyone dressed, loot the camp, find any sensitive documents, and then return to Riverwatch.” She glanced at Mivo. “With one captive.”

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TWENTY

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Mark of Trust

With the camp raided and provisions and wagons prepared, the convoy was ready to set out. Ario was waiting at the front. It was clear that he unsettled the others, but he didn't seem to mind.

"You could join us in Riverwatch," Ilea said.

He shook his head and wrote down, *My path is clear. You have set me free, Lilith. I will not forget.*

"Good luck out there," Ilea replied. He gave her a nod and then vanished into the forest. "Now, everyone, we're leaving. I hope we get back to the city by morning."

* * *

It took them around four hours to return. Around an hour longer than her whole journey from Ravenhall to Riverwatch. By now, she had sufficiently calmed down. Her healing helped.

To her surprise, it was Dale who was called out to her when the guards at the gate saw them arrive.

"Good to see you, old friend. Night shift?" she asked when she saw him.

He looked at the battered wagons filled with people, goods, and weapons. "No, started ten minutes ago. And I can tell already that it's going to be a long day."

"Yeah. Maybe you should call for the governor."

Less than fifteen minutes later, Ilea, Alistair, Dale, Valery, and Esteban, the old mage, were gathered at one of the guard stations in the city. Ilea told them what happened and gave them the ring she had taken.

The others were quiet for a long moment.

“You killed a Harken,” Esteban murmured. He seemed to consider the implications, his words not sounding accusatory.

“We don’t know how they will react to this,” Alistair said. “I doubt it’ll be enough, but at the very least, we’ll have proven that we can fight back. It will buy us more time. And we know exactly who we’re dealing with now.”

“Wynehold has a substantial army. We wouldn’t be able to face them in open battle,” Valery said.

“We will be fighting defensively,” Esteban said.

“It will depend on Lord Harken. And on how fast and far the Empire progresses on their campaign.” Alistair scratched his head. “There are a lot of external factors here. We don’t know how they will react to the pressure from the Empire or Lilith’s attack. I would hope for reason and self-preservation to prevail, but I’ve been disappointed in the decision making of high-ranking nobility far too many times in recent years.

“We will prepare for a siege and for defensive battles in the coming weeks and months. At least we have enough food stored away, and time should be in our favor. I have called for a Shadow team to support us with scouting and finding enemies in our forests. I will call for a meeting with the officers in two hours. Lilith, I don’t expect you to join, but you are very welcome to do so. We would compensate you handsomely for any continued support in this matter, of course.”

“I don’t plan to stay in the area for too long. I will help out in an emergency, but I don’t want to stick around and wait for Harken to make his move. I think my time is better spent on training and the Sentinels.”

“Sentinels?” Valery asked.

Ilea smiled. “I’m sure you’ll hear about them in due time. I also have an idea as to how you can contact me if needed. Dale, if you’re available for a quick talk afterward, we can figure that out.”

He gave her a nod.

“Then I will take my leave and prepare for the meeting,” Alistair said. “Thank you for the intervention, Lilith. And for the ring you have retrieved. We will check its contents immediately. Any valuables, including the ring itself, will be added to your pay once we have checked any relevant

documents.” He gave her a look and nodded. “I’ll also be eager to hear about the progress with the Sentinels.”

Ilea watched his back as he left, followed by Valery and Esteban. *Claire must have mentioned them. That or the information has reached him already.*

She turned to Dale and saw him looking at Alistair as well before turning his gaze back to her.

“Found you running through the forests before you had even gotten to level fifty, and now you’re single-handedly attacking war camps to defend Riverwatch.”

“Are you proud?”

He laughed. “I gave you a few pointers and some gear. I didn’t train you or fight whatever creatures you fought to get to this point with you. But yeah, I guess I’m proud. To call you a friend and ally, that is. So, about that way to contact you? I assume it’s some kind of insanely expensive artifact or a spell that nobody has heard of before?”

“You’re ruining the surprise,” Ilea said as she summoned Catelyn’s sphere. She had checked it from time to time, but so far, the fox hadn’t called for her again. She stored it again without explaining it to Dale. “It’s an addition to a skill that I have. I can put a magical mark on you that lets me know where you are and allows you to send me a very short message.”

“Yeah, I know I said it before, but I’m still surprised. Well, let’s get it over with then. Is it painful or blood magic related?”

“Yes, very. And your soul will belong to me afterward,” she joked, but her heart wasn’t in it.

He looked her dead in the eye and nodded. “Let’s do it.”

Ilea smiled. It was always refreshing to joke around with old friends who had known her long before she became as powerful as she was now.

They tested it quickly when she was done, and everything seemed to be in order.

Dale looked at the runes and made a fist. “So, you’re saying I can summon the great Lilith with a single thought?”

“I’m quick, but not quite as quick as a summon.” She stretched. “Say, has there been any news on a Basilisk on the westward road lately?”

“No. My advice is also no,” he deadpanned. “Maybe you could check the adventurers guild for current information. But I’ll leave you to your ridiculous adventure.”

“And I’ll leave you to your strategy meeting.”

“We can’t all be winged mythical Shadows. Some of us have to check city wall maintenance and guard drills.”

“It was good to see you, Dale. Just wish the circumstances could be a little less strained sometimes.”

“And you as well, Ilea. The last few years have been busy. But we’re still here, standing firm. There will be less turbulent times, I’m sure of it. Good luck on your hunt.”

Ilea smiled and spread her wings.

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TWENTY-ONE

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Quest

The adventurers guild hadn't changed much since she'd last visited. The guild hall was packed. Dozens of people were drinking and feasting together, with just as many waiting in line to get quests or receive rewards.

It felt nostalgic, even though she hadn't exactly participated in this type of life for a long time. A single dungeon and she'd joined the Shadow's Hand.

But these were the adventurers of Elos, slaying monsters and taking care of all kinds of problems that came up in the city and in the wild. At the end of the day, she was still doing the same, just perhaps on a bit of a grander scale than most of the quests advertised here.

She breathed out, the tension of the recent problems and dangers fading away as she looked at the armed and armored adventurers.

"Oy, healer! Ya lookin' for a strong team?!" a very loud patron called out to her. He was a stout man with bulging biceps and a pot belly. His ear hair was long enough that he could probably braid it.

[Warrior – lvl 68]

Adventurers of Elos indeed, she thought, joining one of the lines.

"Didn't ya hear me?" the hairy man called out again.

"Leave her be," one of the man's party hissed, a lithe rogue at a similar level, who pulled the hairy man away. "You don't wanna insult the Orders."

Before Ilea could turn away, someone else walked up to her and introduced himself.

“Miss, I want to apologize for the behavior of my fellow adventurers. My name is Asher.” He had long, wavy blonde hair and a charming smile.

[Mage – lvl 102]

“Hello, Asher, what is it that you want?” Ilea asked as the line moved forward, the man dancing around her to avoid bumping into the others.

“It has come to everyone’s attention that you are a healer. Your kind is rare within these halls. I was wondering if perhaps you were looking to join a team?” he asked, getting straight to the point.

“As much as I’m intrigued, I believe I’m looking for slightly different jobs than you might be,” she said, arriving at the front of the line.

“Welcome. Your badge, please,” said the attendant, a rather petite woman in her twenties.

Asher was undeterred. “What kind of jobs are you looking to do? We could adjust if we had a healer in our team.”

Ilea handed the attendant her silver badge that still identified her as a level fifty healer. “You’re... Would you like an updated version? You’re far beyond Silver.”

[Mage – lvl 110]

The petite woman was clearly a little flustered and ran a hand through her short-cropped hair.

Ilea wondered how high the woman could identify. *Does she think I’m one-fifty? Two hundred?*

“Sure, whatever the equivalent of this is,” she said, summoning her Shadow badge and placing it on the counter.

Asher opened and closed his mouth before taking a step back.

The woman behind the counter gave her a look and checked the badge. “This is real. Are you sure you want an adventurer’s badge? This one should be more effective in almost all cases.”

Ilea considered it and then smiled. “Yeah, I’d like to have one.”

Might be useful for my adventuring persona. Regular old Ilea, just your run-of-the-mill, high-level adventurer.

“Very well. Let me see if we have any Emerald badges. Ah... As you’re a Shadow, I’m not sure how many jobs you did for the adventurers guild before then. If you didn’t reach a certain quota, the badge will cost you one gold piece and thirty silver. Is that alright with you?”

“Sure, why not?” Ilea said, summoning the money.

More than a few people were looking her way by now, and the conversations had died down.

Asher chuckled. “I know when I am outclassed. Apologies for wasting your time, Miss Shadow,” he said and bowed.

Ilea smiled. “Don’t worry about it. I appreciate the way you asked. If I wasn’t as busy as I am, I would even take you and your team to the Caverns of Rot and help you get a few levels.”

“Aha, how... kind of you.” He still smiled at her, but it was strained now, perhaps slightly panicked.

Why are people so scared? This is such a good offer.

The new badge looked the same as the old one, other than the metal it was made of. This one was a dark green color that didn’t reflect much light. Ilea paid and made the thing vanish.

“Anything else I can do for you?” the woman asked.

“Yeah. I’m looking for information on a Basilisk.”

She smiled as the attendant did a double take and Asher cursed rather loudly.

* * *

Ilea soared through the skies, trying to identify the landscape. Sadly, there had been no new information on a Basilisk. The attendant could, however, pinpoint the area where Ilea’s caravan had last encountered the creature on a map.

A few skeletons showed that she had found the right place. *Nazarks*, she thought, crouching down and picking up one of the skulls. *Not decayed, but chewed. I wonder how Roland and Lily are doing? Feels like it’s been ages.*

She strolled past the skeletons and made her way toward the cavern entrance. A few creatures moved by in the nearby forest, doubtless aware of her. It seemed they deemed her too dangerous to approach.

Lucky for them, Ilea thought as she found parts of the old caravan sitting untouched within the cavern. Splintered wood, wagons, spoiled goods, weapons, and destroyed armor.

Most of the Nazark corpses had little remaining on their bones, but it looked like only the brave had come in here to feed.

She grabbed a sword that had been missed or deemed cheap enough to be left behind, twirling it in her hand as she looked for any traces of magic.

The tracks were old. No traces of magic either, nor a massive winged creature.

Ilea spread her own wings and flew through the cavern, speeding up as her senses didn't pick up a single thing.

She chose the largest opening she could find and entered. The tunnels were large, dozens of ways leading away from the main one, naturally formed or created by the denizens of Karth.

She stayed in the main tunnel, the walls moving farther away by the minute as the space widened. It was quiet. Entirely so.

A hiss cascaded off the walls in front of her, making her stop in her flight. Her skills were ready. The sound had been expected this time.

'ding' You have heard a mighty being's cry – You resist the effects

There you are.

Ilea smiled and moved through the darkness. The buildup of mana was graspable, permeating the air as a spell gathered power.

She turned and faced the creature. Though she was unable to see it, nor close enough to perceive it in her sphere, the mana told the tale of its location.

Something is wrong.

The spell manifested, a wave of air moving her way. She saw it enter her sphere and rushed backward, blinking to the side twice as the powerful magic rushed by.

What is this? This is no four-mark.

The whole cavern rumbled when the spell impacted the opposite wall a moment later. Quite a powerful attack.

But I avoided it so easily?

Ilea rushed at the creature, reaching it moments later.

It had large wings and a head that reminded her of a dragon and snake mix, with a wide maw with crooked teeth as wide as her head. Scales lined its body like armor, and its eyes looked right at her.

[Basilisk – lvl ????]

And then she was there, ashen limbs smashing into the monster's head. Most glanced, off but four found purchase. Where the attacks landed, the creature's form seemed to ripple and shift.

It lashed out, but Ilea avoided the attack with a quick twirl to the side as more limbs smashed into it. Her fist slammed into its skull, discharging a full load of her destructive spells. She watched as it opened its maw before she released a lightly charged Heart of Cinder into its throat.

The Basilisk reared back, the wound to its head shifting and distorting before it started charging another spell. Ilea stopped, floating in midair as she closed her eyes.

This is all wrong. It reared back from my blow. The Trakorov barely moved after an attack like that.

Its spell was charged and released, another wave of air. This time, she trusted Azarinth Fighting, feeling the attack coming and letting it wash over her. It barely scratched her armor, the wind moving to each side as if split in half.

Illusion?

She sent the thought toward the being. A question. One she did not expect an answer to.

And yet, she received one.

L e a v e

Broken sounds spoken with an inhuman hissing voice.

She felt her very core shake.

Interesting. But I at least want to meet you, she thought with a smile, wondering if fighting a Basilisk would constitute an important achievement for her next Class or evolutions.

She rushed the creature once more, but it vanished entirely, as if it had teleported away. Only traces of its magic remained.

Only one way to go, she thought, continuing down the tunnel.

A few more wind magic spells disrupted her journey, but the Basilisk itself didn't approach again. The charge time for its attacks lessened, and

the power increased with each subsequent spell.

The tunnel led into another cavern, this time with a bowl-like shape, a few crystals growing from the ceiling providing enough light for her to see.

When Ilea reached the center, she found the remains of the largest egg she had ever seen.

The druid talked about this, didn't he? He was right! There's a baby Basilisk! So that thing we fought was a mirage of sorts? A dormant spell to protect its spawn? I wonder if it's still here, then, or if that thing I saw before was just a remnant of its power.

A definite exit to the cavern revealed itself when she looked up – a large circular shaft rising into the unknown. Her wings moved, and she flew up, soon back in near-complete darkness. A few cracks and tunnel entrances appeared within her sphere from time to time, but she kept flying upward.

The flight was long, considering the speed at which she was traveling.

When she emerged out into the open, the air was thin. The moons seemed closer, shining bright. Cliffs and boulders grew around her in towering shapes and sizes. She felt tiny between the high-reaching peaks of jagged rock.

The plateau she found herself on was far above the clouds dotting the sky below, only faint colors visible of what amounted to forests, lakes, and plains. She was far up the mountain and still nowhere near the peak.

Bones littered the area, flesh and organs still clinging to some. These creatures had once been larger than most living things Ilea had ever seen or fought.

She moved silently through the graveyard of bones, freezing when she saw green scales in the distance.

The creature lay surrounded by stone, its eyes closed, unaware of her small form within its domain. This was not the Basilisk she had seen. In many ways.

It looked smaller, less vicious. Still, Ilea could feel its magical presence, even at this distance. The very air was permeated by it. Having been in Ravenhall for a while, she had almost forgotten what kind of monsters were out there.

Identify worked from this distance, likely just because of the being's sheer power.

[Basilisk Hatchling – lvl ????]

Oh my God. That is the cutest thing!
Should I try and pet it? Feed it? Fight it?

A hiss interrupted her considerations. It flowed over the mountain like a wave crashing into seaside cliffs.

‘ding’ You have heard the challenge of a Basilisk – You resist its effects

Ilea looked up, feeling the magical pressure increase tenfold.

She saw the broad wings and the snake-like tail of the adult Basilisk hovering in the night sky above what must be its nest, sparks of lightning spreading through the air, glistening light reflecting off the large dark green scales. Its size dwarfed even the illusion she had fought.

She wondered if there were some Trakorovs or a Fae in the area to recruit for her endeavor.

But this time, she was alone.

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TWENTY-TWO

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Thresholds

Lightning surged from the being, yellow and bright like the suns. Thunder did not follow, the power sneaking through the sky without so much as a whisper.

Ilea was ripped out of her amazed stupor when the lightning crashed into the stone around her, ripping through with little resistance as she blinked away.

Not far enough, she thought as the shock wave sent her flying, residual lightning surging through her body as she healed the damage.

A wave of mana washed over her as she floated with her ashen wings, locking eyes with the massive being.

It flew down and hovered above its spawn.

Le ave

Its voice rumbled through the vicinity like a spell of sound and air.

Ilea braced herself with both arms, remaining steady thanks to her resistances, mental pressure, air, and pure arcane power.

She spread her wings and flew back around fifty meters, landing whilst still facing the creature.

I at least want to know what you can do...

Ashen spears formed around her, looking pitifully small against the thing they were supposed to injure.

Battle, she sent before she charged the being.

It floated without reacting, moving its wings before its mana manifested. Lightning and air surged outward, homing in on Ilea as she

twirled and moved through the air with all the speed, precognition, and maneuverability she could muster.

She dodged the main brunt, but she was still seared by lightning, her right wing disintegrated, and her side was badly burned. Her wing reformed and she kept flying, but she still felt the lightning spread through her – slowly, though, thanks to her high-level resistance.

It allowed her ample time to heal the damage, and she even tried her third-tier addition to try and redirect some of the lightning. It was difficult but manageable. Ilea focused the remaining electrical charge out through her right leg, gritting her teeth as the residual lightning flared out the sole of her foot and into the ground below.

She saw the being move its massive wings and felt the air rush at her. She flew with it, the winds flowing past her, pushing her upward. Ilea used some of the power to enhance her speed, circling closer to the creature.

The spells that missed her slammed into Karth itself, leaving deep gashes in the stone, the magic sending debris and boulders flying.

Let's push a little further and see what happens, Ilea thought with a wide grin, flying around the aircraft-sized being. She narrowly avoided the attacks coming at her without pause, realizing shortly after that they were increasing in number, lightning strikes and gusts of powerful wind. The attacks came faster now but the individual strikes bore less power.

Adjusting to my size and speed, she thought and pushed forward, a wave of air sending her back toward the mountainside. She tried Monster Hunter, but it had no effect.

A blink let her avoid a swath of lightning projectiles, only for her to realize that thirty more had already reached her. The spells slammed into her ash, spreading slowly as she counter-healed, using the third tier a few times as she was pushed backward.

The spells subsided only to make way for a massive beam of lightning, large enough to envelop her entire form.

Her perception slowed, and she stared at the fast-moving stream of lightning. She couldn't blink again yet, so she moved her wings in front of her and summoned as much ash as she could in that split second.

The lightning struck, burning through her wings and arms and into her chest, causing her to hit the ground hard. She could feel herself seize up, the overwhelming magic slowing as it spread through her. She could see it, feel it, her perception still slowed.

Ilea focused on the energy and knew that if she let it spread, she would burst. She tried to grip it, using her resistance against lightning. It was too much to focus on, but she pushed what she could to her right side.

Her arm and shoulder swelled as the lightning spread through them before exploding in a splatter of gore and bone, a bright flash of energy exiting in a broad cone.

She used her third-tier healing to reform everything, blood splattering to the ground as she staggered back a single step, unbalanced, ash covering her again a moment later.

The Basilisk moved its wings lazily, its large reptilian eyes looking at her from hundreds of meters away.

Ilea looked back.

Okay, she sent. I got the memo. This mountain is yours.

She jumped and flew down the jagged cliffside, soon entering a sea of clouds. Her sphere let her maneuver through them without any fear of collision.

Then Ilea broke out of the clouds and slowed down, letting herself fall toward the dark landscape below. She laughed as she fell, already excited for their next meeting.

‘ding’ Sentinel Reconstruction reaches 3rd lvl 30

‘ding’ Blink reaches 3rd lvl 22

‘ding’ Sentinel Sphere reaches 3rd lvl 15

‘ding’ Sentinel Sphere reaches 3rd lvl 16

‘ding’ Sentinel Core reaches 3rd lvl 25

‘ding’ Azarinth Perception reaches 3rd lvl 14

‘ding’ Armor of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 30

‘ding’ Ashen Wings reaches 3rd lvl 16

‘ding’ Ashen Wings reaches 3rd lvl 17

‘ding’ Eyes of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 9

‘ding’ Avatar of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 23

‘ding’ Deviant of Humanity reaches lvl 3

‘ding’ Deviant of Humanity reaches lvl 4

‘ding’ Deviant of Humanity reaches lvl 5

'ding' Heavy Archery reaches lvl 7
'ding' Monster Hunter reaches 2nd lvl 7
'ding' Veteran reaches 2nd lvl 19
'ding' Veteran reaches 2nd lvl 20
'ding' Lightning Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 3
'ding' Lightning Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 4

Veteran!

She checked her new upgrades while falling, moving her wings from time to time to make sure she wouldn't splat against the mountainside.

Veteran

You have faced creatures completely out of your league since arriving here and up to this very moment. Not just that, but you have mostly faced them alone and even managed to get two four-marks to fight each other. It's hard to say if you're a veteran or just a plain lunatic. Either way, you may unlock the third tier of Veteran.

Damn right I can!

'ding' Veteran reaches 3rd lvl 1

Veteran – 3rd lvl 1

You have experienced the shouts and spells of beings completely out of your range of imagination. You will not survive, but at least you won't be entirely immobilized while you get eaten. Good luck, warrior.

2nd stage: You are immune to the fear of facing that which you do not understand. Be wary – some might sense your arrogance in the face of power, but others might fear it.

3rd stage: It seems you don't just happen upon impossible fights, you outright look for them. Your confidence and experience are obvious, not just to yourself but to others too. Your second tier now extends to allies within a fifty-meter radius, should you allow for such to happen.

Additionally, your ability to gauge an unknown enemy's power is vastly improved.

Nice. The buff to allies was welcome, but she was more intrigued by the second part. *Might just check again. Should I?*

Ilea smirked and changed direction, flying up once more and back through the clouds.

The Basilisk was flying close to the mountain, not immediately taking note of her.

[Basilisk – lvl ????]

She knew instinctively that the creature was at least a thousand levels higher than her, but anything more than that was a mystery.

One thousand three hundred at least. Interesting. I wonder what I can tell about the Hatchling.

But when the monster turned her way again, Ilea decided against checking, instead blinking away and back through the clouds.

It's just that I'm not interested. I could've easily sneaked past. Easily. Definitely.

Landing in the forest below, she activated her third-tier blink. *I wonder what I'd get from the Superfae with the third tier.*

She appeared back in her home in the south and made her way to Ravenhall. *I love teleportation. I'll even be able to make breakfast.*

TWENTY-THREE

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Moving Pieces

That day, Ilea returned to her full schedule and training. The Sentinel training was progressing, and a few of them would soon reach the second tier of Pain Tolerance, something that likely wouldn't have been possible without a healer present. One that could take care of mental strains too.

Ilea spent some time on more dancing lessons, during which she told Claire of her job in Riverwatch, and, of course, she spent most of her nights in the Caverns of Rot with her newfound silent friends, the Specters.

She was back in her routine with enough time to eat in between duties. Sometimes even for a nap. The next few days passed without major incident, if one didn't consider the dangerous near-death experiences with the Specters as incidents. Luckily, they didn't invent new tactics to pin her down; otherwise, Ilea might have had to find new sparring partners.

Most of her skills were advancing steadily, some with major breakthroughs.

Dark Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 1

You have stood against a being of true darkness. Its magic was unable to pierce your defenses, and you survived to tell the tale. This skill will help you repeat such actions.

2nd stage: Your body is attuned to the effects of the dark. You may traverse areas imbued by it without harm, and creatures that dwell within will not all see you as something not part of their domain.

Her main gains, however, came from the Specters. She immediately invested a third-tier point into Blood Magic Resistance when the advancement became available.

Blood Magic Resistance

You have made masters of blood magic your enemies, pushing through and surviving despite the odds. Your body has been ravaged by this school of magic so many times that any count would be meaningless. Creatures beyond your imagination have tried to kill you – without success.

Blood Magic Resistance – 3rd lvl 1

The arts of blood manipulation can be deceptive and dangerous to both ally and foe. You have stood against the old magic and lived. Next time, your chances of survival will be even higher.

2nd stage: Masters of this ancient art have found ways to use the very essence of your life against you. With sheer ferocity, you have shown that not every creature born of blood is prey alone. They will find it a challenge to invade and use what belongs to you alone.

3rd stage: Your very blood has changed and evolved. While it may still be susceptible to change and foreign influence, it will not take the abuse lightly. Enemies will find their blood magic will demand a sacrifice should they choose to injure you. You may deactivate this effect.

The Specters now had minor ruptures ravaging their bodies after they used their blood magic ability against her. Luckily, not enough to kill them, though. The creatures regenerated and didn't seem to feel pain, making them a great party to test the third tier on.

Ilea wondered if she would get some form of blood magic as a general skill if she used the feedback often enough. Realistically, it would just level the resistance, but she could hope.

Either way, she had her goals in sight, and every day brought her closer to them.

* * *

The officer bowed, going to one knee as he addressed his lord. “The scout reports are conclusive. We estimate heavy losses should you wish to take the city within the week.”

Rowan Harken scowled, running a scarred hand through his graying hair, his eyes going from the officer to the map on a wooden table within the command tent. A variety of figures had been placed on top of it, carved from wood and stone, each symbolizing one of the many troops at his beck and call. Paid, trained, enslaved, or otherwise employed.

His most loyal guards and troops were close by. The scouts had been thorough, probing the independent city for the past few weeks. As troublesome as it was to him, he could only commend the efforts that had gone into strengthening the town’s defenses.

Riverwatch had been a miserable frontier city when he had last visited eight years prior. A mismatched town of adventurers and people seeking to fulfill their hopes and dreams in the uncivilized and crime-ridden independence of the west.

A foolish notion, and one that had cost them dearly.

Only two cities that had been born of that downright ridiculous experiment remained. Rules and laws were there for a reason. Strict and guiding for all bloodlines, be it low-born, slave, or even noble.

It seemed Alistair Gallian was worthy of his reputation, having taken control of the city despite his low birth. There were exceptions even among slaves and adventurers. Patrols and guards had been strengthened immensely, not just in numbers but in character too. Few could be paid for even scraps of information.

He had expected the man to hire Shadows, now that so few of them would work for Baralia. Vultures feasting on easy targets. He was well aware of the irony.

One of his cousins had already been killed, his camp raided. Supposedly by a single Shadow too. Luis had always been incompetent. It had been no major surprise, but with the reports he’d heard, he still felt slightly concerned.

Rowan had thought the town an easy target, yet Nipha’s indecision about conquering the lone-standing city proved to be based on more than just incompetence. An overwhelming attack would cause heavy losses, not just among the soldiers but the population of the town as well.

He sighed, still confident in the operation but annoyed at the setback. A challenge was welcome, but at a time like this, he had to keep order in his ranks. Never had he marched with all his soldiers, fellow nobility, and even guards. The logistics of it all were difficult. He was carrying supplies in his own storage ring and had to make everyone who possessed an item like it follow suit.

He balled his fists as he thought about his lands and the ridiculous orders from his king. Baralia was lost. With the Empire looming, he saw this campaign as his only hope to retain power. He would take Riverwatch and place only a small garrison in Wynehold, distancing himself from the king and Baralia. With his armies and wealth intact, most of it moved to Riverwatch, Rowan expected far better results from future negotiations with Lys.

He had no illusions about his military might.

It was this or submit to the Empire. Lys was moving slower than he had anticipated, but his advisors had rarely been wrong. Baralia was doomed, and so was Wynehold. The only way to escape the fires of war was to relocate, form new alliances, and rebuild Baralia out of the ashes.

Once Baralia fell, it would be too late for the king to retaliate.

If only he had acted when the first signs of incompetence had shown themselves in the high king thirty years back.

He pushed the thought away. This wasn't a time for regrets. It was a time for war. A time for change.

"What of the Shadow?" he asked, looking at the dark-winged figurine in the forest between his camp and Riverwatch.

"It is possible she was employed by the city, or perhaps she had a personal reason to attack the camp," one of his officers explained. "Her power level is likely average for a Shadow. Most soldiers were caught off guard, underequipped, tired, or drunk. We estimate her to be of minor concern in the conflict, if she is even still in the area."

Harken gazed at the man hard enough to make him wince. "She slaughtered forty men in the span of mere seconds. If she shows up, we have to be prepared. Make sure the Vowed are informed. Focus their efforts on ash magic resistance and add more healers to their squads."

"As you wish, my lord."

"There will be more Shadows too. Prepare gold and make sure our elite are ready to face high-level threats at any time."

An exciting time indeed, one he deemed himself entirely too old for. Rowan ground his teeth, anger flowing through him as he wished he was powerful enough to kill King Baron himself.

That stupid fucking fool. Jeopardizing everything we've built. If I could at least see him fall...

He focused on the war council again. They were moving fast, and soon, they would have to rebuild and strengthen the defenses of their new city. He hoped the Empire would be satiated with the fall of Baralia, but he didn't plan to sit idly.

And in time, I will reclaim Wynehold as well.

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TWENTY-FOUR

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Bells of War

“She moved through again,” Sean said, taking a sip of his ale.

Warm light filled the inn, and most of the patrons were already drunk out of their minds. It was good that they usually went into the dungeon late in the day. Less competition.

They were still looking for a new member now that Sophia had left for Utach. He could respect her decision – in fact, he’d seen it coming for a while.

Wooden beams covered the ceiling, a few supports also reaching up from between the chairs and tables. People young and old occupied the inn, most of them adventurers, with a few cooks, caretakers, guild workers, travelers, and merchants.

Some looked sullen, showing fresh scars and injuries, the scent of blood in the air. Others rejoiced, lifting their mugs high as they sang one song or the other, their spirits high due to a rare find or an especially successful day within the dungeon’s suffocating tunnels. Or perhaps they were rookies, excited to delve into the dark for the first time, not yet introduced to the pain and fear that accompanied the often dangerous work.

Sean wondered what kind of monsters Ilea was fighting down there. He had heard their call, had felt the chill, the need to run. A single one of them could slaughter everyone here.

He had played with the thought of leaving as well. Maybe they would soon enough, find another dungeon to get familiar with.

He sipped his ale. The mug hadn’t been cleaned properly, and the ale here wasn’t great. Still, it would help soothe his thoughts.

“Imagining how she’s fighting them as well? How do you think she’s doing?” Colt asked.

“I don’t want to know,” Sean said. He was just thankful for the levels he had gotten.

“I would pay to be there and watch,” Colt mused.

“I really hope you stay sensible, Colt, otherwise I’ll have to find myself a new warrior.”

Colt waved him off. “Don’t you worry, boss. We’ve been at this for too long to risk it now.”

Sean smiled and downed his mug when one of the traveling bards started with yet another song about Lilith.

I do wonder how far she’ll go. Or if she’ll soon join the many myths and legends of the long-dead.

* * *

Dale woke up and grabbed his sword, loud pounding coming from the door below.

Abby turned to him, barely awake. “What’s going on?”

“I’m not sure,” he said as magic flowed through him, waking him up immediately. He had few days off, and everyone knew it. It had to be an emergency.

A few scouts had been sighted in the last few days, but they couldn’t have moved so quickly, could they?

He hoped he was wrong.

Alaina’s door was open, the small girl peering out from behind it with a confused expression. The red hair she had inherited from her mother was sticking out at odd angles. Rhett was sleeping through the commotion, as expected.

“Everything’s fine,” Dale whispered to his daughter before descending the wooden stairs.

His house was simple and comparatively small. Officers in his position could certainly afford more, but he had been more interested in a secure location and nearby guard stations. The price had been higher, but he could sleep more soundly at night. That was worth every piece of gold.

Abby made them feel at home regardless, decorating the house with beautiful colors, exotic paintings, curtains, furniture, and even a small library.

He sighed and kept his blade at the ready. “Who’s there?!”

“Captain Langston! There is an emergency – all officers and guards are called!” a woman’s voice said through the heavy door.

Celis. She was one of the guards from the nearby station, a warrior close to level one hundred. She was reserved and professional. *And she’s almost sounding panicked.*

Dale opened the door to find Celis armed and armored.

“Do you know more?” he asked.

“I’m not sure. The gates are closed, and—” she started, but she was interrupted by ringing bells.

Dale opened his eyes wide and nodded to her. “I’ll be there, go now. Hurry and fulfill your orders,” he said, turning around and rushing back to his room.

“The bells, what’s happening?” Abby said, already half-dressed, as she looked at him with worry.

“I don’t know yet. We might be under attack,” Dale said as he put on his clothes and armor, his motions quick and efficient. “Take the kids and go to the cellar until further notice.”

He fastened his sword to his belt and hugged her. “You’ll be safe.”

Abby nodded. “Don’t try to be a hero, Dale. Promise me.”

“Don’t open up for anyone you don’t know,” he said before rushing down the stairs and out into the night.

* * *

Alistair and most of the officers had gathered already, maps of the city spread out on the tables in front of them. Barrier mages and healers were positioned around them, as well as a few dozen high-level guards.

“They’ve taken out our scouts and patrols – only two managed to return, heavily injured. We expect them to be here in a few hours,” one of the officers explained. “No information on numbers.”

“The Hunters will remain within the city walls for now until we gain a better understanding of the situation. You know what to do, move out,”

Alistair said.

And so they did. Dale nodded and turned away, signaling to a team of ten high-level guards from his station. The southeastern section of the wall was their assigned position. Dale would be there to command his guards as well as lead them.

He still remembered the chaotic scramble when the Elves had attacked during the tournament a few years past. The response now was calculated, prepared. Everyone had a position, knew what to do. They were ready.

As ready as one could be for a siege.

No matter what they did, lives would be lost. Families would be destroyed. He knew a siege was never pretty.

Still, he knew one person who might be able to help.

He looked at the mark on his hand and focused on the part of it that he could activate.

* * *

Preparations were going well. Most of their scouts had been taken out, and their siege weapons were moving into position. Every supply line was cut off. All of it in less than a few days.

With such a high population, Lord Harken's advisors assumed the siege would be over in one or two weeks. He knew that Alistair Gallian cared about his people. And he would use that against him.

Rowan saw the smiles on the faces of some of the younger officers and frowned.

To be excited for war. They do not know the cost of it all, nor will they learn from this siege. Once we return to the ashes of Baralia, they will understand.

He whispered to his horse to try and calm her down. Hundreds of his soldiers were nearby, and his officers and fellow nobility were gathered around him.

They were ready.

* * *

Dawn had yet to come when the first trebuchets and ballistae propelled their payload into the city and its walls.

“Keep your heads down!” Dale shouted.

The wall shook as an enchanted steel-tipped arrow slammed into it. The thing nearly burrowed its way through entirely.

Not just the projectiles that are enchanted – the siege weapons are too, he thought as he glimpsed the soldiers loading another arrow.

A few of their own bowmen tried to reach the distant machines, but only a few higher-level rangers were able to fire that far. A translucent shield flared to life, blocking their attacks before they impacted the artillery.

“Water and ice mages, ready!” Dale called out, seeing a few flames burst to life in the thicket where the enemy forces were arrayed. Arrows, boulders, and flaming chunks of wood followed. Not enough to overwhelm the defenses, just to test them. To strain their resources, their mages.

A few of the slower projectiles were taken out by ranged magic of their own, others making it through and damaging the walls. Two water mages took care of the fire that spread as a result.

“Reports are in, Captain!” a runner called out from below, rushing up the stairs.

Dale joined the young man, who was barely two years older than his son.

“Formations are holding, the walls are being continuously damaged. Earth mages are to patrol and reinforce the defenses. Due to all supply routes being cut off, the gates are to be closed too,” the runner said. “Hunter squads are preparing to hit enemy targets, and siege engines are being moved closer to the walls.”

“Good, finally something we can send back,” Dale said as he spotted a catapult being moved closer to the wall. He would have preferred enchanted cannons, but this was what they had.

The suns were finally coming up, revealing the sky to be mostly clear other than for a few clouds and plumes of smoke.

His eyes widened as he walked along the top of the wall. Dale now understood why the enemy had waited until now to show their numbers.

Lines and lines of soldiers stepped out of the thicket, sunlight glinting off their armor, spears, halberds, flags, bows, and robes. The dark red of Baralia had finally stepped out into the open. Clean, well-fed, armed, and armored.

He watched as a series of projectiles came flying out of the forest behind them. A line of soldiers and mages stepped forward, protected by shields of both steel and magic. Bows and spells were readied before they rained missiles into the wall and beyond.

His women and men hunkered down next to him on the wall, impacts sending debris and dust over the edge, houses bursting into flame as walls collapsed. Horns echoed outside as another volley of spells showered the city.

The defenders' few shields and counter spells barely managed to stem the flood. A few guards began coughing as acid, poison, and smoke magic spread over the walls, forcing some of them to jump down and abandon their positions.

Dale turned his head as a loud explosion came from the gate.

"To the gate!" he called out before he rushed toward the entrance, reaching it right as an explosion snapped the heavy wooden bar that held it shut like a twig, flinging the gates open.

A dozen foes rushed in, teleporting about as they slit throats and engaged in close combat. Vowed, Dale thought as he blocked an attack, stepping back to assess his enemies.

Three of them were slaves, their tongues cut. The gate remained open.

They're just sending in their slaves. To demonstrate their power?

Dale focused on the now, deflecting the blows aimed at him, a throwing knife grazing his armored shoulder. Several Hunters appeared at his side, a few guards joining them to stand against the enemy.

Don't take too long, old friend.

"Close that fucking gate! With me!" he shouted and activated his skills, rushing the closest Vowed, his blade cleaving through an arm before he ducked under a slash, coming up with another slice that slit the man's stomach.

Dale turned and cut through his neck with a clean swing. He ignored the notifications and rushed to a wounded guard, intercepting an incoming death blow. His shout was lost in the chaos of battle, exploding debris and spells impacting around them.

TWENTY-FIVE

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Shadow

Rowan was pleased with the reaction. Their numerical advantage showed. Most of the night had been spent either resting or building siege weapons. They would overwhelm the city within the week.

Now that the suns had risen, the true power of his army was revealed. Not all of its pieces, but enough to show the locals what they were up against.

The walls and important buildings were bombarded by spells, stones, and heavy arrows. A few projectiles were aimed at the closest lines of houses, but his orders to keep his new city intact were mostly obeyed. Rowan had a few trusted rangers and mages keep close track of those who went overboard or exclusively attacked civilians.

A third of the Vowed, aided by warrior slaves willing to participate for a chance at freedom and citizenship, had pushed forward. The show of force aided by ranged artillery and arrows had let them advance to the walls. A few of the gates had even been broken, but it wasn't yet time to push into the city with everything they had.

The losses would be too high.

Lord Harken was patient. Many years of battle and rule had shaped him. This battle would be a victory. It was only a matter of time. Uncertain aspects like the Shadow's Hand and potential high-level individuals in the city would have to be dealt with, but their numbers were overwhelming.

Navigating the coming years of diplomacy and retaking and rebuilding his homeland would be the challenging part of this war, but Rowan didn't

let his thoughts drift quite yet. Overconfidence had been a cruel teacher, and he wouldn't make the same mistake twice.

"We have identified most of the officers," a ranger reported, suddenly appearing close by.

"Good. Inform me how they fare against the lower-level Vowed," he said, using his looking glass to observe the walls.

Well-disciplined guards. Fires aren't spreading, which is good for both sides.

"Focus on taking out their healers. Reduce the bombardment in half an hour. Half the mages should rest," he said to a waiting officer.

"Yes, sir," the man replied, vanishing in a puff of red smoke.

Harken checked on the troops positioned north and south of his position, finding their aggression to be similarly effective.

Alistair Gallian was a reasonable man, if the records could be believed. He would give up the city if the pressure became too much, if too many guards died. Rowan hoped for both their sakes that the man made the right choice and in a reasonable timeframe. He hated camping in the woods like some savage or adventurer.

Once again, he turned away from the raging battle and sat down on his heavy wooden chair, brought from his office and stored within his ring. The tent itself was simple so as not to arouse any suspicion of where the commander was located.

He sighed and summoned the drafts he had written.

Words were a powerful weapon, and soon he would have to announce to the guards and people of Riverwatch who their new ruler was. A mistake on his part could cost lives on both sides. He had to be concise and confident. Perhaps the leaders of this independent heap would be more inclined to listen to reason than High King Baron had ever been.

The pen in his hand snapped at the thought of the arrogant, stupid, childish king. He calmed his breathing and let meditation flow through him, a new pen appearing as he looked over his short speech once more, scratching a word here and there, replacing another.

Explosions, shouts, and spells resounded from the direction of the town. Rowan ignored them. After a while, he received the report that the initial assault had been thrown back. Heavy losses on both sides.

His speech almost ready, Rowan stood up and inspected himself in the large mirror in his tent. He scratched his short gray beard, a little annoyed

that he hadn't reached level two hundred earlier in his life. Slow and steady had been his maxim.

At least he looked wiser than most of the green officers he was commanding. His gray hair was cut short. He would look dignified even in the heat of battle.

He wore black silk pants held up by a brown leather belt. A dark red shirt was covered by an embroidered jacket. He disliked the way generals pinned their chests full of unnecessary medals. Still, he wore his family's crest and the Baralia coat of arms. Anybody worth their medals didn't need to wear them to be recognized.

Scars showed on both his cheek and neck. Scars he was proud of. Any noble worth their name had healers close by in case they got injured. It was meant as a message that he carried these scars with him to this day, each representing certain events that his competition had best not forget.

Light armor appeared on his body, crafted from sturdy reinforced dark steel, colored in dark red shades. He kept his two steel chain whips stored for now. His helmet too. With his ring, he could simply will it onto his head in the blink of an eye. He didn't expect to wear it today, however.

"Lord Harken," one of his guards said as he stepped outside.

"Signal the troops. Cease fire," Rowan said before teleporting twice to reach the front lines. He didn't believe in charging in at the very front, but neither did he think effective command could be issued from kilometers away.

Soldiers stepped out from the thicket of the forest, their armor impeccable, their formation impressive. The stage was set.

Many of Riverwatch's guards looked out from the top of the battered walls at the lone figure stepping toward them.

Rowan whistled, and a horse emerged from between the lines of troops. He gently touched the horse's head before getting on.

"People of Riverwatch!" he shouted as he spurred the horse to move closer to the walls. Everything was silent, and not a single arrow or rock flew as he stopped his steed once more.

"I, Lord Harken of Wynehold, am willing to discuss the terms of complete surrender with your leaders. All following bloodshed is a waste of life – on both sides. It does not matter to me if you surrender now, a week from now, or even in a month. Know that you cannot stand against us. The ceasefire will last for half an hour. Make your choice!"

He finished his short speech and turned his horse around, slowly trotting back to the lines of soldiers until he moved past them. The army would remain in the open, but he would wait in his tent.

“What’s that?” one of the rangers said as Rowan moved past.

Are they surrendering already? Perhaps I underestimated Alistair, he thought with a slight smirk as he turned. He schooled his expression immediately and got off the horse, walking back to the front line.

A few soldiers were pointing up at the sky. Squads of elite soldiers who could fly were ready, but the flying black dot was moving entirely too fast.

Rowan saw some of his troops flying up, though they were unable to catch the newcomer. He fished out his looking glass and tried to focus on the thing.

Person, black wings.

“The Shadow has come,” he said, glancing around as he saw his high-level officers and soldiers forming up in groups to tackle the dangerous individual.

A single one, he thought, not letting himself smile.

The Shadow flew closer and landed like an arrow right behind the eastern gate.

Looking glass in hand and a ranger by his side, Rowan watched the winged and armored being appear next to one of the guard officers on top of the wall. He couldn’t tell what they were discussing, but he saw the Shadow hug the man.

Personally involved. Then perhaps I can solve this with a deal instead of losing important people.

They talked for a few minutes before the Shadow jumped down and onto the field before the wall.

A woman. What is she doing? Rowan thought as he watched her move closer. The guard officer didn’t seem particularly pleased with the development either, but he made no move to stop the Shadow, instead giving orders to a few people close to him, some of whom ran away immediately.

“What should we do?” one of the soldiers asked.

Rowan stepped forward, summoning his helmet and weapons, positioning himself a little in front of his troops. Shadows could move quickly, and he had little information on her. If she was the same one, she

would use ashen magic. Unfortunately, he hadn't bothered with getting a resistance against such a rare school of magic.

The woman stopped around fifteen meters in front of them, her body entirely covered in ash formed into armor. Forward-facing horns adorned her head, and a few tendrils of ash moved lazily behind her back. Her wings were gone. Piercing blue eyes stared right at Rowan.

His instincts told him to run. This Shadow was dangerous, more so than any he had met before.

[Battle Healer – lvl ??]

Two-eighty, at least.

He nodded. "Welcome, Shadow."

Rowan gauged her every movement, but she didn't seem to be bothered at all. No signs of stress or a defensive stance. Either through true power or madness, this Shadow was confident in the face of his entire army.

If we attack immediately, she will flee and join the defenses. I'll have to play this right.

"Rowan Harken," the woman spoke. "Lord of Wynehold. These are not your lands."

Straight to the point and attempting to take the moral high ground. He could respect the maneuver.

"Riverwatch will fall, and you will not change that fact, Lilith," he said. "Why not talk to your friends in the city and convince them to lay down their arms? Too many have already died."

Any Shadow worth their name had a good understanding of a battlefield. She would know that there was no way for the city to face him.

A few of the soldiers around him were shifting. Were they scared of the Shadow, or was it because they were so close to two powerful beings?

She seemed confused for a moment and then narrowed her eyes. "I agree. Too many have died, and you are the one responsible for that. From what I have seen, you are not a Lord. You're just a slaver."

A few people gasped. Offending a noble of Baralia was a grave crime. But a Lord? That was punishable by death – or worse.

These were wild lands, however, and Shadows were monstrous creatures.

Rowan looked at her and chuckled.

Ridiculous. Is she here to provoke an open battle? Or perhaps to rile me up into agreeing to a duel? I have always known most Shadows were madmen. Another one to confirm the reputation.

“I don’t see the Hand rallied behind you, nor an army of Ravenhall descending on my troops. Riverwatch is ours, and you won’t stop us.”

He saw her narrow her eyes, and he felt himself almost taking a step back. It felt wrong, her absolute confidence. It felt like all of this was just a nuisance for her. He didn’t let any of it show. She was bluffing, of course. Nothing more.

“You came to protect your friend? I will ensure his safety and that of his family. You can take them and leave for Ravenhall. No more blood needs to be shed,” Rowan said.

He watched her for a reaction, but if anything, she seemed to become more aggressive at his generous offer. Perhaps madness was her affliction, then? A pity.

She met his gaze. “You gave the city half an hour? I’ll give you ten minutes. Take your troops and leave. Free your slaves and send them to the city.” Her voice was terse, almost condescending.

A few soldiers chuckled, some outright laughing at the ridiculous proposal.

Has she faced too many horrors to understand this situation? Rowan wondered. He was about to talk when the woman spoke again.

“Ten minutes,” she said, power surging outward with the words.

‘ding’ You have heard the challenge of a powerful healer. You are paralyzed for two seconds.

His eyes opened wide as he watched the Shadow spread her wings and fly back to the wall. All the laughs and chuckles had been cut short, replaced by utter silence and palpable terror.

* * *

Dale watched as half the army suddenly froze, his own wall just as quiet as the enemy forces as everyone looked on in disbelief.

He shook his head and sighed.

Ilea landed next to him, her expression hidden under her ashen armor.

"What the fuck was that?" he asked.

"Monster Hunter. Seems like they should work on their Veteran skills," she said.

Dale watched as the army started moving again, apparently unsure how to proceed. Rowan Harken remained standing where he was.

Entirely paralyzed.

"You have a way with diplomacy," Dale said. "If you planned to intimidate them, I think it worked, but I don't know if it'll be enough."

"He's arrogant, but he seems less stupid than his cousin. He should take the deal and leave."

"Are you sure you can do this?" Dale asked, seeing Alistair arrive with an entourage of officers.

She gave him a slight smile. "There's more here than usual, but I do this kind of thing every morning."

He gave her a questioning look.

"I don't usually fight back."

"I know you have ways of surviving and escaping, but there are hundreds of them facing you," Dale said, nodding to the man who now joined them on the wall. "Alistair."

"You came so quickly," the man said, glancing at the two of them. "He gave us half an hour to surrender. Are more Shadows on the way?" Alistair asked, looking at Rowan and his officers forming ranks.

Powerful magic surged from the people now stepping onto the battlefield. A challenge.

"They made their choice," Ilea said.

She touched Dale's shoulder and jumped down.

"What is she..." Alistair trailed off, looking at Dale.

"She gave them ten minutes," he said and allowed himself a small smile. He had lost a dozen guards already. Men and women he knew well, whom he had trained, fought, and eaten with. He had called her here, but everything that happened now was on them.

"Ten minutes... she can't be serious," the governor whispered. "We can't engage... even with her on our side, it would be suicide."

"She's told me stories you wouldn't believe. If even half of it is true..." Dale heard himself say.

“This is ridiculous... She can’t seriously think she can stand against an army?” Alistair said, looking at Dale before turning his attention back to the battlefield.

Can’t she? Why not? She has faced hordes of monsters on her own already. How is this different?

He looked at her armored back. He had known her for so long that it was difficult to shake his image of her as an inexperienced healer. But the woman who now faced their enemy was no longer the one he had met so long ago.

Dale motioned to the other officers. “Stand down!”

Alistair gave him a look.

Dale breathed in deep. It was still Ilea who now walked toward Lord Harken, but she had grown, had fought, and had survived. She had faced far worse than what she faced now, if he believed her.

And he did.

He grabbed the hilt of his sword and waited. “Lilith is allied with Riverwatch. I think we’re about to find out what that means.”

* * *

Lilith stopped thirty meters before them. “To all the normal soldiers, if you want to flee, I won’t hunt you down. You have my word.”

Rowan gritted his teeth and stepped back, looking at all his high-level officers and warriors gathered before him, his army at the ready.

Arrows were nocked and spells charged, ballistae loaded and aimed.

“Kill her!” he shouted and motioned to his troops.

Spells of twenty different schools of magic rushed out at the Shadow, hundreds of them in total, interspersed with arrows.

Explosions, steel, and fire rained onto her position, and smoke, dirt, and debris rose and spread out as his mages, rangers, and ballistae unloaded their spells and projectiles.

He watched for a full ten seconds before he raised his hand.

“Cease fire!”

One last arrow fired from a ballista rushed at the rising smoke. Flames burned the nearby grass, and crystal, stone, wood, and poison all occupied the same space.

Rowan watched the projectile, heard the sound of metal striking stone. He held his breath, as did everyone around him.

Slowly, the smoke cleared, revealing an ash-clad Lilith standing amidst the debris, holding a massive arrow in her hand. She threw it to the side, wings of ash spreading from her back before they beat once, sending out a wave of air that dissipated the lingering smoke and magic.

Voices started whispering around Rowan as a few cheers echoed from the walls of the city.

Some way to negate damage or projectiles? Or did she teleport away? Might be she's an illusion in the first place.

"An illusion?" Rowan asked, watching her approach with slow steps.

"I cannot tell, Lord Harken. As far as I can see, she is here," one of his officers said, his voice almost frantic.

"Impossible," another said as he stepped forward.

The man had reached level two hundred at a young age and now confidently lifted his two-handed mace. Enchantments came to life as he faced the Shadow.

She didn't stop, approaching with the same uncaring attitude.

No matter what, it is foolish to attack a Shadow alone. I will have to deal with him after this is over, Rowan thought.

Everyone watched as the officer stopped a few meters in front of the Shadow, his form towering above hers, the head of his mace as large as her chest.

"Didn't you see what happened just now?" she asked, looking around at the waiting soldiers.

"Quiet!" the officer shouted, magic surging as he brought his heavy weapon down. An impact boomed through the forest, but the weapon was stopped dead.

Lilith stood with one arm raised.

A moment later, a dozen limbs of ash punched through the officer's heavy armor, and with a tearing sound, he was ripped apart, his weapon falling to the floor as Lilith kept advancing.

Rowan gulped.

Her wings spread again. Ash moved out across the ground, and spheres started forming around her.

She looked straight at him.

"Time's up."

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TWENTY-SIX

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Lilith

Rowan knew he was losing control. “Prepare to fight – take her down as fast as possible! Everyone who flees will be executed!”

Looking back, his eye twitched when he saw some of his soldiers were already turning away, and more were stepping back, unsure of what to do.

Just because she can shout and kill one man! Undisciplined imbeciles!

“Stand your ground!” he roared and prepared his two steel whips, imbuing them with power. “I don’t give a fuck about her ultimatum. Take her down now!” he ordered the team in front of him.

Even some of them were showing uncertainty.

“Come, then, and face me in battle,” the Shadow said as she crouched and made to charge.

There was something new there. A glint of excitement.

Rowan watched as his elites used their skills and shot forward, some teleporting right next to her while others sent their spells forward instead.

Her limbs rushed out around her. Three men were impaled, her fist punching through the chest of another. There was a loud crunch as his chest plate bent inward, his ribs broken and his insides squashed to a pulp.

The three impaled men were flung at the mages, one of them unable to dodge the body. Marbles of ash zipped around, two finding their targets as heads exploded in a red mist.

Four warriors slashed their weapons at her only to find thin air as she weaved through their attacks, her limbs impaling two of them as one of her wings slapped away the third.

The last warrior dodged two of her punches only to get a knee in his crotch. She followed up with an elbow to his face, the force ripping off his head.

Lilith vanished and reappeared over the downed mage, his cries finding no mercy as he was silenced with a sharp limb of ash through his skull.

She straightened and looked at Rowan as motion erupted all around her. Arrows were loosed, men and women shouted, and spells impacted close to her, but unlike before, none found their target.

Many soldiers screamed and turned, some vanished, and others fell to their knees, overwhelmed by terror.

Rowan looked around at a loss. “Stand your ground!” he shouted, but his voice was lost in the chaos.

He turned and found two blue eyes staring into his own.

“Yo—”

A hand lashed out, slapping his cheek with enough force to nearly break his neck. He tumbled to the side and landed hard a few meters away, disoriented and bleeding.

“Stand—” he started as he stumbled back to his feet, but his voice stuck in his throat when he saw the ashen tendrils mow through his men as if they were bugs. Heads were pierced, limbs were severed, and corpses were thrown to all sides.

Spears and marbles of ash slammed through tempered steel plate as if it was wet paper. Hundreds were already fleeing.

Rowan saw soldiers trained and prepared for this day on their knees, praying to their gods as the creature of ash slaughtered their brothers and sisters in arms.

“A monster...” he whispered, shielding himself from a fiery explosion to his right.

Nothing stopped her. Shields were broken, spears snapped, and blades shattered against her armor. Arrows rushed past or had no impact. Spells hit allies or trees, the monster teleporting and shredding through their ranks like an unchained beast left to hunger for weeks.

What have... what have I done? Who is she? How could I have known?

Rowan stumbled forward, his eyes still focused on the woman, only able to follow her due to the limbs of ash and the path of carnage she left behind.

He watched as a mist of ash covered twenty men in formation, their screams drowned out until they fell a few seconds later, lifeless and smothered in ash.

“Lord Harken! We must retreat!” an officer shouted near him, half of his right arm missing.

Retreat? How... one Shadow. Is she even human? he asked himself as he followed wordlessly, running into the forest, fleeing alongside hundreds as battle shouts rang out, then died.

He had lost control. Discipline and trust had been ripped from his hand by sheer force of nature. Whatever he was facing, it wasn't human. It was a creature of darkness.

Was it punishment? For forsaking his king and country? The Order of Truth?

He could feel his steps hasten, his eyes focused forward as he ran. He was the commander, Lord Harken. He was supposed to stand, to face the enemy and lead his army to victory. And yet, all his instincts told him to run.

Adventurers told stories of creatures powerful enough to slay whole towns, to break through walls and slaughter hundreds, if not thousands. He had thought it hubris. Overblown stories by men and women who thought themselves heroes, trying to impress their lowly peers.

He believed them now. And the thing could speak, too. *Lilith*.

Lilith, he repeated in his mind.

A sudden burst of magic came from the left, and he teleported, his whips at his side as he felt a strong pressure on his mind.

The officer who had run by his side collapsed, foaming from his mouth as he died.

“*You are the commander, are you not?*” The voice that boomed in his mind wasn't human.

“Show yourself, beast! Lilith! Come and finish it! Show me your power!” he shouted, finding courage in the mindless slaughter of his comrades.

A creature clad in black rags hovered out into the open, abyss-like holes instead of eyes in his skull, and its large mouth opened, revealing sharp lines of teeth glinting in the sunlight breaking through the trees.

Rowan took a step back, at a loss for words.

She reveals herself at last.

[Mind Weaver – lvl 219]

“Mistress Lilith is looking for you. But I found you first,” the creature said without moving its mouth. “So much meat. A waste, really. And here I am, collecting the scraps.”

A powerful surge of magic slammed into his mind, and Rowan had no recourse but to teleport away as far as he could. His resistance was strong but not enough to counter whatever that being was.

He turned back and watched as it lifted the recently deceased officer’s corpse, biting down on his neck.

Rowan kept running. *She commands demons too. Mind demons... I have to warn the kingdom. Maybe the high king will forgive me. Maybe they will be able to help.*

No, we have to avoid this place. She offered mercy, and I laughed at her.

He ran for twenty minutes, the shouts and screams lessening over time. Soon, he found himself entirely alone, still running as fast as his legs would carry him. He saved up his teleport skill in case the enemy showed up.

Rowan felt his heart thrumming in his chest, his breath the only thing he heard in the thick forest. *Have I crossed into Nipha already?*

He had to regroup, find the survivors, return to Wynehold, and think about what to do.

A whistling sound came from above. Rowan jumped to the side, crouching between two trees for cover. Something heavy impacted the ground.

“There you are,” the voice said.

No...

No, no...

Rowan stepped back and stumbled.

Before him stood Lilith, clad in her dark ashen armor, her eyes taking him in.

All he saw was a monster looking at its prey.

Before he could use his own teleportation skill, she appeared in front of him and grabbed his skull. He felt a strange tearing and then pain. For a moment, his body felt weightless, and then his vision darkened.

The last thing he saw was an ash-covered helmet.

* * *

“Bring them over here!” Dale shouted toward a group of guards. Dozens of soldiers wandered aimlessly before their captors, dejected and entirely defeated.

“Where are the water mages? Get over here, we can’t have half the forest burning down!” he barked, pointing at a few uncertain mages walking amongst the carnage. “Move, move, move!”

They did move, focusing on the trees instead of the mince meat.

The officers had been defiant until the last one of them was ripped apart.

Most of the army had fled, and he knew Ilea would keep her word and let them go. The same wouldn’t be true for the Hunters and guards looking for revenge for those who had fallen. He had to keep them in line lest more lives be lost.

“Start building pyres. I want this carnage cleaned up by this evening!” he said before walking briskly back to the wall. All the blood and corpses would attract a large amount of monsters. The fight wasn’t over quite yet.

Dale had seen a lot in his life, but that scene on the field before Riverwatch topped everything. He still wasn’t entirely sure he had really seen what he had seen.

A few earth mages had extended a section of the wall to allow Alistair a base of command. Officers came and went. Rescue operations to get people out from collapsed or burnt buildings were already underway.

Alistair gave Dale a hard look when he returned.

They were quiet for a minute, watching the guards and Hunters regroup and work. Groups of former slaves had joined their efforts, while others were crying or walking around aimlessly. Some Hunters and guards argued that they should go and hunt down the enemy soldiers.

“Where is she now?” Alistair asked.

“Lord Harken fled,” Dale said.

“I’ve met Shadows, Dale, and I know what she did to the smugglers, but this...”

“Be glad we met her out in the woods back when we did.”

“This event will ripple through the lands. If she wasn’t known about before, she will be now.”

* * *

Ilea soon reached the battlefield she had left behind. She could see the guards were already cleaning up, and all the people left in Baralia colors were either already helping them or waiting nearby with uncertain expressions, reflecting fear and relief alike. She saw the remnants of the war camps left by their enemies too. She imagined the cleanup would take a while.

She spotted Alistair a few hundred meters away and flew down, very aware of the stares and whispers all around her as she landed. For once, she kept her armor on.

“Lord Harken,” she said, throwing the head into his arms. “And his storage ring.”

Alistair looked at her for a long moment and then bowed his head. “Thank you, Lilith.” Everyone around them had gone quiet.

“Left a bit too much of an impression, it seems,” she said, but other than a few embarrassed glances, nobody seemed to want to join in with the joke. “I’ll help with the cleanup. Let me know if you need me for anything else.”

She flew up into the air again before Alistair could respond, quickly finding Dale among the people cleaning up. He glanced up at her and waved, a relieved expression on his face.

She waved back and landed. He looked at her for a moment.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hey. Anything you need?”

She shook her head and smiled ever so slightly. “Just here to help with the cleanup.”

He nodded and then smiled back. “Good. After the mess you’ve made.”

She gave him a look and then started helping. They worked in silence for a few minutes before he spoke up again.

“Thank you.”

“Of course. I made the mess, I should help with the cleanup,” she said and winked.

“No. I mean, thank you for coming when I called,” Dale said. “I was worried for a second. When you jumped down from the walls and faced down an army.”

She smiled at him.

“You don’t have to stay and help. You know that, right?”

“I’ll stay for a night. Just in case monsters or soldiers come back,” she said.

He nodded. “Then I’ll make sure to use your strength. Care to join us for dinner later? At our place.”

“You won’t be busy?”

“Today would have been my day off. The least I’ll get out of it is dinner.”

Ilea nodded and smiled, watching the armored guards and Hunters work nearby, their heavy boots moving in the dirt and grass, as the nearby forest cast long shadows in the morning suns.

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TWENTY-SEVEN

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Aftermath

The cleanup was complete by the afternoon, thanks to the help of the numerous guards. The corpses themselves weren't many in number either. Compared to the tens of thousands of demons that had been killed in Ravenhall.

The gear that had once belonged to the dead caused more work. Stripping all the bodies, sorting everything, and transporting it into the town.

Ilea didn't talk much and kept her ashen armor active during the process. She knew that her display would leave a lasting impression on most of the onlookers. The atmosphere, however, was mostly celebratory, a combination of the won battle and the fact that many of the guards already knew her.

A powerful ally was something completely different than an unknown monster helping out on a whim. She did hear the whispers and comments, though, from people thinking she was far enough away that they could talk about her. Rumors and speculation, mixed with admiration.

She sighed, watching the burning pyres, the suns burning down from high above. No sweat or discomfort showed on her face, nor did she feel any, though the guards around her had tears in their eyes from the smoke.

Ilea looked up at the smoke as it drifted into the sky. She summoned a bit of ash and let it drift up and mingle with the smoke. She didn't regret what she had done today, but she recognized that the people who had faced her were still human. If anything, she felt disappointed that people attacked

others they deemed weaker instead of going into the wild and facing a challenge there.

A few soldiers looked at her, and soon, a mage shot up a spray of fire. More joined in as time passed. A gesture to send off those who had fallen. On both sides.

Ilea remained for a few minutes before wordlessly walking back to the city. She didn't participate in taking down the war camps and siege weapons. Doubtlessly powerful new additions to the city's defenses.

Within the walls, mages, engineers, and guards alike were still working hard. Houses needed to be repaired, and anyone trapped beneath rubble and debris needed to be rescued.

The biggest job would be the logistics of dealing with all the slaves she had freed. They needed food, water, jobs, and a place to stay. She imagined at least a few of them would soon make their way to Ravenhall.

Almost all that was true for the soldiers who had surrendered as well.

By now, many of the residents had come out of their houses again, news about the conclusion of the siege spreading quickly. She got looks from everyone. Some people cheered, others were terrified. Many thanked her or bowed in respect.

Ilea didn't feel like removing her Armor of Ash, being the only high-level healer around. Many already knew what she looked like, but now that she had literally become the savior of Riverwatch, she desired a tiny bit of anonymity.

Ilea strolled toward the main government buildings, unsure what else to do. She enjoyed some of Keyla's cooking and soon jumped onto the roofs to avoid people calling out to her. Now that she was up here, she finally cast off her armor and changed into some casual clothes. She wanted to stay at least for the day.

Dozens of soldiers and officials rushed across the square below her, in and out of the surrounding buildings, as they worked to deal with this crisis and its conclusion. One of the inns had already opened its doors again, guards celebrating their victory loudly and cheerfully as they chatted and joked with the people rushing past.

Ilea wondered how many of them would have died if she hadn't been there today. If she hadn't met Dale a few years ago in the nearby forest. If she didn't have the ability to mark someone and have them call for help.

Alistair would have called for assistance at some point, but it would have taken a lot more time to get any response from Ravenhall.

The tale of this victory would spread far and wide, likely leading to more credibility for both this city and Ravenhall.

“Hey! You’re not allowed to be up there!” a guard called out as he walked past.

Ilea spread her wings briefly and smiled at the change in his expression.

He bowed deeply and apologized profusely before being on his way, looking back a few times as if a predator was hunting him.

She looked through her messages for a little while, quickly skipping all the ones telling her about defeated enemies.

Her skills hadn’t leveled much, as expected.

‘ding’ Sentinel Huntress reaches 3rd lvl 5

‘ding’ Ash and Ember Unity reaches 3rd lvl 24

‘ding’ Deviant of Humanity reaches lvl 7

‘ding’ Monster Hunter reaches 2nd lvl 9

Only one level for Monster Hunter. So even though I can’t freeze high-level creatures, just challenging them provides more experience than freezing hundreds of lower-level people at the same time?

Not a single level for her resistances, despite the heavy bombardment. She was happy to see she’d got an additional mark thanks to Sentinel Huntress leveling up. She’d likely give it to Trian, or perhaps even Walter.

Maybe Walter. Claire already has one, and she should be close to Trian most of the time.

Done with her meal, Ilea spread her wings and flew outside the city, finding a tree with a good view and settling down. Ash made her position considerably more comfortable than back when she’d camped out here without her convenient creation skill.

She sighed, turning in her makeshift hammock as she watched things happening in the city. The slightly elevated position let her observe quite a bit. Her Eyes of Ash allowed her to see the expressions of guards patrolling on the walls, the spells and efforts of those still cleaning up.

Soon, the exhaustion of the past few days started to add up, making her close her eyes slowly. A moment later, Ilea fell asleep, neither dreams nor monsters disturbing her.

* * *

The suns had moved considerably when she woke up, shining down on her as she slowly opened her eyes. She found herself looking straight at the celestial bodies but didn't have to blink, courtesy of her Light Magic Resistance.

She assumed it was early evening and sat up. Surprisingly, she was on the ground.

Ilea looked up and saw the tree branches she had used to hold her hammock. *The construct broke as soon as I fell asleep.* Looking down, she found the ash piled up around herself. Contrary to her armor or sphere, the things she made with her manipulation evidently didn't last through her sleeping mind.

She smiled, amused at the fact that falling from a tree hadn't woken her up. She would have been concerned about monsters creeping up on her, but her sphere worked differently. If even level ten wolves had shown up, she would have woken. At least, she was reasonably sure about that. Maybe they were so little of a threat that she would have remained asleep while they tried to gnaw at her.

"That was nice," she murmured as she stretched, her wings lifting her off the ground as she extended her legs.

She summoned another meal and casually floated toward the town when rapid movement to the south caught her attention. *Monsters?* she wondered, but she soon saw two squads of dark-armored forms rush toward the city, half of them flying.

Reinforcements? Seems like Dale wasn't the only one who called for help. They arrived on the same day? Or maybe they were called for earlier.

She sped up a little and kept her eyes focused on the Shadows. They landed near the southern gate and quickly entered the city.

Ilea wasn't stopped by anyone as she slowly flew over the west gate, low enough for the guards to identify her. Their stares didn't make her feel particularly uncomfortable. She was glad many of the guards already knew

her, stories of her early interactions with the city having surely spread like wildfire.

Alistair and a group of officers and guards met the Shadows at the square she had overlooked earlier that day.

She landed on a nearby house, looking down at the groups. Ilea recognized a few of the new people. Among them were Charles, the guy who had used sunlight magic in front of Virilya, and Petra, his lava magic partner.

The group turned toward her.

Oh, noticed me, have we?

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TWENTY-EIGHT

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Reinforcements

“There she is,” one of the Shadows said after waving her over. He was massive, his arm alone casting a person-sized shadow. “Lilith, savior of Riverwatch. Seems like the threat was exaggerated.”

“Or you’re underestimating her,” another one said, amusement obvious in his voice. “Still... very stupidly.” He seemed to be grinning, despite the mask covering his face.

The man who had talked first growled. He was at least twice as large as Ilea, plus another Ilea in the form of muscle on top. His armor, savage, scratched, and hastily repaired in parts, must have weighed as much as a car. He seemed familiar to Ilea, but she wasn’t sure where she had seen him before.

“My offer stands. We can do it right here, right now,” the large one said to the masked one, magic flowing around him.

Ilea smirked, identifying the bunch of Shadows before her. A mix of eight warriors and mages in their mid-two-hundreds. The large man and the masked man were both close to two-fifty.

“Stand down, Miller,” a woman said, her voice calm and confident. She was smaller than Ilea, a fine light blue armored dress covering her slender form. Long raven hair fell down her back, and the upper part of her face was covered by a simple black mask.

Ilea looked at the woman’s eyes behind the mask, feeling the magic in the area through her sphere.

Hmm. That’s new.

[Mage – lvl 285]

The woman was by far the highest-level individual nearby, aside from herself.

The brutish man shut up at the woman's command, not even grumbling as he visibly relaxed.

"You too, Duncan. Let the man be," Charles said, nodding to the masked man. "It is good to meet you here. Lilith, is it?" he said with a smile.

"I suppose it is now. Good to see you too, Charles," Ilea said to the light mage.

"You know her?" asked the blue armored dress-wearing woman, likely their squad leader.

"Yeah, we've met before. You've grown... quite a bit. Impressive work," Charles said.

"I knew you would as soon as I saw you mow down those demons," Petra said and laughed.

"Seems like you took care of the problem. At least most of it," Blue Dress said.

There was a strange aura around her that was completely foreign to Ilea. "I did. But now that you're here, I have to ask about your magic. I've never felt anything like it... I'm intrigued."

Blue Dress inclined her head in consideration. "I have heard a lot about you, Lilith. And your... resistance training. It seems... excessive. Still, I'm interested in your abilities as well, after everything I've heard. Perhaps once we're done with these talks, we could have a little bout?"

Ilea smiled at her. "I'll be waiting." She watched them leave, Alistair giving her a quick nod while both Charles and Petra waved at her as they departed.

* * *

The talks didn't take long, and the group of Shadows soon found her again on the square. Ilea was sipping from a mug of ale as she watched them arrive.

"How'd it go?" she asked.

It was the woman in the blue armored dress with the interesting magic who spoke. "We simply received a report and part of our payment for coming in the first place. And an offer to stay for a while, which we declined. Neither me nor Warren, the other squad leader, deemed it necessary to remain."

"That's good to hear."

"We have another assignment east of here. But it *has* been a while since I met my match," she said, a sly smile on her lips. Her black eyes seemed to sparkle for a split second before they returned to normal.

At two-eighty, there are plenty of matches out there, lady. Maybe you should leave these plains once in a while.

Varren nodded. He was still fully armored, his face hidden, as he had been when she'd first met him. "A monster infestation north of Kroll has been reported. I suppose we can stay for the show, if you don't mind. Since the last tournament was so... rudely interrupted."

"I don't mind," Ilea said.

The woman shrugged.

"What do you guys have? Any interesting magic?" Ilea said.

The two women in Varren's squad looked at each other. Neither of them had talked so far.

"Fire, mostly. I doubt you lack that," one of them said, giggling. She had copper hair spilling out of the back of her helmet.

"I use wind and sand... not rare either, but perhaps?" the other one whispered, the sound traveling through the area via magic.

Is she using wind for that?

"I've got both already," Ilea said, returning her attention to the others.

"My magic is mostly arcane," Varren said.

"Void, but it's the daggers that deal the damage," said Duncan, the other man in his team, twirling his weapons around. "I would still like a bite, if you would indulge me." Despite his mask, he managed to convey a rather roguish demeanor.

Ilea knew that Petra used lava and Charles light. That only left Miller and the black-eyed woman whose name she had yet to learn.

"We should leave the city for this," Ilea said and spread her wings, their groups quickly finding an open space a few kilometers outside the city.

Two teams of Shadows and only one person who might have a new resistance for me. Maybe it's time to level up soon and see what I get.

She stayed in the air, and the black-eyed woman opposite her did the same.

Now that she had missed her morning routine in the arena and even her afternoon lessons with the Sentinels, this felt like a reasonable substitute. And it would take her mind off everything that had happened.

“I won’t hold back, considering your reputation,” the black-eyed Shadow said.

“Please don’t,” Ilea said as politely as she could.

She wondered if the Shadow could reach the same heights Feyrair had displayed, considering their similar levels.

The others moved aside when a powerful pulse of mana rushed out from the woman. Mana Ilea had never felt before.

Please be something cool.

Ilea watched as the woman’s pupils changed from black to something else. A deep void interspersed with specks of light like the night sky.

Magic manifested in the form of hovering shapes, vaguely resembling arrows. They brimmed with energy, colored in shades of red, blue, and purple as if they contained shimmering galaxies. It looked like the light around the Shadow dimmed as her power manifested.

The arrows rotated around her in a complicated pattern as she raised one of her arms, the same sly smile as before on her lips. A tiny speck of light formed in front of her outstretched palm.

Ilea felt the attack coming and the damage it would deal. The decision was obvious, and Ilea instantly disabled her armor.

A beam of dark light came and went, washing over her body. She felt the various aspects of the magic, its complicated form. At first, she thought it arcane in nature, but there was heat too, something that felt like space magic, and... something else. Something new.

She reformed her armor without actually using the skill, instead reconstructing the shape with created ash.

“Interesting,” Ilea said with a wide smile, realizing that the woman’s casual expression had changed.

*Really? You really thought that would be enough to take me out?
Oh dear.*

TWENTY-NINE

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Shadows

Ilea pretended her wings weren't quite as maneuverable as the Shadow's hovering power in order to keep things interesting. Time and time again, she rushed the woman only to be blown back by the strange, blueish, almost rainbow-colored spells she wielded.

Ilea didn't use her Armor of Ash, but even without it, the bright beams weren't enough to take her down. Her healing and regeneration simply outperformed the damage dealt.

Finally, a message popped up in her mind, making her raise a hand.

'ding' You have learned the General Skill: Astral Magic Resistance – lvl 1

Astral Magic Resistance – lvl 1

The power of the stars, harnessed and used to wreak unimaginable destruction. Few beings are able to channel this power through their bodies. It does not come as a surprise to find a human, of all beings, finding a way to modify their weak vessel for its use. But do not let your encounters fool you: this school of magic is quite extraordinary and just as rare.

Ilea grinned to herself.

Another one down.

The Shadow misinterpreted Ilea's request for a pause as she read the notification, her eyes glinting with the light of the fires clinging to some of

the nearby trees next to the barren paths of destruction from where her magic had scorched the ground. Large furrows had been carved through earth, plant, and stone alike – a testament to the power of astral magic.

“Have you finally reached the limits of your regeneration?” she asked, the arrow-like shapes still circling around her. The magic glimmered strangely, as if both absorbing and reflecting the light. The color within cycled from a deep blue speckled with all kinds of other colors to almost white.

The arrows’ edges were hard to make out. It was as if Ilea’s mind was just rendering what it was seeing into the most easily processable design. They appeared almost like rifts in the air, opened to someplace beyond that her brain struggled to understand.

Ilea assumed they were the woman’s defenses, likely activating if something got too close. If they weren’t fifty times as powerful as her other spells, they wouldn’t be a concern. The beams the Shadow had been hurling were powerful, just not enough to break through Ilea’s healing.

“Reached my limits? Not exactly. But thank you very much for the help. I just got a resistance,” Ilea said as her Armor of Ash reformed.

The woman raised her brows.

“Ready to continue?” Ilea asked.

“Whenever you want,” the Shadow said.

She seems bored... Well, let’s actually try then.

Ilea rushed her, ignoring the power of her foe’s magic washing over her, the beam barely shaving off a millimeter of her armor. Ilea no longer flew backward as the beam hit either, instead closing the distance by engaging at a significantly higher speed than she’d shown at any point before.

The Shadow’s eyes widened at the display, raising both arms as more beams poured out.

As Ilea reached her, the arrows dug into her ash before their power dug into her too. *Mana intrusion? Or another way to bypass my armor?* she wondered. She found the damage negligible.

The Shadow vanished before Ilea could reach her, but she noted a distortion of space near the edge of her sphere. A blink brought her to the surprised woman just as she reappeared. Ilea’s hand shot out and closed around the Shadow’s neck, locking her in place.

She felt the power build before more arrows bypassed her ash and dove straight into her body. *Not my body... my mana,* Ilea realized. They

damaged both her mana pool and her health.

The woman choked, eyes ablaze, and tried to punch Ilea, magic flowing around her fists. *That's interesting. Haven't met many mages yet who are able to fist-fight like that.*

Ilea let go before she dodged an astral mana-infused punch and hit back. She heard a *crack* as she drove her fist into the woman's jaw.

Oh, but still not durable enough for close combat, it seems.

The Shadow hovered back, eyes watering from the blow but still focused on Ilea. "You held back. Are you trying to insult me?" she said, wincing in pain before she spat out blood.

"I wanted to get a resistance first. Didn't mean to insult you. Are you done? Or do you want to continue?"

"I am *not* done," the woman growled, her magic surging before another beam blasted from her cupped hands, at least twice as powerful than any she had used before.

Ilea dodged that one, her wings carrying her outside of the magic's range as she approached once again. She reached the Shadow and grabbed onto her leg as she tried to fly upward to escape, twirling in the air before hurling her at the ground.

The Shadow managed to slow herself down a little but still crashed hard, her shin already broken from Ilea's previous grip.

Yes, quite a bit more fragile than your average close-combat warrior, she thought. *Guess she focused on offense. A true mage.*

Ilea grinned. With all of her defenses, speed, and healing, she was probably the worst match-up for a glass cannon like this.

She landed next to where the Shadow lay prone in a newly created crater and waited for her to get up. The others, who had been watching from a safe distance, joined them again.

"Looks like the rumors were true," Miller said with a smirk.

"She's a defensive fighter," Duncan said. "This was decided as soon as we saw her take those astral spells head-on."

Ilea wondered if she could change his mind with a fully charged Heart of Cinder. She decided not to.

Charles and Petra just looked at each other. They had seen Ilea fight near Virilya and against the demons.

The black-eyed Shadow slowly got to her feet and gave a bow. "My name is Rivka. It looks like I've found more than my match. Thank you for

the demonstration.”

Ilea gave her a nod. “I appreciate the resistance. And if you’re around Ravenhall in the coming weeks, feel free to join in at the arena.”

Rivka waved her off. “I have plenty of areas to work on, thank you. Miller here is enough to help me with my hand-to-hand combat. It seems I have neglected it.”

The man just grunted. He nodded to Ilea, as if he was glad Rivka finally understood her shortcomings.

She fought Miller too and then a few of the others, but the results were always the same. They had experience and the skills to back it up, but Ilea had the same, in addition to a hundred levels more, and healing.

“Well, I think we’ve stayed here for long enough. Anybody else want to get their teeth kicked in?” Varren asked.

“I’m fine, boss,” Duncan said.

“We should go too,” Rivka said. “May we meet again.”

“Stay alive,” Charles said, smiling at Ilea.

“You do the same,” she said.

And that was that. A short few bouts with some fellow Shadows, a decent way to clear the bad taste left in her mouth by the Harkens.

She stood there for a moment and then breathed out. The fights underlined the power she had attained on her journey from Ravenhall to the north to the Descent.

Lord Harken and his officers had been nobles more concerned with their power over others than growing their own abilities. Ilea wondered how often they had truly faced a challenge. It wasn’t a surprise to her that she’d been able to drive them off. It hadn’t felt like an achievement.

Being able to win against experienced, high-level Shadows with such ease, however, felt like something else entirely.

Ilea watched them fly and sprint off into the wild. Her own wings spread before she slowly moved around the area, quenching any remaining flames left by their battles with a cloud of ash. The ground had been upturned, dozens of trees destroyed. She smiled and remembered her first few fights in Elos.

The Shadows she had fought were well trained, versed in their magic or style of fighting. They had ways to hit her and avoid her attacks – but in terms of sheer power, they hardly compared to something like the Specters or the Ascended.

*Long way to go.
But first, dinner.*

* * *

Ilea knocked on the door and waited, glad nobody had recognized her on the way. Taking the rooftops had helped. Plus there was the fact that most citizens were below level fifty, meaning most healers would only be identified with question marks anyway.

She was just one of many. As long as the whole battle healer thing didn't become broadly known. *I hope the first Sentinels get their Classes soon. That might solve that issue.*

The house was more basic than she had expected. Not small, but the architecture was simple. Stone blocks creating a cottage-like structure that would be big enough for an inn in smaller towns, a simple, thatched roof, and some practical wooden window shutters. It was large enough to house a family, but it certainly didn't look like it would be home to a captain of the guard.

The door, however, was reinforced with steel and half a foot thick. In her sphere, she noted a mechanism allowing a heavy iron bar to be slid into place behind it by pulling a lever.

Decent security. Wouldn't do much against me, but still decent.

The door opened slightly, green eyes staring out from behind the security chains still in place. "Yes?" the woman asked.

"Hello. I'm Ilea. Dale invited me for dinner... I hope he informed you?" she asked with a smile.

The woman's suspicious face cracked into a warm smile, and she opened the door wide. "He did let me know. Nice to finally meet you, Ilea."

Dale's wife had flowing red hair and striking green eyes and wore a simple dress. She was a little smaller than Ilea and had a delicate stature.

"I'm Abby, come on in," she said, welcoming the guest before she walked to the kitchen, leaving Ilea in the entryway.

It was a simple stone and wood affair, but a rich, multi-colored rug had been laid on the floor, and various candles gave off an inviting glow. It was the kind of space that instantly felt welcoming.

"Can I get you a drink?" Abby asked from the kitchen.

“Sure, whatever you have,” Ilea said, looking around the ground floor.

Her sphere had already told her everything to be known about this apartment from a practical standpoint, but only her eyes could appreciate the subtle color schemes worked into the various items and decorations.

There were shelves of lovely carved knickknacks and walls adorned by tapestries, paintings, or even sculptures on simple wooden plinths. Bowls of dried herbs and flowers gave every space its own fragrance. The colors were warm and welcoming and managed to never feel busy or cluttered despite the veritable feast of art and culture on display.

Does Elos have interior designers? If they do, Abby should be one. Either that or Dale has an interesting hobby.

Abby leaned through the kitchen doorway. “We have wine, ale, mead, beer, whiskey, water, and lemonade. Or do you prefer fresh blood?” She giggled and vanished again.

Ilea smiled. *What exactly did you tell her about me, Dale?* “Ale, mead, or beer. I’ll take whatever you suggest.”

Ilea heard Abby pour something into two mugs before showing herself. She handed one of the containers to Ilea and smiled. “I thought you had horns and a tail.”

Ilea took a sip of the mead. *Delicious.*

[Cook – lvl 41]

“Horns? That comes with the armor. I decided on a more casual outfit for tonight,” Ilea said.

“Very disappointing to hear,” Abby said as she leaned casually against a cupboard, her own drink in hand.

Ilea smirked. “Do you want to see it?”

“Yes. Very much,” Abby said and took a sip of mead, a sly smirk on her freckled face. “It’s been the talk of the town, after all.”

Ilea obliged, activating Armor of Ash.

“Hmm, yes. And the wings?”

Ilea spread them, making sure not to hit any of the furniture or vases. She also noticed a young boy entering the house behind her.

“What? Why is there a bird in here?” he asked in confusion.

Abby giggled. “I didn’t tell him,” she whispered.

Ilea turned, the confused expression on the boy's face turning to terror as he took a step back, one hand going to his side as if to draw a weapon. There was nothing there.

"Nice to meet you," Ilea said as she deactivated her skills. "I'm Ilea. Dale invited me for dinner."

"D... what?" the boy said. His hair looked similar to Dale's, as did his build. He had the beginnings of a solid beard growing in, though not quite as well-kempt as Dale kept his. She assumed he was around eighteen.

[Warrior – lvl 22]

How cute.

She nodded to him. "No need to be scared."

"Why would I be scared?" the boy asked, squaring his shoulders and lifting his chin.

Ilea could feel his terror despite the bravado.

Abby laughed and went back into the kitchen. "Be so kind as to introduce yourself, Rhett! You should show her around as well."

He nodded and deflated a bit, taking a deep breath before he bowed deeply. "I'm Rhett Langston. Thank you for saving our city and my father!"

"No worries. I just helped out a friend," Ilea said and motioned him to stand up straight again.

"Sorry about that. Dale told me you're not exactly in it for the attention, but after what you did today, I doubt you'll have an easy time avoiding it," Abby said as she returned and refilled Ilea's mug from a pitcher.

"It's not that much of a problem when you can literally fly into the wild to avoid people," Ilea said.

The woman laughed.

"You wanted someone else to train with, Rhett, why don't you show her your skills?" Abby asked before going back to the kitchen, grabbing a few vegetables, and beginning to wash them.

Ilea smiled, looking at the boy, whose cheeks had taken on a dark shade of red.

"I wouldn't mind. I see you have a training room in the house," Ilea said, nodding toward a closed door.

"How did you know?" the boy asked.

"I can see through walls," Ilea said in a whisper.

“Really?” Rhett asked, now with a smile on his face.

“Yes, come on. I’m sure you can benefit from attacking me for a while.”

“No resistance training for him, young lady!” Abby shouted from the kitchen.

“Yes, yes,” Ilea said, waving her off as she entered the training room.

It wasn’t large. Enough for two people to swing swords, but not quite enough for an actual bout. The walls were made of stone, chips and scratches covering them. The straw scarecrow at its center looked back at Ilea, homemade button eyes looking almost sad.

“Why does it look so depressed?” she asked, touching the thing as if she could heal it.

“Father says I need to understand the weight of taking someone’s life,” Rhett said as he walked over to a small wooden chest, taking out a wooden sword that he twirled somewhat expertly.

I don’t know if a sad scarecrow will help with that.

“I heard the whole army shot spells at you... and you didn’t even flinch. Is it true?” he asked.

Ilea turned toward him. “I wouldn’t say the whole army. That would have been difficult logistically. I’m a rather small target. But there were quite a few.”

He laughed and changed into a battle stance.

Ilea noticed a pair of green eyes watching from the doorway a few minutes later, so she decided to put on a good show.

* * *

Dale showed up half an hour later.

“I’m back!” he said, walking into the kitchen. “Did—”

“Yes,” Abby said, pointing to the training room down the hall.

“Ah,” Dale said, joining Ilea and her two trainees, Rhett and Alaina.

The girl had eventually shown herself and accepted Ilea’s invitation to the makeshift lesson on swordplay. Dale knew more about it, but Ilea had fought enough experts to know a few things herself.

Rhett brushed sweat from his brow before grasping his sword. His face was focused, his stance prepared. Two steps, and his blade rushed past the

dodging Ilea. He didn't leave himself open, instead sidestepping before he went into a more defensive stance.

"Well done," Ilea said with a smile. "Hey, Dale."

"Hello all."

"Daddy, come play too! She can make wings! Like a bird!" Alaina exclaimed in a high-pitched voice, running circles around Ilea while cackling wildly.

He gave her a look and then started laughing.

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THIRTY

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Expectations

After an enjoyable evening with the Langstons, Dale joined Ilea for a short walk through the city.

“You have a lovely family, Dale,” Ilea said after a minute of comfortable silence.

“Thank you. They definitely liked you.”

“You were worried?”

“I’ve told them quite a few stories, and after what happened today, I guess I was worried they would feel intimidated.”

She smiled. “I’m glad they didn’t. At least not openly. I appreciate that about you as well.”

“I do my best, but you do make it hard for me sometimes,” Dale said, nodding to a guard patrol walking past.

The city was still on high alert, most of the guards and Hunters still manning the walls or patrolling the streets. A few glanced at Ilea, but the others either didn’t care or didn’t make the connection.

“I do my best as well,” she said.

He smiled, then stopped and looked up. The sky was dark, clouds moving far above. It would rain soon.

“Hope you didn’t leave too much of an impression on the kids. I’m worried about them wanting to become adventurers as well. I won’t stop them if that is truly what they want. It just worries me. With everything out there. They’re just kids.”

Ilea smiled. “Now you know how I feel about you.”

The captain snorted. “Just because I’m not at level three hundred.”

“Would help,” she said.

Dale showed her the back of his hand. “I’ve got this thing here, at least. Summons a powerful beast. I got it from a traveling witch.”

Ilea nodded. “Hmm, that sounds suspicious. Are you sure it’s not a curse?”

“I’m not sure. But I have a good feeling about this one,” Dale said and continued walking.

They checked on a few groups of mages and guards who were cleaning up through the night or stabilizing buildings that might have otherwise collapsed.

The damage to the city was manageable, considering the expected impact of that siege. There would be a recovery period, and some traders might stay away for a while out of fear, but the city would bounce back quickly. The only permanent damage would be those lost.

Still, as a frontier town, Riverwatch residents were used to loss. They grieved and moved on and remembered. Ilea liked their attitude. She liked a lot about this place, which was why she was always a little sad to leave.

Not particularly strange that I like Hollowfort so much too.

Ilea said her goodbyes to Dale an hour later, letting the man return to his deserved rest.

She patrolled the walls in her black armor, keeping an eye out for soldiers and beasts alike. None of the guards complained.

Soft rain started to fall shortly after, washing the blood from the battlefield away. The event would live on in the memories of the people living here, in history books and government reports. To the monsters lurking in the dark, it meant nothing.

They would continue to prowl the night, looking for prey. A few did show up, scouring the fields in search of injured beings or a half-eaten carcass. They all gave up after a while.

Ilea watched a group of four-legged hound-like creatures slowly stalk back into the thicket. The guards around her gulped, but she didn’t know if it was because of the monsters out there or because of her.

Those who had seen her fight approached her quite differently than the citizens who had merely heard about her. The guards respected or feared her. For many of the people who had called out to her that day, she assumed it was still hard to believe.

A normal-looking healer. Sure, her level was high, but to a level thirty craftswoman or farmer, what did that mean? They didn't understand the difference between a level one hundred adventurer and her. Not truly.

"Tea?" a man asked the assembled watchers, joining them on top of the wall. He was clad in armor, evidently part of the Hunters. In his hands, he carried a tray with a few mugs and a pot, steam rising lazily from its spout as raindrops trailed down the dark ceramic form.

He noticed Ilea then, but other than his eyes opening a little further, he showed no visible reaction.

"Gladly, thanks," she said.

"I'll take some too," one of the guards chimed in.

They stood in silence for a little while, looking into the night together as they sipped their tea. A combination of herbs with a note of citrus. It would help a little with staying vigilant and awake.

"Do you think they'll come back?" the guard asked.

Ilea looked over the battlefield. "I don't know."

They remained quiet, contemplating the possibility as they drank from their tea.

She left soon after, strolling through the dark city streets until she saw a few familiar alleys. She smiled to herself, thinking back on the investigation she'd done for Alistair.

I wonder how Kevan's doing. Would he be up? She smirked. *What am I talking about? Of course he will be.*

It took her a while to find the overgrown mansion. The rose bushes were still luscious and the steel gates still creaky, but it looked like someone had at least added some cohesion to the garden. Entering the gates, she found that the door had been repaired.

Ilea knocked carefully this time and didn't resort to violence when nobody showed up immediately. It took a few minutes, but eventually, the door did open a bit. She saw his red eyes staring at her. An annoyed expression crossed his face before he recognized her.

Then he looked more annoyed.

"It's you," he said.

Ilea pointed at herself. "It's me. How are you doing, Kevan?"

He opened the door and glanced around the garden, confusion and annoyance apparent in equal measure. He then looked back at her. "Why are you here?"

“Am I not allowed to visit an acquaintance, unannounced, in the middle of the night? I assumed you were awake, and I happened to be in the area.”

“Just for a visit?” he said, blinking before he smiled. “It was you, wasn’t it? Come inside.”

She followed and closed the door behind her, immediately seeing some of the changes in the entrance hall. There was a training dummy, a wardrobe, and even some flowers. *Because of Vin and her brother?*

“Freshened up the place?”

He gave her a long look. “You fought off that Baralia army. I thought it was ridiculous when I heard about it, surely exaggerated. Warriors like that don’t exist in these lands, but seeing you here, I’m inclined to believe it. Welcome then, acquaintance. I’m afraid I can’t offer dinner at this time, but if you’d like a drink, I’m happy to oblige.”

“I’d like that, thank you. But no blood, and no curses.”

He faked a dry laugh and led her up to his office. “Vin had certain complaints with the interior and its lack of utility. I still maintain that she lacks any sort of appreciation for architectural and design aesthetics, but we have reached a few compromises. Of course, they didn’t complain about it in the first few weeks, only once they were comfortable.”

He opened what looked like a fancy wood-carved fridge inlaid with enchantments, then took out a few different bottles with a questioning glance at her.

Ilea looked around the office. *It’s not as messy as last time.*

“You took them in, after all. How did that go? I’m happy with ale.”

Kevan opened a bottle and handed it to her, filling a martini glass with a thick red liquid for himself. He looked at her and then out the windows before he sat down on a large leather chair. “It’s not been that long. I’m not sure yet, but I don’t think it was a bad idea.”

Ilea sat down on the chair opposite him and drank from her ale. “That’s good to hear. You’re helping them with training?”

“Education, training...” He paused. “I’m even reading stories to them. Vin told me that nobody had ever done that for them,” he added as if to justify his actions.

“That sounds nice.”

He nodded. “It is.”

They were quiet for a long moment before Kevan spoke again. He gestured in her general direction.

“So, seems like you’ve pushed past what humans normally manage. Thanks for dealing with that siege. I know Baralia would have been more tolerant of my blood magic, but they are so very uncivilized. I had plans to leave if the siege succeeded. But tell me, by Verillion, how did you get so powerful so quickly?”

Ilea smirked. She knew he was from a different land, and while it had been intriguing the first time she had met him, now, she found that it felt comfortable. It was as if, to him, she was an impressive warrior, not some kind of anomaly like a lot of people in these parts seemed to think.

“You’re still not inclined to tell me about your homeland?” she asked.

“Let’s hear of your adventures, and maybe I’ll share some things. Or maybe I won’t.” He winked at her.

She smiled and told him of her adventures in the Descent and her more recent activities.

In the end, they had a few drinks, but Kevan didn’t share anything else about his past or where he came from. Ilea wasn’t bothered. At this point, she could tell it was a sore spot, and perhaps he wanted to retain some of the mystery about him.

He’ll tell me when the time is right.

Vin and her brother Joshua were asleep, but Ilea heard how the girl managed the estate during the day when Kevan was sleeping.

“I can’t eat most of the foods here, but it’s nice to see them enjoy fresh eggs and bacon. I sometimes wish I could eat it too,” Kevan said.

“It is quite enjoyable,” Ilea answered. “I should be off soon. I ought to check the walls and surroundings to make sure it’s safe.” She saw him give her a look and then nod to himself. She continued when he didn’t interrupt her. “You can always visit in Ravenhall, if you want a change of scenery or an adventure with the kids.”

He looked thoughtful and then smiled with a hint of tiredness. “Maybe someday, but I think both they and I have had plenty of adventures and excitement for the time being. I think, for now, we’ll just stay here and do whatever feels right.”

“That sounds nice.”

“Feel free to visit whenever you’re around. You definitely left an impression on Vin. Stay safe, Lilith, healer of ash.”

“You too, Kevan. If you ever need anything from me, find Captain Dale and ask about Ilea.”

With that, she left, taking a few minutes to stroll over the nearby rooftops. *The way he said 'healer'. Strange. Was it respect? Felt like there was more to it than when adventurers and shadows say it.*

She discarded the thought, attributing it to another quirk of Kevan.

He seemed happy. And I guess my intervention today helped them out as well.

* * *

She left when the first signs of dawn seeped over the horizon, only a few gray clouds now hanging above it.

A short stop at the Vultures let her mark Walter after a quick discussion. He had a way to comprehend parts of the spell and, after reviewing and confirming its purpose, was content to have a way to call for her.

Weavy hadn't returned yet, but word of the battle would likely reach them in the coming days. With the Vultures reasonably close to the city, Walter could call for her in an emergency if anything prevented Dale from doing so.

Ilea didn't use her third-tier blink to return to Ravenhall, instead opting to fly even though she might miss her appointment at the arena that morning. Thoughts of the recent events were on her mind, and she wanted to have some time alone to think about it all. She found that, next to fighting dangerous monsters, flying was up there when it came to processing things.

Still, she was looking forward to breakfast and the simple joy of having magic crash into her magically empowered body. She would try not to be late.

* * *

Nathan finally came to a stop, groaning as he looked around. Luke was moaning in pain somewhere to his right, and Celeste was still rolling down the steep decline based on her shouts.

He rolled to the side once more, the sharp pain in his thigh confirming that he hadn't gotten out of this unscathed.

“I need light,” Lorelei said in her calm voice. She was examining Luke’s injuries but seemed unharmed herself.

Of course, he thought before a small flame came to life above his open palm. It flickered when Celeste landed, the girl chuckling to herself before she winced. She had managed to land on her feet in a crouch, but the tumble had still taken its toll.

“Status?” Nathan said as he walked over to Lorelei, his hand pressed to his thigh as he felt wet blood flowing from an open wound.

“He cut his cheek and hit his head, might have a concussion,” Lorelei said.

Nathan moved his pack and crouched, wincing as pain rippled through him. The temptation to deactivate the pain was there, but he knew how dangerous that would be. He might collapse due to blood loss or an infection without even realizing it.

Celeste stepped up, ripped a rag in two, and grabbed the bottle of alcohol Nathan held out to her. He pointed to his own thigh and to Luke’s bleeding cheek and head. The girl nodded and soaked the rags before handing one to Lorelei and crouching down by Nathan.

Nathan gritted his teeth through the sharp pain of the liquid cleansing his wound. He let Celeste apply a bandage with enough pressure to stop the bleeding.

He forced more mana into the flame to provide a better view, glancing at Lorelei as she took care of Luke. The man would be fine in a few minutes if the hit to his head hadn’t been too much to handle.

Everyone was quiet, listening, watching as Lorelei worked.

No monster had shown up so far, but it would only be a matter of time.

He checked the message he had received halfway down the slope.

‘ding’ You have entered the Hidden Gulch dungeon

Their first dungeon. This was it. The real deal. And they weren’t here to fight, only to survive.

He hadn’t heard of the Hidden Gulch before. The Vile Grotto, Raven’s Cavern, and the Frozen Peak. Those were the ones other teams had been sent to.

At first, it had sounded entirely ridiculous. These were dungeons that even adventurers in Ravenhall generally avoided. The monsters remained

inside and rarely attacked travelers.

If they had been easy to reach and filled with weak creatures, the circumstances would have been different.

Lilith selected one team per night, woke them up, and let them prepare for three minutes. She asked if they were ready to do this, and when they confirmed, she grabbed them and brought them to a dungeon somewhere in the mountains of Ravenhall.

At least, that was what most of the students assumed. Nathan assumed she could fly much faster than most other Shadows. Others swore they had heard of some of the dungeons before and knew they were close by.

It didn't matter. They were here now. And they had to survive.

That was the main goal. Side objectives were to gather rare ingredients and metals, observe local creatures, and fight said creatures. Finally, once at least some of the side objectives were accomplished, they were tasked to return to Ravenhall.

So far, nobody had managed the last task alone.

Many had doubts, but Nathan was certain Lilith watched over them. Why else would only one team go out per night? Why else would nobody have died so far?

Whispers from Riverwatch had reached the city of Shadows a few weeks ago. Stories of Lilith fighting an entire army on her own.

He believed them.

Every Sentinel did.

That was why Nathan had his doubts. If their team couldn't survive a dungeon, could they really call themselves Sentinels and disciples of Lilith and Trian?

"Luke's fine now, and so are you," Lorelai said.

"Nothing in the vicinity," Nathan said.

"Can't hear anything either. Any info on this one?" Celeste asked.

"Nothing," Nathan said.

Lorelai shook her head, propping Luke up as he put a hand to his brow.

"I fucked up, sorry guys," the farmer said.

"You can rest for a few minutes, I'll check the vicinity," Celeste said.

Lorelai nodded and watched the girl speed away.

The wound on Nathan's thigh was healing already, he could feel and see it. His health was recovering, making him sigh.

“You rest for a bit too,” the knight said, looking at him. “Keep up the flame if you can.”

“I will,” Nathan said. He felt calm. Calmer than when he had arrived in Ravenhall, calmer than when he had joined the Sentinels.

Yes, he was in an unknown dungeon, injured, and with a group of people he hadn’t known for longer than a few months. But he had chosen to be here, had trained and learned and fought through pain, and he trusted his team more than he had ever trusted anyone.

Sitting on a rock in a dark cavern, his fire flickering to illuminate their surroundings, it was the first time in a long while that he had felt at ease.

* * *

“I heard about Riverwatch,” Claire said.

Ilea took a sip of her tea.

“I know it probably pales compared to your exploits in the north, but what happened there will send ripples through the Plains. Everyone and their servants, guards, and mothers will know of Lilith.”

“Good. Maybe they’ll think twice about picking Riverwatch as a target next time.”

Claire gave her a calculating look. “It will serve as a warning, but it will put a target on your back as well. Any powerful party not yet aware of you will now make inquiries, at the very least. Up to this point, you’ve been a powerful and interesting Shadow, but now you’re a player on the board. I wouldn’t be surprised to see the first invitations, assassins, traps, and offers raining down in the coming weeks.”

Ilea grimaced. She could handle assassins – at least, she thought she could. But all the other things very much interfered with her chosen lifestyle. Well, she would have to handle it, and she wasn’t alone either. She looked at Claire.

“No, I won’t handle everything for you,” Claire said.

Ilea groaned. “Why? You handle everything else.”

“Because we’re in this together. And while I don’t want to send you on diplomatic missions, if you don’t show up at all, it could lead to even more problems.”

“Do you expect me to behave myself? I don’t want classes on etiquette.”

Claire leaned back in her chair and smiled. “Oh no, not at all. I expect you to be you. Lilith already has a reputation, and I don’t think it’s a good idea to try and change that now.”

Ilea narrowed her eyes. “I wasn’t sure how you would react to my intervention. I didn’t expect you to enjoy the consequences.”

“Old rules and old powers led my parents into ruin. And me to run and hide in Ravenhall, even after I became a Shadow. Of course I’d enjoy a little chaos.”

“That’s the last sentence I thought I’d ever hear from you.”

“Well, I’ve learned that chaos can lead to opportunities, as unpleasant as it is at first. And with everyone holding on to the status quo, it’s difficult to shake things up for the better. That’s why we work so well together, Ilea. But I don’t plan to get in over my head, and I suggest, as always, that you don’t either.”

“I’m making no promises,” Ilea said.

They had nearly met their end facing the Birmingales. She knew how dangerous other people could be, and while things had changed with her fast increase in power, the fame, or perhaps infamy, now attributed to her name could balance things out. They didn’t know how many level three, four, or even five hundred people were out there, and while they likely hadn’t cared much about some random Shadow in the south before, they may care now.

It may be time to get to three-fifty and see what I unlock. I may need everything I can get my hands on soon.

“I hear the first Sentinels have been sent into dungeons. Any Classes yet?”

Ilea shook her head. “None as of yet. But with how well they’re doing out there, it’s only a matter of time.”

“I hope you’re not pushing them too far. I checked some of those dungeons, and the monster levels are far too high for them to handle.”

Ilea smiled. “That’s the point. Besides, I’m there to watch over them.”

“I hope there are results soon. With your intervention in Riverwatch, there will be more eyes on Ravenhall too, and while Trian has tried to keep the Sentinels somewhat obscure, we’ve not made major efforts to keep the

organization hidden. I imagine that at least some healing orders will be making moves in the future.”

“Do you think we should be concerned? I don’t want to endanger the Sentinels.”

Claire shook her head. “No. We always knew this would come up, but both Ravenhall and the Shadow’s Hand back them – and Lilith, of course. All that has changed is perhaps getting a bit more attention a bit earlier than we had thought. I’ll let you know if anything of note comes up.”

Ilea gave her a nod.

Claire relaxed in her chair and gave her an amused look. “I’m not sure what’s more surprising, my own apparent enjoyment of our seeding of chaos in the established order or you and Trian training up a new generation of battle healer hopefuls. Definitely not what I expected after our first few bouts and classes as freshly accepted Shadows.”

“Let’s keep the trend going, then. Speaking of which, I have a smith to meet.”

* * *

“What do you think?” Balduur asked as he stood proudly next to his creations.

Ilea couldn’t hide the grin on her face.

“They certainly look fierce. How do they hold up?”

The man smiled, his booming laugh rolling through the massive forge. Not the usual forge she had visited in the past but a larger one. It was still in Morhill, though, the city the Shadows had cleared before retaking Ravenhall from the demons. One of the Ravenhall council’s projects was to rebuild and repopulate the city to make it something akin to a buffer zone between them and the Empire.

Ilea wasn’t entirely sure what role exactly Balduur filled in the town, but the large repurposed warehouse now held enough forges, materials, and storage to provide dozens of smiths with a space to work to then supply hundreds, if not more, fighters, guards, and adventurers.

“The Stonehammer steel you provided is quite durable. I’m surprised the armor pieces you gave me were this mangled. Did you find them in some dungeon, or did you get them to this point yourself?”

“I fought monsters,” Ilea said, thinking back on the knights in Tremor who had slowly demolished all the armor Goliath had provided.

Balduur huffed. “Of course you did. The bones are quite durable too. Not quite as strong as the steel, but they’re more flexible, so I used them where they can provide more mobility without losing too much protection. I think the result is a good mix.

“I did want to ask something, though,” the smith added with a frown. “I watched Orthan work, and it’s clear that the bones are human. And with how consistent the quality and durability are, I hope there’s no sinister source. I wouldn’t want to be part of something like that.”

“They’re mine, Balduur. Don’t worry about it.”

He sighed. “I did wonder. Wasn’t sure if you would really do that. Guess I am surprised again after all.”

Ilea gave him a smile and stepped up to the armor. She touched the single horn jutting from its forehead. It was rather sharp to the touch. *It won’t remain like this.*

The shoulders on this set were smooth, much like her own. The whole thing was made to fit close to the body of the wearer. Made to be light and quiet. Very little steel had been used on this one, only in places that protected the heart, head, and spine.

It looked deadly.

But so did all of them. The armor had been made to be both distinct and effective. Balduur and Orthan based them all on the measurements and fighting preferences of every Sentinel, and soon, the first of them would receive their set.

They had grown from scared and desperate refugees or aspiring adventurers without means to capable fighters. Many had already received options to change their Classes, but nothing exceptional or distinct had come up yet. And so they would wait. Wait and train.

“They’re perfect. I’m really glad you took the job. I know you weren’t enthused about making dozens of sets of armor.”

Balduur gave her a knowing look. “I like what you and the others are building here. The world needs more healers. Ones that can defend themselves as well. I’ll be done by the end of the week.”

Ilea looked over the rows of armor and smiled to herself. She remembered her first Drake scale set. These were superior in every way.

When the first students were ready, she couldn't wait to see their expressions when they received their first set of Medic Sentinel armor.

* * *

Cless had finally finished the piece she had been working on all morning.

Somehow, it was more difficult to paint Ilea than anybody else. Trian was easy, as was Claire. Only Kyrian provided a small challenge, but she could see even him with clarity.

She stepped back with a smile on her face and paint on her white shirt. A small twirl of joy later, she inspected her creation.

Sadly, Claire wasn't here to tell her what a good job she had done, but she knew that this one was special.

It showed Ilea with a single wing, floating in midair with three ghostly bone monsters attacking her with nasty-looking swords.

Cless understood that Ilea and Kyrian often fought monsters. They were heroes! She would grow up to fight monsters too. Her spells were getting better, but William and Claire hadn't let her join the combat classes yet.

At least I can paint, she thought and giggled when a ding resounded in her mind.

She really liked those, and she was excited to see which of her abilities had become stronger. Unlike homework back in school, her efforts here were always rewarded. And painting was so much more fun than math.

Cless stuck her tongue out at the thought of addition when Claire stepped into the room.

The two looked at each other.

"I did it!"

"You did?" Claire asked, smiling as she joined her. "That's her alright. So those are the Specters of Rot she mentioned."

"They look scary," Cless said as she hugged the woman's leg.

The gesture always made Claire rub her head, and it didn't fail this time either.

Cless had a smug smile on her face as she looked at the painting. The beings did look scary, but not to her. Ilea was strong. No monster could beat her.

“They do,” Claire said. “Can’t believe she fights them for hours every day...” she added in a murmur.

“Are you angry at her?” Cless asked and looked up.

“Angry? No, not really. Just sometimes worried.”

Cless giggled. “That’s silly. Nothing can beat Ilea.”

Claire laughed and ruffled the girl’s hair. “I hope you’re right, Cless.”

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THIRTY-ONE

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Guardian

Nathan could hear the troll approach through the dark tunnel. He could hear its pained breaths.

His face was stained by anguish and concentration. *One step at a time*, he told himself, pushing further as he felt warm blood dampen his arm.

They had had their escape route planned out, but none of their team had noticed the troll sleeping in a dark corner of the cavern, instead focused too much on the one already chasing them.

One mistake had cost them a successful mission. The last five ventures had nearly been too easy. A few brushes with death, but nothing major to speak of.

Celeste was on the ground, having been hit directly, and was now groaning in pain and barely able to move.

The second troll lashed out again, still in a state of confusion, half asleep and injured by the blade Celeste had stuck into its eye at the last moment.

Nathan moved as quickly as he could, scorching the frenzied beast with everything he had before grabbing the woman and getting the fuck out of there. The rest of the team was distracting the other monster, leaving him to get out with Celeste on his own.

He knew that the creatures had a good sense of smell. The blood dripping to the ground would easily be tracked. He was simply too slow.

The girl was weighing him down. And she was no longer moving. He had to check her.

He could hear the rampaging troll, but he had gotten some distance.

Nathan carefully laid the woman down. *Breathing, good.* He took his pack and grabbed a few bandages.

His hands were shaking, but he ignored that, ignored the exhaustion and the sounds of the approaching troll. *Extend, clean the wound, apply pressure, three, four times around, secure.*

The steps were trained, practiced hundreds of times. This time, though, the wound hadn't been inflicted by Lilith or one of their own but by a wild monster out to kill them.

Nathan steadied his breathing and moved the unconscious woman into a lateral position to make sure she wouldn't choke on her own vomit or blood. Her head and back should be uninjured, but he couldn't be entirely sure.

He dragged Celeste to a dark corner in the cavern. The only sounds he heard were his own breathing and the soft, scraping noise of her leather armor against the cold rock.

Nathan stopped his movements when he heard the heavy footfalls. He held his breath and carefully set her down.

Faint light from the crystals growing on the walls illuminated parts of the area and the furry creature lumbering toward him, bloodshot red eyes staring straight at his own.

[Cave Troll – lvl ??]

It didn't carry a weapon, but its broad arms alone would be enough to kill them ten times over. The creature was at least three meters in height and two meters broad. It moved with a hunched back to even fit into the cave.

Any wound Celeste had managed to inflict had vanished and, with it, the knife that had been stuck in its head too. Maybe it had been foolish to approach even one of them, but they had to grow, had to achieve more. And they had been ready.

Just not for two.

Both Orthan and Sidney had often talked about the importance of numbers and cooperation. Any sapient group of beings could hunt down monsters of a higher level than themselves. There were risks involved, but it was possible.

In this case, four against one was a risk. Four against two was suicide.

The troll took a step forward. One of its eyes seemed lazy, glassy.

Nathan could feel himself freeze up. He could feel the heat on his neck and cheek. From when he had been burned. From when they had attacked. Had killed. Had...

She'll come.

She'll save us.

Because I was too weak.

I was too weak again.

The troll kept coming.

And then, something changed.

He went cold, no longer frozen. All this work, all this preparation, all of that fear that he had faced, had fought. Just to feel powerless again?

"No," he said, raising his arms toward the creature.

His hands were steady.

Mana flowed and formed into flames. Flames that could only destroy, not heal.

Nathan would not rely on the specter of ash anymore.

She had brought him here, had trained him, had sheltered him. She had given him the opportunity to choose. The ability to protect others from the fear and the loss he had experienced.

If he didn't fight now, if he didn't protect Celeste, why was he even here?

Fire blazed and expanded, a trail of heat lashing out to the right as his eyes and hands followed the dodging creature, too large to avoid the spell.

It pushed through the flames, arms shielding its head and chest against the spell. Its fur caught fire as it cried out in anger.

Nathan stepped to the side, ducking under a wild swing before he fired off a fireball at point-blank range. The spell exploded and sent him staggering back, stunning the massive creature for a split second.

He ground his teeth, steadying himself. *Don't you dare touch her*, he thought and immediately attacked again.

The troll was focused on him, rushing at him with a frenzied push. He had no way to get out of the way, throwing his hands in front of him to take some of the force as he jumped to the side.

Nathan was hit by the monster's shoulder, his ribs and a bone in his right leg snapping before he slammed against the hard ground. He coughed up blood, turning off his pain as he rolled to the side.

The sounds and the wet feeling in his chest didn't indicate that the frantic roll was a smart move. But the fists slamming onto the ground where he had previously stood suggested otherwise.

Only turn off your pain in emergencies.

He stood up, finding his leg to be unreliable. But it still worked. *Left heavy then*, he thought and formed another fireball.

Nathan waited until the last moment, sidestepping a punch before his spell slammed into the monster's head.

He wouldn't be able to keep this up for much longer. A step brought him closer to the monster, his left hand forming another fireball and his right grabbing the dagger from his belt.

Throat, heart, spine.

He heard the words in his mind. High regeneration demanded that weak points be taken out.

The spine was unreachable, and he didn't know if he could even penetrate to the monster's heart, let alone find his way past its spine.

His spell exploded just as the creature's arms closed around him. It moved its head back, crushing his sides at the same time.

Nathan's sight went blurry, and now that he wasn't moving anymore, he started using meditation. He ignored his health and focused entirely on the monster's throat.

His hand rushed up, and the dagger slammed in. It slipped a little, but he still penetrated the thick skin.

He summoned a fireball with his crushed left arm, pushing back the already loose arms of the monster. His own resistance to the magic was higher.

Both of them slammed to the ground.

Nathan ignored the cold feeling in his gut, the smell of blood in his nose, and the wet and heavy feel of his gear.

The troll grasped at the dagger in its throat, gurgling in pain as it struggled to breathe.

Nathan tried to form another spell. The flame came to life but snuffed out a moment later.

His vision went dark as he heard the dagger clatter to the ground.

It didn't matter anymore.

He had fought, and he had lost.

No.

Nathan used all his remaining strength to push himself up. His eyes and his magic didn't work anymore, but he still had his hands.

He wouldn't let her die.

Never.

Never again.

Blood flowed to the ground below him as his vision cleared. He couldn't get up. His leg wouldn't listen.

That's a lot of blood there.

It felt warm, comfortable. He had expected death to feel cold and miserable. Maybe it only felt like that to the people left behind.

The bleeding stopped, likely because he simply had no more blood to lose. He felt calm. His breathing stabilized.

He had to find the knife, had to get to its heart, maybe a tendon. He turned his head right to find the knife and instead found two legs covered in ash.

She's here, he thought. *It was her magic, the warmth, the comfort.*

His heart went cold. He had failed again. He hadn't been able to protect her. He was too weak.

He heard a whistling sound before something wet hit the ground.

The troll's head, its features warped, surprised, and angry.

"Well done," Lilith said before she vanished.

Nathan steadied himself, some of his wounds not yet entirely healed. He activated his pain perception again, wincing at the overflow of sensation. A groan escaped his lips, but he pushed onward, hobbling toward Celeste. Lilith was standing over her.

"She's fine," she said, turning toward him.

"I failed," Nathan said.

"You fought. And you lost," the woman said, her ash receding to reveal her face. "There is no shame in that."

"I'm weak. I'm not like you. I never will be," he heard himself say.

"You are a Sentinel. And your mission isn't over," Lilith said. Then she vanished again.

What did I do? He slapped his cheeks. *She's right. I'm still here. She saved me. I did all I could. And I will continue to do so.*

The embarrassment made his cheeks heat up, but now wasn't the time to think about that. He stepped toward Celeste and once again lifted her over his shoulders.

Bad idea.

He took the time to apply a few supportive bandages to his own injuries. Half his pack had been emptied to save on weight.

Nathan gritted his teeth and carried the still unconscious girl out of the cave, his eyes and ears peeled for monsters.

There would be time to regret his decisions later, to analyze his failure in a hundred different ways. Right now, the life of his teammate was more important. As was the mission he'd been given. To survive.

He quickly checked the messages he had heard appearing in his mind.

'ding' Your group has defeated [Cave Troll – lvl 182]. For defeating an enemy one hundred or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted.

Nathan stopped for a moment, his eyes widening as he read through the next part.

'ding' Requirements met for Class change: Guardian Medic. This Class will replace either [Child of Fire] or [Fire Mage] with all associated skills and stats.

You have endured the harrowing training of the Medic Sentinels. Gained ample understanding of the human body and its functions. Mastered various first aid techniques. Gained a basic understanding of various forms of healing magic. Gained an understanding of various combat abilities. Have the First Aid, Fear Resistance, and Veteran skills. Have risked your own life to save another.

The Guardian Medic combines the combat and defense-oriented teachings of the Medic Sentinel Corps with a focus on healing magic. This battle healer will keep their allies alive and protected, no matter what. Healers may be desirable in a team of adventurers, but a Guardian Medic trained in Ravenhall can keep up with the best of them, able to provide support and protection during combat without losing to fear or pressure. If someone finds themselves in the worst possible situation, they should pray that one of their allies is a Guardian Medic.

His mind was calm, his breathing even. Trian had told them to wait if Class change opportunities presented themselves, but Nathan knew that he had found his.

Nobody would take this from him. It was the first step to the power he needed. The power to protect.

‘ding’ Are you sure you want to replace [Fire Mage] with [Guardian Medic]? All associated skills and stats will be lost.

‘ding’ [Guardian Medic] replaces [Fire Mage]

The [Fireball] skill was removed

The [Flame] skill was removed

...

The [Mage Body] skill was removed

New Class: Guardian Medic

Vitality +20

Strength +5

Intelligence +10

All healing magic skills are improved by 200%

Body Enhancement magic is improved by 50%

Resilience is increased by 50%

Skills gained in Guardian Medic:

Active: Focused Heal – lvl 1

Your mana surges as you channel regenerative power into yourself or one ally.

Category: Healing

Active: Healing Aura – lvl 1

All mana regeneration is channeled into a one-meter spherical aura that heals yourself and all allies within.

Category: Healing Aura – Body Enhancement

Active: Guardian Spirit – lvl 1

You stand against all. Increases your resilience by 50% [75%] and your Strength by 20% [30%].

Category: Aura – Body Enhancement

Passive: Medic Resolve – lvl 1

Your mind and body are trained and experienced. You will not flinch, stagger, or fear as easily. Your focus will not waver when in danger.

Category: Body Enhancement

Passive: Sentinel Warrior – lvl 1

You are familiar with various weapons and fighting techniques. Damage inflicted with your preferred weapon type and your own body is increased by 50% [75%].

Category: Body Enhancement

Nathan immediately felt the weight on his back from carrying Celeste increase, the few points he had invested into Strength from his fire mage Class vanishing in an instant.

He activated Guardian Spirit, and the weight decreased once more. It used a substantial amount of mana, but he needed it right now. Wisps of power, gray and white in color, occasionally wafted from his limbs and torso as he looked down at himself.

The self-pity and pain from before were gone. The mission was a success.

If he managed to get back alive, that was.

His Focused Heal spread through him. A pitiful display compared to Lilith's torrent of life. But this one was his.

It wasn't long before Lorelai and Luke found them. Lilith had saved them too.

The rest of their trip was difficult, but with a healed Celeste and the confidence his new Class brought to both him and his teammates, it felt trivial. The work, pain, and sweat had paid off. He was the first of his team, but he knew the others would soon follow.

Lilith picked them up a few kilometers outside the dungeon, where half-frozen rain and howling winds were the only challenges remaining. Nathan

looked at her and felt like everything fell into place. All the uncertainty, suspicion, the back and forth in his head.

For so long, he had felt like everything around him was uncertain, like the world was throwing him around, but now, he was here, and he would take his own steps in a world of chaos.

* * *

“Guardian Medic,” Ilea said with a smile, reading through the notes on the first Class that had emerged from the Medic Sentinels.

It had taken the Sentinels so much work to get to this point. She had started to fear that it wasn’t possible after all, but young Nathan had now made the first step.

“These are as good as some Azarinth Healer skills,” she whispered.

Trian stood next to her and nodded. “It’s not just the skills – it’s rare to have that many requirements for a level one Class. Our waiting has paid off. And looking at the requirements, I wouldn’t be surprised if more unlock this Class or something similar by the end of the month.”

He sounded excited, likely having plans for the next steps already.

Ilea grinned at his enthusiasm. “I’m sure of it.”

Trian summoned a bottle of expensive-looking alcohol before he gestured to her. “The students are celebrating Nathan’s success in the dining hall. I’m sure they would enjoy your presence.”

“And I would enjoy some breakfast,” she said.

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Possibilities

Trian was wrong. The first new Sentinel Classes were unlocked by the end of the week. And now that they knew the exact requirements, they could offer choices and help the students unlock their desired Class, replacing one of their old, low-level ones or taking an empty slot.

Ilea enjoyed a large breakfast on the roof of the Golden Drake as she read over the requirements provided by the students, who had shared their newfound knowledge for the Sentinels to come.

‘ding’ Requirements met for Class change: Medic Sentinel. This Class will replace [insert class] with all associated skills and stats.

You have endured the harrowing training of the Medic Sentinels. Gained ample understanding of the human body and its functions. Mastered various first aid techniques. Have a basic understanding of alchemy. Gained an understanding of various combat abilities. Have the First Aid and Fear Resistance skills. Have at least five resistance skills at level ten or higher. Trained and forged under the scrutiny of veterans in their own right and chosen by the Medic Sentinels, you will embody what it means to be part of their ranks. Should you choose this path, you shall find no lack of adversity and struggle, but with this come opportunities and unlimited potential. With both defensive and healing abilities, the Medic Sentinel provides the backbone for any organized team. And even alone, they should not be underestimated.

'ding' Requirements met for Class change: Ashen Medic. This Class will replace [insert class] with all associated skills and stats.

You have endured the harrowing training of the Medic Sentinels. Gained ample understanding of the human body and its functions. Mastered various first aid techniques. Gained a substantial understanding of ash. Gained an understanding of various advanced combat abilities. Endured several near-death experiences. Have the Pain Tolerance and Ash Magic Resistance skills in the second tier. Have the First Aid, Fear Resistance, and Veteran skills. Have at least five resistance skills at level ten or higher.

The Ashen Medic would not at first be recognized as a healer. Perhaps you may even be mistaken for your benefactor. It's up to you to try and live up to such expectations. An Ashen Medic is a hunter with a balanced offense and defense, using both ash and healing abilities to fight on the front lines or to provide time and opportunities for more offensive fighters. Your path is set, and opportunity calls.

Ilea bit into a croissant filled with jam. She couldn't keep the smile off her face. Not only was she mentioned in the Class description, but they'd actually managed to unlock ash magic for some of the students. An ash and healer hybrid class. It was perfect. Which was an objective opinion, of course.

She even felt a little envious. With ash and healing in the same Class, the students could get an entire second class to synergize with the first.

I wonder when the first of them will eclipse me. At least they don't have arcane healing. I mean, it would be nice if they did have that, but yeah.

She was looking forward to the bouts.

At the same time, she wondered how important her presence would still be at this point. They had their Classes, and now they could heal themselves and each other. Sure, her mental healing was helpful, but they all had Pain Tolerance in the second tier already, and they'd been exposed to so much grueling training that it likely wouldn't affect them much anymore anyway.

That's a good thing, Ilea.

Still, she felt a bit strange about it. They had worked so hard to reach this goal, and now? Well, she would have to find other things to work on. At least until a new batch of students was chosen.

There was one more Class. And she liked the name.

‘ding’ Requirements met for Class change: Ashen Sentinel. This Class will replace [insert class] with all associated skills and stats.

You have endured the harrowing training of the Medic Sentinels. Gained ample understanding of the human body and its functions. Gained a substantial understanding of ash and its uses in combat. Gained an understanding of various advanced combat abilities. Have come to the brink of death at least five times and pushed on. Have the Pain Tolerance, Ash Magic Resistance, and Lightning Resistance skills in the second tier. Have the Veteran and Fear Resistance skills. Have at least five resistance skills at level ten or higher. Have defeated an enemy fifty levels higher than yourself while alone.

The Ashen Sentinel is both protector and destroyer. Wielding powerful ash magic, they are unpredictable and prepared for everything. Unwavering and ready to meet death with weapons drawn, they instill fear in their enemies and confidence in their allies. With minor healing spells and high regeneration, these warriors are difficult to take down. Ambition and drive may lead you to reach the same heights Lilith herself has reached.

She grinned. *Now we’re talking.*

Despite her feelings, all the work of Trian and the others, all the work of the Sentinels themselves, it had all led here. They were ready. For whatever was to come. For whatever they wanted to achieve.

Ilea looked through the more detailed information on the Classes but knew they would change with level-ups and evolutions. Now that the Sentinels had their Classes, they could fight and kill monsters to level up. It was just a matter of time to see where they could get to.

The skills often overlapped. Medic Sentinel and Ashen Medic were more defense-oriented battle healer Classes with various utility and combat skills. At a higher level or stage of evolution, Ilea wondered if they would be even more durable than herself.

The Ashen Sentinel was more focused on battle and less on healing. She compared it more to her First Hunter Class, which had changed her designation from healer to warrior. The same applied here. The Guardian Medic was more focused on healing but could likely still compete with many a pure warrior.

All of them had requirements that were far beyond what most level-one Classes needed. Many of them were specific to the Medic Sentinel Corps

and its training.

She finished her breakfast and made to leave. She had planned on giving out the new gear as the Sentinels unlocked their Classes, but now that things were moving so quickly, she had decided to wait until all of them had one.

Balduur was done as well, which only left one thing to be done.

Ilea joined Trian at the planned ceremony, and all the Sentinels and the faculty had gathered at the headquarters. Trian had the honor of informing the students.

“Congratulations. By unlocking your Class, you have all reached the rank of Apprentice. And with that, you will receive your own personal set of armor.”

* * *

Lorelai watched the set of armor appear, each piece held up by floating ash.

Bone and steel, she thought with a broad grin.

She was proud. Proud of everyone here, proud of herself. And she was excited. For her set of armor and for the months to come.

Lorelai had already reached level fifteen in her new Medic Sentinel Class. She could heal her own injuries and those of her teammates. Could fight monsters well beyond her own level without fear.

Each name was called out.

Fifty people had been chosen as Medic Sentinels, and now fifty people were graduating.

She had immersed herself in training and classes. She had seen death before but never this close, this personal. And never had she thought she would find the courage to stand in its presence.

Not just stand but fight it.

Ilea didn't seem so alien anymore, her power not unreachable but respected.

She couldn't imagine the waves this organization would create in the Human Plains, but Lorelai couldn't wait to see them. To be a part of them.

Lorelai was called to receive her set of armor and a personal congratulation from the faculty. She nodded to Nathan, Celeste, and Luke.

Their journey had only just begun. But she didn't feel uncertain anymore. She was one of the Sentinels.

"In the coming weeks, your training will continue, adjusted for the new skills and abilities you have unlocked," Trian said at the end of the ceremony. "Those who deem their second Class a bad match will receive information and specialized lessons to determine and work toward something better. I encourage you to think out of the box. Find something that suits you."

* * *

The Medic Sentinels were set up now, equipped with personal armor, new Classes they could finally start leveling up, and the ability to figure out a variety of new skills and combinations. All the while, Trian and the other faculty worked hard to provide whatever else they needed.

Ilea still occasionally spent time training with them, but they had so much to work on that her instruction was hardly needed at the moment. Her healing had been the main boon, but now they could take care of that themselves. And they could even go on short dungeon runs without supervision.

In the meantime, Claire continued to build a relationship with Riverwatch. The war was still raging, but every time Ilea heard about it, Baralia was sure to lose. More freed slaves were coming into the Empire or Riverwatch by the day.

Ilea smiled to herself as she looked through the messages from the last weeks of training and teaching. The Sentinels had gotten their Classes, and now, finally, it was time for her to push past three-fifty and accomplish her own, more personal goal after all the training and work she'd put in.

She had continued visiting dungeons, the arena, and the Sentinels for training. She even spent some time trying to figure out more about the Armaments of Trials, the massive hulking armor that Goliath had made for her, but without much progress.

Her skills had grown considerably, with many of her Class skills reaching level thirty in the third tier, which meant they were maxed out as far as she could tell. One of her new Sentinel Huntress marks had gone to Trian.

Her ashen Class didn't disappoint either, a few skills leveling quite nicely with the challenging Specter training. But, of course, her main focus had been her resistances and general skills.

'ding' You have learned the General Skill: Dancing – lvl 1

Dancing – lvl 1

The ability to move your body to music and coordinate your movements with those around you or a partner. It's really a surprise this took you so long, considering your dexterous body.

'ding' You have learned the General Skill: Gourmet – lvl 1

Gourmet – lvl 1

You have long consumed high-class cuisine. You spare no expense, learning about dishes and the intricate combinations of taste through extravagant experiences.

'ding' You have learned the General Skill: Teaching – lvl 1

Teaching – lvl 1

With time and effort, you have shared knowledge and experiences with those considered your students. You will find it easier to explain concepts as this skill reaches higher levels.

'ding' You have learned the General Skill: Warhammer Mastery – lvl 1

Warhammer Mastery – lvl 1

You have learned to use the warhammer to an adequate capacity. This skill will let you handle the heavy weapon a little more easily. Your swings will move with just a little more weight, and your balance will improve significantly.

Now that Ilea was ready to get to three-fifty and find out what exactly she would unlock, she didn't hold back with her third-tier points either. The

first skill she advanced was Monster Hunter.

Monster Hunter

You have used this skill not only to stall an entire army of humans but to challenge beings far above your own power. True to the name, you have killed beings twice your level and have survived battles against even stronger creatures.

The point was easily spent.

‘ding’ Monster Hunter reaches 3rd lvl 1

Monster Hunter – 3rd lvl 1

Many times have you faced creatures well beyond your level. You revel in it, seek them out, and you prevail. Your presence demands respect. Imbue your voice to show your intent. Effects vary depending on your disposition as well as those affected and their levels in relation to yours.

2nd stage: You become better at communicating your intent. Infuse your voice with up to one hundred mana to increase its range and effect on those who hear it. When fully infused, you may lure even powerful creatures toward your location, depending on your intent.

3rd stage: You may communicate even more intricate messages to monsters of all kinds. Infusing your voice allows you to imitate the calls of generally lower-level monsters you have previously heard.

Ilea could now tell creatures to fuck off, cower in fear, come and fight, or simply come to chill out. She was most excited about the last option, of course. Previously, Violence had helped a lot when communicating with beings like the Lightning Elemental. Now? She assumed she could handle them on her own. Being able to imitate the calls of other creatures was just the cherry on top.

So far, though, there had been few opportunities to apply the new addition, other than scaring her students with monster shouts in the training halls.

‘ding’ Blight Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 1

Blight Resistance – 2nd lvl 1

A rare phenomenon often caused by ancient curse magic colliding with naturally poisonous, unclean, or corrupting environments. When wielded by a mage, it can turn into a dangerous weapon.

2nd stage: You have survived blight exposure for prolonged periods of time. Weak spells or natural blight will no longer be able to penetrate your skin.

‘ding’ Bone Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 1

Bone Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 1

The ability to shift, grow, and use one’s body to gain an advantage in battle is as old as magic itself. A skill that many humans mastered in a time long past. Now, most of that knowledge is gone, and few remain to practice these arts. You have faced it in battle and survived. Of course you did. Sigh.

2nd stage: You seem to really love bone magic. Due to your prolonged exposure to it and your increasing understanding of its structure, your own skeleton has become more robust. Both bone magic attacks and anything else trying to break or injure your bones will have a harder time inflicting significant damage.

‘ding’ Diamond Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 1

Diamond Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 1

A considerably hard substance capable of channeling powerful mana if the user understands its properties. Rarely seen due to the required gems and necessary fundamental understanding and connection to its composition.

2nd stage: Through long-term exposure and thousands of injuries, your skin has adopted some of the diamond’s properties, increasing its durability.

‘ding’ Emerald Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 1

Emerald Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 1

Vine magic is a magic school closely associated with water and earth, often used to entrap creatures where trees and vegetation are naturally abundant. Emeralds have the ability to create vines from magic. Acute control and high understanding are necessary to achieve a viable result. 2nd stage: You have been entrapped so many times that you find it easier than before to escape. Quick movements of your arms and hands, a twist of your torso, or a sudden jerk of your legs may be all you need to escape being bound.

‘ding’ Rot Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 1

Rot Resistance – 2nd lvl 1

With your regeneration and healing, it was unlikely that such a resistance would ever manifest. However, you have found a powerful source of unnatural rot. Perhaps fueled by a curse or magic. Congratulations on yet another painful and horrific experience.

2nd stage: Your body has endured more than most, solely thanks to your magical regeneration. Time and exposure have made your body more resilient to infection, damaging bacteria, and fungal growth.

‘ding’ Smoke Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 1

Smoke Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 1

Usually the result of fire magic, this school focuses on smoke itself. Wielded by a master, it can be just as deadly and destructive, if not more so.

2nd stage: The effects of breathing in smoke have become irrelevant to you. Only its magical power remains. You should still look for air, though. It’s good for you.

‘ding’ Void Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 17

...

‘ding’ Void Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 20

Ilea immediately upgraded the resistance as soon as the third tier became available.

Void Magic Resistance

You have faced the concentrated attacks of an Ascended, a master of the void itself, and lived to tell the tale. Be it through sheer luck or pure tenacity, here you stand, defiant.

‘ding’ Void Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 1

Void Magic Resistance – 3rd lvl 1

The mystical magic usually used to enchant high-level items applied as a form of combat magic. It’s as deadly as it is silent. How exactly you survived is unclear; perhaps the caster willed it so. Next time, it might work against a true enemy as well.

2nd stage: You have resisted the true magic of the void. Your body shows unrelenting grit. More than a simple spell will be required to invade your body with the void. Your very existence and all of its parts are connected to you through the threads of magic.

3rd stage: Your body is bound to the space around it. The void cannot take what it does not own, nor move what cannot be moved. The effects of void magic are reduced. Its damage remains, but you can no longer be ripped out of space itself, nor be moved against your will by the magic of the void.

‘ding’ One third-tier General Skill point awarded

Her full status had grown to a formidable list that surely even Claire would be proud of. She even had a bunch of third-tier skill points to spend despite having leveled Monster Hunter and Void Magic Resistance.

Name: Ilea Spears

Unspent stat points: 0

Unspent 3rd-tier skill points [The Azarinth Sentinel]: 0

Unspent 3rd-tier skill points [Kin of Ash]: 0

Unspent 3rd-tier General Skill points [1711 total skill levels]: 5

Class 1: The Azarinth Sentinel – lvl 348

- Active: Absolute Destruction – 3rd lvl 23

- **Active: Sentinel Reconstruction – 3rd lvl 30**
- **Active: Azarinth Awakening – 3rd lvl 30**
- **Active: Blink – 3rd lvl 27**
- **Active: Sentinel Sphere – 3rd lvl 25**
- **Passive: Sentinel Core – 3rd lvl 30**
- **Passive: Azarinth Fighting – 3rd lvl 30**
- **Passive: Sentinel Huntress – 3rd lvl 8**
- **Passive: Azarinth Perception – 3rd lvl 23**
- **Passive: Azarinth Reversal – 3rd lvl 19**

Class 2: Kin of Ash – lvl 348

- **Active: Armor of Ash – 3rd lvl 30**
- **Active: Aspect of Ash – 3rd lvl 30**
- **Active: True Ash Creation – 3rd lvl 30**
- **Active: Heart of Cinder – 3rd lvl 19**
- **Active: Storm of Cinders – 3rd lvl 17**
- **Passive: Ash and Ember Unity – 3rd lvl 27**
- **Passive: Ashen Wings – 3rd lvl 24**
- **Passive: Eyes of Ash – 3rd lvl 17**
- **Passive: Avatar of Ash – 3rd lvl 30**
- **Passive: Keeper of Ash – 3rd lvl 27**

General Skills:

- **Dancing – lvl 3**
- **Deviant of Humanity – lvl 8**
- **Elos Standard language – lvl 6**
- **English Language – lvl 15**
- **Gourmet – lvl 2**
- **Harmony of the Drowned – lvl 8**
- **Heavy Archery – lvl 11**
- **Identify – lvl 13**
- **Meditation – 3rd lvl 7**
- **Monster Hunter – 3rd lvl 1**
- **Oxygen Repository – lvl 14**
- **Sage of Torment – lvl 18**
- **Teaching – lvl 3**
- **Veteran – 3rd lvl 4**

- **Warhammer Mastery – lvl 5**
- **Arcane Magic Resistance – 3rd lvl 16**
- **Ash Magic Resistance – lvl 1**
- **Astral Magic Resistance – lvl 1**
- **Blast Resistance – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Blight Resistance – 2nd lvl 1**
- **Blood Magic Resistance – 3rd lvl 8**
- **Blood Manipulation Resistance – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Bone Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 5**
- **Corrosion Resistance – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Crystal Resistance – 2nd lvl 14**
- **Curse Resistance – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Dark Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 6**
- **Death Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 8**
- **Diamond Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 3**
- **Divination Magic Resistance – lvl 5**
- **Dust Magic Resistance – lvl 6**
- **Earth Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Emerald Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 1**
- **Fear Resistance – lvl 10**
- **Flesh Magic Resistance – lvl 8**
- **Gravity Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Health Drain Resistance – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Heat Resistance – 3rd lvl 7**
- **Ice Resistance – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Lava Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Light Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Lightning Resistance – 3rd lvl 4**
- **Mana Drain Resistance – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Mental Resistance – 3rd lvl 5**
- **Mist Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Olvor Magic Resistance – lvl 3**
- **Pain Tolerance – 3rd lvl 3**
- **Poison Resistance – 3rd lvl 2**
- **Rot Resistance – 2nd lvl 5**
- **Ruby Magic Resistance – lvl 14**
- **Sand Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 20**

- *Sapphire Magic Resistance – lvl 13*
- *Silver Magic Resistance – lvl 1*
- *Smoke Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 3*
- *Soul Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 3*
- *Sound Magic Resistance – lvl 18*
- *Space Magic Resistance – 3rd lvl 2*
- *Stamina Drain Resistance – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Time Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Topaz Magic Resistance – lvl 18*
- *Vine Magic Resistance – lvl 14*
- *Void Magic Resistance – 3rd lvl 2*
- *Water Resistance – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Wind Resistance – 3rd lvl 2*
- *Wood Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*

Status:

Vitality: 945

Endurance: 303

Strength: 302

Dexterity: 323

Intelligence: 946

Wisdom: 944

Health: 9450/9450

Stamina: 3030/3030

Mana: 18880/18880

She put the few stat points she had into Dexterity. Her main stats would soon hit 1000, and she was looking forward to that achievement, but at the same time, she felt like her physical stats shouldn't fall too far behind.

Keeping them at around a third of her main stats felt good, just so that her stamina, strength, and reaction speed could keep up with her more magical advancements. Like a foundation for her fighting ability. With so many stat points, the changes usually felt incredibly minor, but she always noticed when something didn't feel quite balanced anymore.

Her remaining options for third-tier resistance advancements were blood manipulation, corrosion, lava magic, light magic, and sand magic. The only one she felt was reasonable was light magic. The rest seemed too situational, even if the bonuses were potentially beneficial.

Lava might give an increase to Heart of Cinder, though.

Many other second-tier resistances were more enticing, but she hadn't met the requirements to reach the third tier. Blast Resistance, the various drain resistances, and even time magic were sadly unavailable.

Ilea decided her five points were enough to spend two. If she needed more, she could always host another resistance training session.

'ding' Light Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 1

Light Magic Resistance – 3rd lvl 1

The power of the suns harnessed and enhanced by magic. You have experienced the burning heat of light and pushed ahead. This skill will help you be more resistant.

2nd stage: Staring into the light should really have blinded you at this point. Instead, you have gotten used to it. Your eyes are much less sensitive to the negative effects associated with light. You are mostly immune to sudden blinding changes, be they an abrupt abundance of light or a lack thereof.

3rd stage: You have been exposed to incredible sources of light magic. Your body has gained the ability to absorb some of the properties of the light around you, allowing you to see even in the absence of light as long as you have been exposed in the past week. Damaging natural occurrences of certain wavelengths no longer pass through you but are instead absorbed, should you wish for such to happen. Excess energy will be transformed into both heat and mana.

Ilea smiled as she read through the added text. It wasn't purely related to light magic but a more generally applicable bonus. And with every skill in the third tier, she assumed potential requirements for a new Class or her next evolutions could be unlocked.

She moved on to the next one. *The Trakarov would be proud.*

‘ding’ Lava Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 1

Lava Magic Resistance – 3rd lvl 1

An elemental form of molten rock reserved for those few living in conditions most consider deadly. You have met and fought such a being, resisting its magic, close to fire and earth but older and more primordial.

2nd stage: Your body can store heat more effectively, and your skin and muscles are less prone to melting. Lava has become to you what water is to others, its substance less restricting as you move through it.

3rd stage: You have gained the ability to absorb heat from both within your body and your surroundings, effectively cooling yourself and your vicinity, allowing you to survive in high-temperature environments.

Oh! Which means...

Ilea activated Heart of Cinder.

She could feel the heat building before it flowed seamlessly into her body. Other than lightly warming her skin, nothing happened. She stopped channeling the spell, releasing the small amount of energy that remained in a comically weak cone of fire.

So I can absorb the heat now instead of having to use the spell. A nice little quality of life improvement.

She smiled to herself and stretched. With her points spent and levels checked, she was ready for the next step. All she had to do was go and kill some monsters.

* * *

Ilea informed her allies of her upgrades, and then she was off for an extended dungeon stay.

The flight to Kroll and its Caverns of Rot was quick, and she was facing the first Specters of Rot mere minutes later. Heat grew within her, and a smile grew on her face.

She was finally ready to advance.

The first explosion of fire and energy was similar in power to the blast she had used against the Ascended. It was delivered in a sphere instead of a more focused cone, but the effect was similar.

She broke their defense immediately.

No more holding back.

Compared to the steel wall of the Ascended, the Specters fared quite a bit worse. They were pushed back, half their bodies instantly vaporized, the rest burnt and molten.

However, Ilea couldn't get through their bones, leaving them to quickly regenerate. She knew she had to overwhelm their resources just as much as they would have to overwhelm hers to defeat her. This was a fight of attrition, the creatures leaving little room for trickery or overwhelming force.

Not at her current power, at least. She knew that someone like Vor Elenthir could simply stop them in their tracks with space magic or steel. Or use void magic to rip them out of existence... if that was how it worked. She had never seen it done.

She couldn't do any of that. Not yet.

Ilea enjoyed the fight as she closed the distance to the first monster. Half its injuries had already regenerated when her ashen tendrils, fists, and reversed healing hit it, all at the same time.

She had fought these creatures for months and refrained from killing more than a few. Now, she could finally let loose.

Your contribution to my resistance training is appreciated.

The three other Specters advanced, fully recovered, as they focused on their well-known enemy.

Ilea blinked in the last moment, avoiding the bone blades before she sent a barrage of ashen projectiles into the creatures. She had the mana. Every little bit of damage would help.

The dark fog around her no longer felt oppressive. The creatures she fought were familiar, their devastating spells and skills well-known to her. They were lifeless, monstrous creatures. Some of many she had met and killed already.

Ilea was pushed back as a few well-placed swings prevented her from advancing. One even nicked her arm, but the blade barely bit into her bone, the wound closing near-instantly.

Blood erupted within her body, but the explosion was more subdued, as if her blood strained against the foreign influence. The Specter didn't react at the eruption within its own body that came in response – it was just minor damage to the unfeeling creature.

Ilea turned and punched, weaving through spells and attacks as she delivered her own. Absolute Destruction spread into the nearest of the humanoid beasts, fire and cinders flaring up as her ashen abilities entirely demolished its defenses, now spreading into it unchecked.

Ilea didn't miss any of the openings. Not after all the training she had done with them, after her skills had reached this level. She let herself get hit here and there, knowing that it wouldn't matter.

This had long been her fight to win. Now, she was finally here to claim it.

When the next creature fell and only two remained, she no longer had to consider defense. Ilea was now able to appear behind them, her spells landing before they could even detect her.

She knew how they moved, their reach, the spells they could and would use. She knew how the space distorted when they vanished, how far away they usually reappeared. She knew the telltale signs of mana in the air when they began to re-manifest.

Ilea was used to the feeling of sharp bone digging into her flesh, her skills allowing her to take blows in exchange for devastating mana intrusion attacks. She knew the end of the fight was near, knew the creatures would die.

She wondered if they knew too. She wondered if they hoped for a mistake, a sudden weakness, a stumble.

Ilea moved through the air as surely as she moved on the ground. She skewered and punched, dodging blows and ignoring spells as she whittled down the health of the vastly higher-leveled creatures.

It was like a dance, each step almost pre-determined. Her ashen tendrils swirled to the left of the falling Specter, instantly biting into the flesh of the last remaining foe.

There was nothing but the creature. No notifications, no thoughts, no questions. No uncertainty. Just the next nudge to the left, the next limb rushing forward, the next sound of ash or bone cutting flesh.

A last punch smashed into the Specter, and its body fell to the ground with a wet sound, hundreds of wounds on its body.

Ilea remained hovering in the air in the dark cavern.

She breathed out.

She smiled.

‘ding’ You have defeated [Specter of Rot – lvl 615]

...

‘ding’ You have defeated [Specter of Rot – lvl 632]

‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel reaches lvl 349 – Five stat points awarded

‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel reaches lvl 350 – Five stat points awarded

‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel reaches lvl 351 – Five stat points awarded

‘ding’ Kin of Ash reaches lvl 349 – Five stat points awarded

‘ding’ Kin of Ash reaches lvl 350 – Five stat points awarded

‘ding’ Kin of Ash reaches lvl 351 – Five stat points awarded

‘ding’ Absolute Destruction reaches 3rd lvl 24

‘ding’ Azarinth Reversal reaches 3rd lvl 20

‘ding’ Heart of Cinder reaches 3rd lvl 20

‘ding’ Storm of Cinders reaches 3rd lvl 18

‘ding’ Bone Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 6

‘ding’ The following requirements have been met: Unlocked at least one unique class. All Class skills leveled into the third tier. Defeated a level 750 creature or higher without assistance. Fought and survived three battles against a level 1000 creature or higher. Significantly contributed to the defeat of one or more level 1000 creatures or higher.

You have proven to be truly extraordinary. The potential of one additional Class has been unlocked. Additional Classes exceeding your race’s limitations will have subdued effects. They cannot be chosen as main Classes due to their abnormal nature.

So it’s true. A third Class.

She felt giddy.

Thanks for the tip, Superfae.

Ilea absentmindedly flew back through the dungeon, reading through her many options all the while.

‘ding’ Requirements met for Class acquisition: The Demonic Herald. No current skills or stats will be lost. Be aware that other Classes may become unavailable.

The Unknown. Has slaughtered 1000 demons. Has forced a Mind Weaver into submission. Has instilled fear into 100 sapient beings or more. Has Mental Resistance and Pain Tolerance skills in the third tier. Has two Classes at level 350 or higher. Has unlocked an additional Class before reaching level 600.

The Demonic Herald wields fear and the arts of mind magic to subdue and conquer all. She slaughters those who stand in her way. The demon realm trembles at the call of her name, only spoken in whispers. Only those chosen shall stand by her side, her path destined for greatness. A vicious queen of death and pain, wielding overwhelming magic as she leads her armies of beasts.

Demons and mind magic. Huh.

‘ding’ Requirements met for Class acquisition: The Ashen Mentor. No current skills or stats will be lost. Be aware that other Classes may become unavailable.

The Uncompromising. Has inspired fear and pain in her students. Has helped create two or more Classes. Has broken and healed the minds of those she has taught. Has spoken with and learned from ancient beings. Has the Sage of Torment skill. Has the Pain Tolerance skill in the third tier. Has two Classes at level 350 or higher.

The Ashen Mentor is not to be questioned. She is the pinnacle of humanity, a being shrouded in myth. She inspires both fear and adoration in those who know her, sheltering her chosen in her mantle of power. Those she taught will be broken, rebuilt, and forged into monsters of their own. None shall stand in their way, and even in the face of death, they shall fear only one.

Professor Ilea? I’m not so sure about that, but I do like that last line.

Now out of the dungeon, she kept flying on her way to Ravenhall. She wanted to discuss the options with Claire and Trian, but she wanted to have some time to think about them beforehand. So no teleportation.

Reading through these feels like opening a bunch of Christmas presents. So, what's next?

'ding' Requirements met for Class acquisition: The Mad Shadow. No current skills or stats will be lost. Be aware that other Classes may become unavailable.

The Heralded. Has defeated an army. Has had at least three songs written about her. Is known in more than 20 cities. Has defeated her supposed peers with reasonable ease. Has the Veteran skill in the third tier. Has two Classes at level 350 or higher.

The Mad Shadow is a legend born in Ravenhall. She has freed slaves, fought armies, and defeated unimaginable monsters. Her name has been invoked to force children to sleep, to threaten criminals, and even to frighten wild beasts. She is known to appear when danger is afoot, when creatures of the dark lurk in the shadows. Her name is a whisper, just like her form, a true Shadow that cannot be seen or heard, yet it is there. Be wary.

God, I wish I was this mysterious and ominous! Was this Class essentially created for me? It doesn't really mention any skills, though. I assume something sneaky?

Next!

'ding' Requirements met for Class acquisition: The Benevolent Knight Hero of the North. No current skills or stats will be lost. Be aware that other Classes may become unavailable.

The Righteous. Has saved at least one settlement from destruction. Has saved a long-forgotten king. Has allied with creatures others would dismiss as monsters. Has convinced a level 1000 being to help in battle. Has defeated an army. Has been knighted. Has been truthful in the face of adversity. Has risked her own life for that of another. Has two Classes at level 350 or higher. Has unlocked an additional Class before reaching level 700.

The Benevolent Knight Hero of the North is a being of noble spirit. She inspires devotion and affection wherever she goes, helping those below her standing or financial position without question. She is a savior to the

weak, a knight in brilliant armor riding on a mighty and beautiful steed. The hero denies all praise, returning to her humble home when her people are safe yet again, waiting for the call to return. Stories will be written about her, songs telling of her benevolence and pure soul!

What? My house is huge! And who the fuck knighted me? Maro? Are you kidding me?

Definitely not.

Although... shining armor and a steed? Hmm.

No. Still no. I like my ash.

‘ding’ Requirements met for Class acquisition: The Headless Horror. No current skills or stats will be lost. Be aware that other Classes may become unavailable.

The Terrifying. Has lost her head multiple times. Has willingly donated her body to another. Has lost 100 limbs. Has willingly taken fatal damage. Has sought out sources of pain and destruction to forge her body. Has instilled fear in thousands. Has the Flesh Magic Resistance and Monster Hunter skills. Has two Classes at level 350 or higher. Has unlocked an additional Class before reaching level 600.

The Headless Horror is a being of nightmare. Whoever finds themselves in her path can only pray for her lenience or hope to have something of interest to present. She is a monster, true to the word, using her body and limbs to attack in a vicious and uncontrolled manner. Nothing can kill or stop her. A murderous disaster on one to three or more legs. She wields flesh and blood magic without regard for her safety until her enemies drown in her own or their blood. Run, for she has come.

I mean, the damage wasn't fatal if I still survived. So, what am I, exactly? Knight or horror? One to three or more legs? Hell no. I guess it would be fun to freak people out, at least.

‘ding’ Requirements met for Class acquisition: The Trakorov Rider. No current skills or stats will be lost. Be aware that other Classes may become unavailable.

The (quite frankly) Unhinged. Has ridden a Trakorov. Has two Classes at level 350 or higher.

The rider and her steed will bring the end of time itself. If either can be woken from their slumber. She wields fire and molten rock, bathing her enemies in fury before they are crushed by the weight of her body. Everything will be burned, cooked, and devoured.

Ilea wobbled in the air as she laughed. *Fuck yes, exactly that! Thanks, Trakkie! Not sure I want to bring about the end of time, though. But I do like lava, heat, and sleeping.*

‘ding’ Requirements met for Class acquisition: The Arcane Touched. No current skills or stats will be lost. Be aware that other Classes may become unavailable.

The Changed. Has survived in concentrated mana. Has had lethal amounts of mana channeled through her. Has the Arcane Magic Resistance skill in the third tier. Has two Classes at level 350 or higher. The Arcane Touched is a being attuned to the force of the arcane itself. Her body is a weapon clad in the limitless depths of mana. Her thoughts and emotions are one with the will of nature. She is a recluse, seeking out the depths of the arcane. Only the most precious mana will satisfy her on her quest for power.

Oh? This one is interesting. Don’t think I’m exactly a recluse, though. One more.

‘ding’ Requirements met for Class acquisition: The Faen Valkyrie. No current skills or stats will be lost. Be aware that other Classes may become unavailable.

The Ferocious. Has saved three Fae with no ulterior motive. Has protected a Fae with their own life. Has befriended a rare murderous Fae and reveled in the joy of violence. Has marked an ancient being with the goal of protecting it. Has been welcomed into the domain of the Fae and survived without going mad. Has visited three different realms. Has the Arcane Magic Resistance, Space Magic Resistance, and Veteran skills in

the third tier. Has two classes at level 350 or higher. Has unlocked an additional Class before reaching level 500.

The Faen Valkyrie is a mysterious being who has befriended and fought at the side of the Fae. A being who not only found a violent member of the ancient and unchallenged collective but one who understood and bonded with this irregular. She is a being of battle, both resilient and destructive. Her body is a weapon to defend and one to execute judgment, enhanced by the Flame of Creation coursing through her veins. Her will shall bend space itself. No realm will be guarded from the storm she brings.

Oh. Little bugger. You did that, didn't you? Hmm.

Can't wait to show the others. Though I do have a favorite already.

* * *

Trian joined his hands together above his head. "Damn."

"Hell yes," Ilea whispered, sharing a smile with Claire, who had just finished writing.

"Lots of choices," the woman said, keeping her pen ready. "Nothing normal like Fire Mage? Or any of your Sentinel Classes?"

Ilea shook her head. She tried to think about it, to focus on other options or choices. But there was nothing.

"This is what I have," Ilea replied.

"Now don't be hasty, Ilea. I know you like that massive horned creature, but hear me out," Trian said as he pointed at her.

Ilea just rolled her eyes and cleaned herself with ash.

"Do you have a favorite already? Or do you want to hear opinions?" Claire asked.

"I do have a favorite," she said. "But let me know your thoughts. I mostly wanted to show off how cool I am."

"Very cool. The Headless Horror sounds right up your alley, Ilea," Trian said. "More legs are always welcome, no?"

"They are, aren't they?"

It seemed like Trian had regressed back to his older self for some reason. She didn't complain.

“Are you healing me?” he asked, trying to slap away the ash swirling around his head.

“Just making sure,” Ilea murmured.

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Choices

“The Demonic Herald,” Claire said. “Fear and mental resistance. Mind magic abilities, I presume, and maybe even fear-based magic. That’s rare. So much so that I don’t think a Shadow has been recorded with such magic in my lifetime.”

The three of them were now gathered in one of the training halls within the Sentinel headquarters. Ilea had distributed some food and drinks to the others.

“I’m worried about the part about the queen of death, leading armies of beasts,” Trian said, cutting himself a piece of sausage.

“You think there’s something else involved? Turning people into monsters through mind magic and fear?” Claire suggested.

“Mind magic might give me an opening to attack, but it doesn’t really work against me anymore. I doubt it will be a major asset against powerful foes,” Ilea said. “The fear magic, however...”

“People and monsters don’t have your resistances. It will most definitely be a powerful asset. But the connection to demons is strong – I’m worried it might influence you.”

“Wouldn’t my resistance protect me against that too?” Ilea asked. “I doubt a Class or skill could really harm me at this point.”

“There have been records of Shadows in the mid-two-hundreds killing their team members because of berserker Classes and traits. It might work out for you, but I think there are safer choices,” Trian said between bites.

Claire nodded and took a sip of her drink.

“Next one is the Ashen Mentor,” Claire said. “Inspired fear, created Classes, broke minds... No requirement like the ‘before level six hundred’ one from the Herald, though, so perhaps not quite as rare.”

“It would probably be the best option for the Sentinels,” Ilea said.

“I’m proud something like that came up,” Trian said. “It means they achieved something quite special.”

Ilea smiled. “They really did. But I’d also like them to stand on their own. The Class might be helpful, but we’ve found incredible success as it is. Plus, I don’t really want to focus fully on teaching.”

“I didn’t expect you to. I expect you to take whatever Class lets you fight more powerful monsters, and this one isn’t it.”

“Hmm. Yeah, probably.”

“What’s the next one?” Trian asked.

“Mad Shadow,” Ilea said through a mouthful of bread, a wicked smile on her face.

“Shadow magic, probably. That would be quite an asset to have. Being able to sneak into places, going unseen. Getting behind people unnoticed,” Claire said.

“You can use it to attack too,” Trian added.

Ilea downed her ale and made another sandwich.

“I’m not a fan of sneaking around,” she said.

“What about the knight? Shou—” Claire started.

“No,” Ilea interrupted.

“It could be go—” Trian chimed in.

“No,” she said again.

Was it Maro? Who else could knight me? The Fae? And I wasn’t even there for the ceremony?

“Didn’t expect you to be *that* against it,” Claire said, but she moved on. “Headless Horror seems like an uncontrolled murder class.”

“I deem it unwise to take that one,” Trian said.

“I agree. Though, rationally speaking, coupled with your regeneration, flesh and blood magic might be a great addition.”

“It does sound dangerous – not necessarily for me, though,” Ilea said. “But... despite the allure and my apparent madness, I do think it sounds pretty fucking gross. Even for me.”

“You can clean yourself,” Trian said, gesturing at her ashen armor.

“Doesn’t make it any better. I’d rather take the demon one.”

“The rider one sounds like a wildcard,” Claire said. “Same with the Arcane Touched one.”

“Both would probably give you quite a bit of power,” Trian said.

“They would,” Ilea said. She relaxed in her armchair, looking up at the ceiling. “Lava magic could be a nice addition, though I’d say my ash and embers already cover the ranged aspect.

“I’m not sure if it requires me to have a Trakorov to hand too. The logistics, though... Can’t exactly lift it. Or feed it. The mana that would take...”

Ilea shook her head. The thought of a Trakorov appearing at her side whenever she did battle was both awesome and comical. Thinking of the beast squeezing through small dungeon tunnels, just breaking through the whole structure, she snickered.

“And you would bring about the end of time,” Trian said.

“And that,” Claire confirmed.

“Arcane magic is mostly just beams as far as I’ve seen, right?” Ilea asked.

“Near-instant cast spells with devastating destructive power,” Trian said. “Eats up lots of mana, but the Classes usually have ways to mitigate that. Arcane Classes often make other magic better too, which may be beneficial.”

“I already have a beam. Would just be another one. Even if it makes ashen magic better, I’d prefer healing or body enhancement. The horror Class might provide that.”

“The arcane Class talks about mana density too. About how you would only be satisfied by the most precious mana,” Claire said.

“You’re right. I don’t want to feel uncomfortable in normal mana density,” Ilea said.

“We don’t know how it would change your body,” Claire said. “But it’s something to consider.”

“If something like that could even have an impact on you,” Trian said.

“The last one, then? The Faen Valkyrie? The requirements are focused on your new violent friend. Sounds like what you accomplished is quite the feat. Judging by the pre-level-five-hundred requirement, it’s the rarest of the bunch too.”

“What’s the Flame of Creation?” Trian asked.

Something cool, I bet.

If she was honest, she'd long since made her decision. The rest of the options just weren't nearly as interesting.

"Fire magic? Space magic too, maybe some long-range teleportation or abilities like the Ascended had." Ilea looked at a piece of cheese and raised her hand, trying to lift it up with her mind.

Yeah, that would be fun.

"I just hope the connection to the Fae won't be a problem," Claire said.

"It says I've already bonded with it, not that it would change anything about that. I like the mention of my body being a weapon too," Ilea said.

Plus, I trust the little bugger.

Violence had saved her with a space magic spell, had gotten them out when the Ascended had her pinned down.

Shadow magic could achieve something similar. Both resilient and destructive.

But then again, Ilea wasn't one to hide in the shadows. Nor was she one to bend people's minds. The Headless Horror Class might have sounded more appealing if it hadn't been for her recent Abomination and Specter encounters.

With space magic, maybe I could visit other realms. Check up on Earth.

She wondered if that was a good idea. But even if it wasn't, the ability to bend space to her will? Everything else felt almost mundane to her.

"Yeah, this talk confirmed my feelings," she said and stood up.

"It's the horror one, isn't it?" Trian asked.

She gave him a wink and selected the Faen Valkyrie.

She felt a speck of energy within herself light up suddenly. Heat rose up, and she perceived with her healing how something spread through her. It looked like... fire.

The unsettling feeling turned into pain, expanding and intensifying as the flames spread. It wasn't just physical pain – Ilea knew her soul was hurting too.

Perhaps it would have been an unbearable experience a year prior, but after absorbing the collected mana in the Descent, this felt like a minor inconvenience.

She gritted her teeth against the feeling that permeated her.

Ilea let her ashen armor recede to her back when she felt the flames break through her skin. The fire was pale and white, just like Feyrair's. It

moved lazily as her body was slowly set ablaze with the strange element, neither wind nor her movements animating the flames.

She noted her health dropping rapidly, but it was canceled out by her combined regeneration and healing. Ilea wondered if any of her resistances worked against the fire.

As the heat built, so did the damage to her body. She raised her hand to look at the flames, creating ash that swirled amidst the new power. The nearby element didn't destroy her creation but somewhat incorporated it, the colors shifting around each other.

Her health had slightly declined a minute later when the fire slowly settled, not vanishing but flowing instead into her body.

She closed her eyes and breathed out.

'ding'

New Class: The Faen Valkyrie

Intelligence +20

Wisdom +20

Space Magic is improved by 100%

Resilience is increased by 250%

Body Enhancement Magic is improved by 100%

Ilea expected a few new skill notifications, but instead, she received something else entirely.

'ding' The following requirements have been met: Has [Locked] or has unlocked an additional Class beyond the limitations of their race.

Core Skill points have been unlocked.

Core Skill points replace Class-specific third-tier skill points.

Retroactively applicable achievements unlocked:

You have survived an untouched Arcane Shift – 1 Core Skill point awarded

You have visited the Great Salt – 1 Core Skill point awarded

You have befriended a Mind Weaver –1 Core Skill point awarded

You have befriended a Fae – 1 Core Skill point awarded
A song about you has spread to five cities – 1 Core Skill point awarded
You have trained with a Lightning Elemental –1 Core Skill point awarded
You have reached the speed of sound – 1 Core Skill point awarded
You have unlocked third-tier General Skills – 1 Core Skill point awarded
You have ridden a Trakorov – 1 Core Skill point awarded
You have absorbed pure arcane energy – 1 Core Skill point awarded
You have entered the Home of the Fae – 1 Core Skill point awarded
You have unlocked 10 third-tier General Skills –1 Core Skill point awarded
You have helped create three new Classes –1 Core Skill point awarded
You have unlocked 50 resistance skills – 1 Core Skill point awarded

You have unlocked a third Class – 1 Core Skill point awarded

That's not related to the new Class, right? Locked? Or an additional Class? What? I'll check this later.

She checked her status as her companions slowly approached.

Name: Ilea Spears

Unspent stat points: 30

Unspent Core Skill points: 15

Unspent 3rd-tier General Skill points [1716 total skill levels]: 3

Class 1: The Azarinth Sentinel – lvl 351

- Active: Absolute Destruction – 3rd lvl 24***
- Active: Sentinel Reconstruction – 3rd lvl 30***
- Active: Azarinth Awakening – 3rd lvl 30***
- Active: Blink – 3rd lvl 27***
- Active: Sentinel Sphere – 3rd lvl 25***
- Passive: Sentinel Core – 3rd lvl 30***
- Passive: Azarinth Fighting – 3rd lvl 30***
- Passive: Sentinel Huntress – 3rd lvl 8***
- Passive: Azarinth Perception – 3rd lvl 23***
- Passive: Azarinth Reversal – 3rd lvl 20***

Class 2: Kin of Ash – lvl 351

- ***Active: Armor of Ash – 3rd lvl 30***
- ***Active: Aspect of Ash – 3rd lvl 30***
- ***Active: True Ash Creation – 3rd lvl 30***
- ***Active: Heart of Cinder – 3rd lvl 20***
- ***Active: Storm of Cinders – 3rd lvl 18***
- ***Passive: Ash and Ember Unity – 3rd lvl 27***
- ***Passive: Ashen Wings – 3rd lvl 24***
- ***Passive: Eyes of Ash – 3rd lvl 17***
- ***Passive: Avatar of Ash – 3rd lvl 30***
- ***Passive: Keeper of Ash – 3rd lvl 27***

Class 3: The Faen Valkyrie – lvl 1

- ***Active: None***
- ***Active: None***
- ***Active: None***
- ***Passive: None***
- ***Passive: None***
- ***Passive: None***

General Skills: Hidden

Seeing the six available slots in her new Class, she smiled.

That's pretty good for a 'subdued' Class, she thought. Or is the power of the skills themselves subdued? Well, I guess I won't find out unless I meet another Faen Valkyrie.

She kept the General Skills hidden for now since she'd recently looked through them anyway. Instead, she wondered about what to do with her stat points.

The Core Skill points were something else to check out, but she focused on the empty slots of her new Class first.

Let's see if there's anything here.

Skills available for The Faen Valkyrie:

Active – Flare of Creation

Let the fires erupt, burning away your health in exchange for devastating power. Attacks with your body are infused with the Flame of Creation, dealing lingering damage to health, mana, and magical constructs. You are immune to stunning, fear, and shout abilities. Your resilience is increased by 25% [200%].

Category: Aura – Body Enhancement

Subdued my ass! That's so much stuff from a single skill! And it directly improves attacks I do with my body.

She refrained from choosing the skill immediately and read through the next one.

Active – Spear of Creation

Wield the fire of creation as an extension of your arms. The spear is especially useful against magical defenses.

Category: Fire Magic – Space Magic

Cool, but no body enhancement, so that might be a pass.

Active – Displacement

Shift space to your will, making an object or person appear somewhere else.

Category: Space Magic

Teleportation!

She smiled.

But it's more than that. Could I just move an enemy's weapon away? Or the enemy itself to create openings?

I could also move a drink from my fridge into my hands without getting up. That's close to what I hoped for.

Choices, choices.

Active – Burst of Creation

Let the fires spread, creating a sphere of lingering flames around yourself.

Category: Fire Magic – Space Magic

That's really similar to Heart of Cinder. No charge, I guess. But with three slots... this one may not make the cut.

Active – Force

Push objects, magical constructs, and people away or stop them from reaching you with space magic.

Category: Space Magic – Aura

I want this. Yes!

Active – Phaseshift

By expending a large amount of mana, you can temporarily unbind your body from the physical and pass through barriers. You may let spells and physical objects pass through you unhindered. Be aware that certain types of magic will retain some or all of their impact.

Category: Space Magic

Oh, that's cool too. Fuck, there are too many options. I want all of them.

Active – Shrouding Cloak

Invoke space magic to hide yourself or objects in your vicinity in plain sight.

Category: Space Magic – Aura

Hmm. Sneaking again. You're taking a back seat, she thought, moving on to the next one.

Active – Blazing Force Shield

Form a shield of fire before you that will devour spells and objects alike.

Category: Fire Magic – Space Magic

It can devour spells?

Too much good stuff.

Since this was the last available active skill, Ilea checked out the passives.

Passive – Space Awareness

You become more aware of the density and shifts in the fabric of space itself.

Category: Body Enhancement – Perception Aura

Very ominous and unclear.

“What did you get?” Trian asked, breaking the silence.

“Skills. Give me a few minutes,” Ilea murmured, continuing to read.

Passive – Space Shift

You can wield space more easily, allowing you to unravel its mysteries.

Teleportation abilities can be used again 50% faster [100%], and you can travel 20% farther [40%].

Category: Space Magic

Oh. This one is a must.

Blink and Reconstruction had always been the key abilities that kept her alive. Using her teleportation twice as fast again after casting it would allow her quite a bit more maneuverability, let alone the increased distance.

Passive – Dimension Storage

You gain a personal dimensional storage space, allowing you to store and retrieve unliving physical items at will.

Category: Space Magic

A storage item replacement. Hmm. My necklace can't really be destroyed, but what could a second and third tier add to this?

Passive – Body of the Valkyrie

The Flame of Creation flows through your veins, increasing your resilience by 15% [135%], Physical Damage Resistance by 5% [45%], and Magic Damage Resistance by 5% [45%]. You won't be fazed by heavy damage or powerful sources of light and sound anymore.

Category: Body Enhancement – Space Magic

Those multipliers are nuts.

Passive – Lull of Battle

You are one with war and battle. Less Endurance is needed the longer you fight.

Category: Aura – Body Enhancement

She bit her lip.

If only there were five slots each. Fuck.

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THIRTY-FOUR

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Experimentation

“Damn, damn, damn. Those are some good skills. I want to see you use force against my lightning! I bet it would look phenomenal. Do you think Phaseshift would negate lightning damage entirely? Or an explosion from Claire? Can you displace spells, or is that maybe the second tier?” Trian was pacing now.

“I would really consider the Lull of Battle skill. If the second tier gives you a reduced mana cost per spell used, you’d become unstoppable. Not that you aren’t already close,” he continued, murmuring to himself about potential combinations.

Claire looked at Ilea excitedly as she finished her notes.

“The storage ability is useless to you now, but what if you can store spells at the second or third tier? Charge your fire beam into it ten times, and you can just unleash destruction!” Trian laughed at the idea, spreading his arms as lightning arced from him into the nearby ground.

“Displacement and storage in higher tiers could mean you can teleport stored spells into other people. Can you imagine that?” Trian exclaimed.

“You’re reaching,” Ilea said. Still, she was smiling.

“I would suggest you test if you can freely swap out skills first,” Claire cautioned. “If that’s the case, you could then test all of them individually.”

“Right, that sounds like a good idea,” Ilea said. She selected Space Shift and Body of the Valkyrie as her first two skills, just to make sure they were set.

‘ding’ You have learned the skill: Space Shift – lvl 1

Passive – Space Shift – lvl 1

You can wield space more easily, allowing you to unravel its mysteries. Teleportation abilities can be used again 50.5% faster [101%], and you can travel 20.5% farther [41%].

Category: Space Magic

‘ding’ You have learned the skill: Body of the Valkyrie – lvl 1

Passive – Body of the Valkyrie – lvl 1

The Flame of Creation flows through your veins, increasing your resilience by 15.5% [139.5%], Physical Damage Resistance by 5.1% [45.9%], and Magic Damage Resistance by 5.1% [45.9%]. You won’t be fazed by heavy damage or powerful sources of light and sound anymore.

Category: Body Enhancement – Space Magic

She felt the difference immediately, her body ever so slightly stronger. A quick few uses of blink revealed the description was on point.

Ilea could now blink farther with one use of the skill. She wondered what was faster – her charged wings, which apparently broke the speed of sound, or her newly enhanced Blink when used in constant succession.

Never broke the sound barrier... meaning my Wind Resistance did a marvelous job. Could I break through without it?

“Did it work?” Trian asked.

“Wait,” Ilea said, selecting Space Awareness.

‘ding’ You have learned the skill: Space Awareness – lvl 1

Passive – Space Awareness – lvl 1

You become more aware of the density and shifts in the fabric of space itself.

Category: Body Enhancement – Perception Aura

Ilea immediately felt something new within her perception. It wasn’t comparable to her sphere or to the change brought by Eyes of Ash, but something had been added.

Eerie was the only word she could think of to describe essentially wisp-like winds of energy. Strands of it came and went, moving in seemingly random patterns. Larger manifestations floated high above, all ghostly white, barely visible. Her sphere picked up the new sensation too, but it looked essentially the same in her sphere as to her eyes.

“What do you see?” Claire asked.

“Mist-like energy floating around. Might not even be energy but something else. It’s thin and barely visible. Can turn it off too,” Ilea said, switching the perception on and off.

She tried to switch out the skill for the Lull of Battle one. She simply focused on the slot and her intent.

Available passive skills for The Faen Valkyrie:

[Dimension Storage]

[Lull of Battle]

‘ding’ Would you like to replace [Space Awareness] with [Lull of Battle]?

All accrued skill levels in [Space Awareness] will be lost.

She smiled. “I can switch them out. I just lose all skill levels already gained.”

“It behaves like a normal Class, then,” Claire said. “I wonder if it provides stat points.”

Ilea confirmed the switch.

‘ding’ You have learned the skill: Lull of Battle – lvl 1

Passive – Lull of Battle

You are one with war and battle. Less Endurance is needed the longer you fight.

Category: Aura – Body Enhancement

She checked again and found that Space Awareness was once more available as a skill.

“Lull of Battle is more straightforward, but Space Awareness feels more intriguing... and it’s a space skill for my Fae Class. I feel like there has to

be more to it,” Ilea said. She knew how vague her ash manipulation skills had been at first. This felt the same.

“What about the active skills, though? What will you choose?”

“I’ll go for the Flare of Creation, Force, and Phaseshift.”

“Try the others out, at least!” Trian said. “The aura one is a must because of your bonuses. I’m not so sure about the others. You should especially consider Displacement and the Spear. Both could be incredible assets in battle.”

Ilea selected the Displacement skill, and knowledge about the magic flowed into her and became intuition. She tried it out with a nearby stone. It took quite a bit of mana and entirely too much time to make the thing move, but eventually, the stone shook and appeared in her hand.

She had teleported it.

“Alright, this is pretty cool,” she said with a smile. She raised her hand and tried to move Trian.

“I can feel it,” he said – right before he vanished and appeared a few meters farther back.

“It takes a while to take effect, but with higher levels, it could be interesting,” Ilea said, thinking about the applications of the skill in combat. She raised her eyebrows and tried to use the skill on herself.

It felt much weirder than Blink. Ilea wasn’t sure she could have managed it without her sphere, the perception ability allowing her to see herself and focus on the space around her instead of what she saw before her.

She focused on the skill and stretched her hand out with closed eyes. *Touching myself with space magic.* She smiled and moved herself to a position ten meters away.

The shift was instant.

“You can use it on yourself too. That changes things,” Claire said.

“Yeah. Another teleportation skill,” Ilea murmured. *Which means I can teleport faster, use Displacement between Blinks.*

She tried, and it kind of worked. The spell was too slow to activate to really make a difference, but with time, maybe that would change.

Trian quirked up his eyebrows and nodded. “Try deactivating your resistance.”

Ilea deactivated Space Magic Resistance but found no change in the way she could use the skill. Other than it still being very weird.

The next thing Trian suggested was teleporting something out of his hand. Surprisingly, it worked with a few random objects, but as soon as they tested it with enchanted or magical items, the spell failed to grasp them.

Having used the skill a few times now, it became clear how much easier it was to move a small object compared to an actual person. Both in how much mana it used up and how quickly the object was affected.

"I assume it's the same problem that applies to teleporting out of someone's grasp. Another mana signature interfering," Trian murmured.

"That's just theory. We don't know much about space magic," Claire supplied.

"But I can teleport normal objects, at least. So I could steal someone's mundane weapon," Ilea said with a smile.

Spinning items or people didn't work, including when she tried on herself. Blink was quite a bit better there, but she assumed a second or third tier could potentially remedy that.

She couldn't rip out an arm or just Trian's legs either, just teleport his entire form. He suggested once again that it had to do with the mana flow.

"Can you move more than one thing at the same time?" Trian asked.

Ilea tried but failed to move two stones with one use of the spell.

"What about magic?" he asked, sending a bolt of lightning her way.

Ilea tried but failed to grasp the projectile, the magic dissipating on her armor.

"Hmm... that limits it somewhat," Trian said. "If you level it, though, you could move around your enemies the way you want. You could teleport single monsters to you to lure them more easily, depending on the range. Or you could teleport allies to safety?"

"The potential is there... definitely," Ilea murmured.

"Now try Force," Trian said.

Ilea added the skill to her active abilities and activated it. She felt she could focus on a small radius around her, about three meters.

"Oh, I can see it. It looks a little distorted," Trian said, grabbing a stone and throwing it at her.

Ilea's hand rushed up to catch the flying projectile, barely slowed down by the field of magic.

"Do it again," she said, throwing the stone back with just as much force.

He caught it and threw it back. This time, she focused on the small rock instead of the whole area around her. It used up a little more mana, but the thing slowed down noticeably before it hit her hand.

She tossed the stone up and used Force to push it toward Trian. The rock flew toward him, but not nearly as fast as when she had thrown it. She had focused on it again but knew she could use the ability to push against everything around her too.

“I want to try something,” Ilea said. “Hug me, Claire.”

“Okay,” the woman said with a smile, closing her arms around Ilea.

Ilea used her ability to push back.

Claire’s hold momentarily loosened, and the woman was pushed back far enough for Ilea to blink out.

“It worked,” Ilea beamed.

“Doubt that will be enough to break a monster’s hold,” Claire commented.

“Not yet,” Trian said and gave Ilea a thumbs up. “Magic?” he asked, sending a few bolts her way.

They slowed down a little, but not as significantly as the stones. Nor did Ilea find it as simple to focus on the volatile magic.

“Could be usable in the future. I do have my sphere to pull spells closer to me already,” she said.

Next, Ilea added Spear of Creation instead of Displacement.

She focused on the spell and found a somewhat lean spear of white fire appear in her right hand. It shone brighter than the flames that had appeared upon her Class selection.

“I don’t know how to use this thing,” she admitted, whirling it around a few times.

“Try me,” Claire said as a few shields appeared in front of her.

She didn’t have to ask twice, the spear immediately breaking through the first layer before scraping against the second.

Ilea wasn’t sure. She stepped closer and used Absolute Destruction against the second barrier, watching as the destructive healing mana ate through three layers in the span of a second.

“Not as fast,” Trian said.

Ilea deactivated the spear. “Maybe, but I’d have to learn how to use a spear. If I could infuse my ash arms with it, it would be more useful.”

“Try the aura, then,” Trian said in an excited voice.

“Alright,” Ilea confirmed and switched out the spear with Flare of Creation.

Upon activation, the pale fire instantly returned, flickering over her ashen armor in a coat of energy.

Her health declined sharply, a few hundred points fueling the newfound skill and the power therein each second. Ilea’s healing activated, mitigating the damage but only barely.

Claire put up several shields again as if reading Ilea’s intentions. One ashen arm clad in moving white flames brushed over the barrier, the fires latching on immediately, breaking through the defenses as if they were made of paper.

Ilea added Storm of Cinders to the mix, watching in fascination as the fire spread through the barriers with ease.

“Much better than the spear,” Trian said as they watched Claire’s defenses break down. The flame spread slowly but didn’t vanish, continuously eating away at Claire’s magic.

“I’m pushing against it too,” Claire said, a drop of sweat rolling down her brow.

“It eats health, right?” Trian asked. “I don’t think it’s supposed to be kept active for a long time.”

Ilea nodded. “Considering the cost, I don’t think it should be anything but a quick burst. However, my healing just about cancels it out entirely.”

Claire took a step back as her barriers disintegrated. “I’m not surprised, what with all your body enhancement bonuses. But trading regeneration for damage is dangerous.”

“It’s a balance. And I can always choose when to have it on and when to turn it off.” Ilea often traded wounds and even limbs for openings. With this, it would just be health itself. It hardly made a difference.

“Someone want to test it on themselves?” she joked, glancing at Trian.

He raised both hands. “No thanks. I don’t want to burn to a crisp.”

“Aw,” Ilea exclaimed, turning the aura off. *I wonder how effective it would be against me. Lingering damage to health and mana.*

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Training

She tested Burst of Creation next. It was an area attack around herself that used the white fire. It was admittedly close to her early levels of Heart of Cinder, but with only three slots for active skills, she wouldn't add something she already had. Not if it was primarily an offensive spell.

Using both together felt a little weird as Heart of Cinder expanded more quickly, thus creating two waves of attacks. Burst didn't need to be charged, but Ilea found she couldn't just use it without pause. Several seconds were actually needed between each use.

When she replaced the spell with Shrouding Cloak, the fires still lingered.

"An illusion?" Trian asked.

"No," Claire said, the two of them looking at the stone Ilea had shrouded. "It's not there at all."

Ilea shrugged. "I'm not a fan of hiding stuff. It seems situational. Very useful for someone else, but not me."

Next, Ilea tried out the Blazing Force Shield, finding that both Trian's and Claire's spells managed to get through. Subdued, yes. Still, she had expected more. What was interesting was the fact that the shield grew a little larger with each spell that passed through.

"It's too stationary," she said after a while.

"Second or third tier may allow it to be around you and movable," Claire suggested.

"I have my sphere to redirect spells and my ash and body to defend. If anything can still get through, I'd rather have this," Ilea said, switching to

the last available skill.

Phaseshift.

Ilea felt the spell manifest, the space within and around her distorting in her sphere before she couldn't see herself anymore.

With her sphere, that was.

Her eyes stared at the two hands she held up before herself. They looked a little translucent but were still very much visible.

"Hit me," she said, her mana rapidly declining.

Trian obliged, sending a bolt of lightning at her chest.

She felt part of the spell damage her, but some of its mana was absorbed by both her third-tier resistance and her Sentinel Core. Most of the spell's energy moved through her entirely, dissipating on the far stone wall.

"Fascinating," Claire said before she raised a hand.

Explosions wracked through the stone below Ilea, but neither the spell nor the bits of rock flying around affected her in the slightest.

The lightning was different. I lost health, albeit not much.

She let go of the spell and felt her mass returning, though she found herself unable to use Phaseshift again immediately after.

"Let's see what kind of barriers and objects you can move through, then," Trian said.

"Yeah, let's test," Ilea said with a smile.

* * *

Ilea could activate Phaseshift when she was being grappled. With the spell activated, she couldn't use Blink or any of her other offensive active spells. Meditation and resistances didn't seem to be affected, nor did any passive or perception-based abilities.

"I can't even move," she said in a disappointed voice.

Her wings didn't have an effect either, refusing to move her space magic-affected body.

"What if you activate it with present momentum?" Trian asked.

Ilea nodded lightly and slowly flew toward the man, Phaseshift activating a moment later. Her body continued onward, passing through him.

He made a face. "That was unnecessary."

“Could have dodged,” Ilea joked. “See anything interesting?”

“There was nothing there,” Trian said. “Confirming my theory that you’re just a powerful magical entity playing at being human.”

She smiled.

“You can keep momentum. Can you move into the ground?” Claire said.

“And get stuck? I’d rather not,” Ilea said.

Claire narrowed her eyes. “Try it.”

Ilea did and found herself pushed out of the ground as her spell deactivated. The effect was essentially the same as when she tried to blink into solid matter, just slower.

“At least you can’t get crushed in the ground,” Trian commented.

“The ground would be crushed instead,” Ilea said, looking at the stone surface below as she squinted her eyes.

“Good thing you didn’t choose the demon class. Wouldn’t want the ground to be running away in fear,” Trian said.

“So it’s between Flare of Creation, Phaseshift, Force, and Displacement?”

“I like all four. Flare of Creation is set, though. Because of the body enhancement bonuses that affect it,” she said. “I want to test Displacement and see how much better it gets. If it turns into another Blink that I can use on objects and enemies as well, it’s a no-brainer. Phaseshift does feel intriguing, but I want to see how Force develops into the second tier. Then maybe I can try out both.”

“Sounds good,” Trian said.

Claire gave her a slight nod.

Ilea chose Flare of Creation, Force, and Displacement as her active skills. Depending on their second tiers, she may reconsider her choices in the future. But for now, she was excited to play around with her new Class.

Class 3: The Faen Valkyrie – lvl 1

- Active: Force – lvl 1

- Active: Flare of Creation – lvl 1

- Active: Displacement – lvl 1

- Passive: Space Shift – lvl 1

- Passive: Body of the Valkyrie – lvl 1

- Passive: Space Awareness – lvl 1

Almost feels like new beginnings. Exciting. I wonder how fast it will level.

Ilea grabbed a pebble, pushing it away with Force before teleporting it back with Displacement. A dull white flame intertwined with wisps of ash from her armor, her ashen limbs moving lazily on her back.

So many new possibilities.

She grinned to herself.

“I fear for her next enemies,” Trian said.

Claire ignored him. “You unlocked something else, right?”

“I did.” Ilea smiled and focused on the Core Skill points she had unlocked with her third Class.

Core Skill Points available: 15

[3rd-tier Class Skill Point]

[Stat Gain]

[Skill Boost]

[Locked]

[Locked]

[Locked]

[Locked]

[Locked]

Most are locked. What does that mean?

She focused on the individual options instead.

[3rd-tier Class Skill Point] – [Advance a Class skill to the third tier – Cost: 1]

So it’s not linked to specific Classes anymore. Not that it matters – my two main ones already have all skills in the third.

[Stat Gain] – [Gain 50 stat points to distribute freely – Cost: 2]

What? For just two points? Though I guess I do have a lot of stat points... Hardly notice it anymore when I invest a few dozen points.

[Skill Boost] – [Increase the level of a skill. Subdued effects at higher skill levels – Cost: 3]

Costs more than the stat gain? But why would I use this when I can just level the skills manually? Just takes a bit of time. Or can they level skills beyond 3rd-tier 30?

“Can you get more info on the locked options?” Claire asked after Ilea had shared everything.

Ilea tried but failed to gain anything else.

“Something was mentioned when you unlocked the Core Skills themselves. You need a locked requirement or an additional Class to unlock the points. Maybe the other locked stuff is linked to that?” Claire said. “Considering the requirements for the third-tier classes, I would assume you unlocked them earlier than most people would, even at your level. Not that we have anything to go on there. As far as I know, you’re the highest-leveled human on record.”

“The Faen Class was the only one with a pre-level five hundred requirement,” Ilea said. “You’re right. Maybe once I reach five hundred, the other ones will unlock?”

“The achievements to unlock those points are quite random as well. Impressive feats, of course, but I doubt you could achieve another ten very easily. I suggest you wait until more options are unlocked to spend any.”

“I’ll use them to advance my third Class’s skills into the third tier, if that’s even possible. Maybe they cap out at level twenty. But the rest I will keep. For now,” Ilea said. “Can’t take forever to get to five hundred to find out.”

“So, you plan on going off to do some testing?” Trian asked.

“Yeah. Some local dungeon would do. Wouldn’t mind you two joining,” Ilea said.

Claire and Trian looked at each other.

* * *

Ilea checked her bone armor through her sphere, moving her arms slightly to feel the weight of the warhammer resting in her hands. Her ashen defense had retreated to her back.

Her new Class was ready, and she felt comfortable with most of the skills. Space Awareness still felt weird, though. It was more distracting than anything else, really. She forced herself not to think about it, not to focus on it too much but to just let it be, as if it had always been there.

Dim white flames lazily clung to her armor as she raised her hammer.

‘ding’ You have entered the Vile Grotto

“Ready?” Trian asked. He wore his usual black armor, light and mobile while providing ample protection. Not enough against the creatures Ilea usually faced, but he didn’t exactly plan to get hit as often as she did.

Claire too was clad in armor. She wore her usual set, mostly black in color with a few parts in blue. Compared to her early Shadow days, this set was sturdier, made with better materials. And the hood had been replaced by a helmet without ornaments, connecting snugly with her chest piece, her eyes barely visible behind the two tiny slits.

Ilea nodded at Trian, a smile on her face as she twirled the incredibly heavy warhammer around. They were here to test her new abilities, but it felt good to be out in a dungeon with part of her team again.

“Alright. Let’s see how this goes,” Ilea said and walked into the dark caverns.

The Vile Grotto reached quite deep into the mountains. It contained large caverns and crevices, sometimes opening into valleys where snow and ice covered the stone. Dangerous for the Sentinels but quite manageable for a Shadow.

The first enemy showed up within a few minutes.

[Corrupted Reaver – lvl 132]

Once human, the reaver had become a mere beast. Turned by magic, corruption, or perhaps taken over by the dungeon after he had died, it now roamed about as a humanoid monster – like a zombie on steroids. Ilea had learned about these creatures in her Shadow classes. She smiled to herself, realizing that it had been a while since she’d last fought a monster she had learned about in advance.

Ilea raised a hand toward the approaching beast. It moved fast but nowhere close to anything the three Shadows could manage.

Space distorted in a field around her, slowing the creature as she channeled mana into Displacement.

The confused monster gurgled before it appeared ten meters above them, flailing its arms as it fell. A wet crunch resounded when the creature landed, decidedly ungracefully.

Ilea lifted her hammer and brought it down onto its head, crushing the skin, skull, brain, and stone below. She ripped the hammer out again with a sucking sound, cleaning it off with ash.

‘ding’ You have defeated [Corrupted Reaver – lvl 132]

‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 2 – 1 stat point awarded

‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 3 – 1 stat point awarded

‘ding’ Displacement reaches lvl 2

Ilea laughed. “Two levels! But only one stat point per level.”

“One instead of five. But I suppose that’s another part of the subdued thing. Another fifty of these creatures and you’re already at one-fifty,” Trian said with a smile.

I see. So it’s going to level quickly, at least at first. Which means I’ll have quite a few stat points to spend soon.

Ilea had more magical abilities that required more resources, but her magic had been buffed as well, and now that she was fighting, she once again felt like the balance of her stats was a bit off. She wanted more Wisdom and Intelligence, but she also felt like a bit more in her physical stats and Endurance would help make fighting with her new abilities a bit smoother.

Damn. I want everything. Good thing I can focus on leveling again.

“You have your main Class skills active?” Trian asked.

Ilea nodded. “Some of them. I can barely lift this thing without certain ones, let alone use it as a weapon.”

“Now that you mention it, I never tried. None of my skills boost Strength.”

Ilea smiled and set down the hammer. “Knock yourself out.”

He pulled with everything he had, but the thing didn’t budge.

Claire walked over, grabbed the weapon, and lifted it as easily as she would a broom. “Can we continue, please?” she said, handing the weapon to Ilea.

Trian looked at her with wide eyes and then glanced at Ilea. “You can’t just do that and not explain yourself!”

“It’s a secret,” Claire whispered as she walked on. “Ilea, maybe you should focus on your new skills instead of using the hammer. And deactivate all your main Class skills?”

“It would be more effective, yes. But I don’t get to use it often enough. It’s fun,” Ilea said. Her warhammer skill was nearly as untested as her space magic abilities.

“I still don’t understand why you’re not a warrior,” Trian said.

“I just got lucky. Though I’d like to believe I would have at least gotten some kind of magic. Magic is cool.”

“Says one of the most powerful humans in the Plains.”

“We’ve got company,” Claire said, and the two of them stopped their antics.

Ilea twirled her hammer and watched the monster approach. This one was larger, more muscly. It reminded her of the Pure Blooded she had encountered in the Descent, but this one wielded a rust-covered greataxe and still wore bits and pieces of old armor.

[Torn Brute Reaver – lvl 342]

Better. Let’s see how I do.

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THIRTY-SIX

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The Three Shadows

Ilea used Force to slow down the ravenous being, trying to teleport it behind herself.

The Reaver stepped to the side but was slightly pulled forward, yet not teleported. His backhand swing was slowed by the magic field as he tried to hit Ilea. The heavy hammer smashed into his side, bringing him down to one knee.

“Feel free to join in. I can test well enough with you two fighting as well.”

Lightning spread into it through its back, making the creature roar before an explosion rocked through the two of them.

Neither the Reaver nor Ilea showed a visible reaction to the blast, the creature continuing to attack as she focused on her space magic.

It blocked her hammer swings with slow movements of its axe. It was stronger than her but considerably slower. She got a few hits in before a fist smashed her square in the chest. An attack she could have easily avoided.

The movements were so clumsy that Ilea wondered how a creature like that could be considered level three forty. *I guess it's fair if it smashes you to a pulp with one mistake. I still think Centurions are far more impressive, though.*

She was flung backward and tried to use Force against the nearby wall. It slowed her movement before she slid to a stop on the ground.

Didn't even crack the armor, she thought with a smile. It was nice to fight some low-level enemies once in a while. Especially with an actual purpose.

Now outside of Force's influence, the creature focused on its other two adversaries, its movements quicker and more decisive.

Trian floated around, sending bolts of lightning at the being from a safe distance, teleporting whenever it got close. A barrier appeared around it after he led it into Claire's hastily prepared circle. A fist slammed into the bright energy, cracks immediately forming.

Bright light appeared within the dome as a dull-sounding explosion spread inside. The energy dome vanished, releasing dense smoke and fire into the air. The Reaver roared as it stumbled out of the smoke, burns showing on its sickly skin.

Ilea executed her three-step run-up perfectly, lifting the hammer overhead with both hands from behind her back before she threw it. It twirled once before slamming into the creature's head, stunning it for a second as the others continued their assault.

She tried to use Displacement instead of Iana's enchantment to move the weapon back to her hands but found the thing only slid slowly toward her, Ilea's mana declining by hundreds of points with each use.

She stopped the attempt and instead used the enchantment. This time, the hammer moved, its weight apparent as she struggled to control its flight angle. She caught it, surprised a little at the thought of it hitting the creature head-on. *Maybe the level is justified.*

Another use of Displacement moved the giant creature a meter back, its fist unable to reach Claire's new barrier before lightning and fire enveloped it again.

Another powerful blast of lightning slammed into the Reaver's head, frying its brain before two powerful explosions ripped through its legs.

It fell, catching itself with one hand right as Ilea appeared in front of it and brought her hammer down.

"Feels almost too easy," Trian said, floating down to join the others.

"Well of course, you've got the great Lilith with you."

"Oh, so that's how it is?"

Ilea twirled her hammer and smiled. "Yes."

'ding' Your group has defeated [Torn Brute Reaver – lvl 342]

'ding' The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 4 – 1 stat point awarded

'ding' Force reaches lvl 2

She quickly tested her spells. *A bit more range for both Force and Displacement. Which means when I get them to the second or third tier, the range should be pretty impressive.*

I like this. Leveling fresh abilities again.

“Nothing for me,” Trian said. “Your participation is showing.”

Let’s try the fire as well.

Storing her hammer for now, Ilea formed a fist and watched the pale flames flicker over her hands. They soon found their next enemy.

[Torn Blood Reaver – lvl 383]

It was leaner, and it seemed a little more intelligent too. It circled them with apprehension, taking in the unknowns invading its cavern with twisted eyes. Clawed hands opened and closed as it gargled.

Ilea had disabled her ash armor, as well as her auras. Which meant she was considerably slower and weaker.

The Intelligence boost is gone too... meaning my magic will be quite pathetic.

She wondered if that fact helped with leveling her third Class’s skills or if the opposite was true.

The beast charged, its steps fast and sure. Claws slashed out at the group.

The mages vanished immediately, Ilea remaining alone in front of the beast. Force barely inconvenienced the creature, and Displacement failed to move it. She ducked, barely managing to dodge the claw she had seen coming from a mile away.

Ilea displaced herself as lightning struck the creature, but it dodged Claire’s explosion and was instantly on Ilea again.

Ilea made a game of fighting the creature with many of her abilities deactivated, though she couldn’t turn off many of her passives. Precognition was huge, as were her fighting skills. She weaved through the quick attacks, her armor grazed but holding, some blows deflected with small movements.

Each touch made the flames spread. Flare of Creation no longer benefited from her high Intelligence but retained the Body Enhancement bonuses. Enough to keep the monster’s attention on her.

Lightning continued to lance out, both health and mana stripped from the being as Trian re-supplied himself through his Vampyr abilities.

The Reaver roared and gurgled, not finding purchase with its claws as the white flames slowly spread over its body. Ilea failed to dodge a few wild attacks, the claws scraping against her bone armor but failing to penetrate.

Eventually, another bolt of lightning burst into its head, and it exploded in a shower of bone and blood. Chunks of flesh slapped into her eyes, and she brushed them away.

‘ding’ Your group has defeated [Torn Blood Reaver – lvl 383]

‘ding’ Flare of Creation reaches lvl 2

She smiled, extending her arms to the sides as her ashen armor spread over her again, her auras activating with it.

“Not a single Class level,” she said.

“Hmm,” Claire said.

“Flare of Creation leveled to two, at least,” Ilea said. She spread her wings now and started charging heat.

“Well, in terms of leveling, it’s probably better for you to find and fight monsters yourself. It’s always slower in a group. Other than the fire, it seems the rest of your skills are more suited to support your main Classes.”

“The fire too, honestly. They spread when I punch stuff, so that’s what I’ll do.”

When another Reaver charged them, Ilea released Heart of Cinder, leaving behind a half-molten corpse, slowly collapsing onto itself.

‘ding’ You have defeated [Torn Blood Reaver – lvl 310]

‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 5 – 1 stat point awarded

More stat points. Yeah, I think I’ll be able to get everything a bit higher with this Class. Then, once I’m comfortable, I’ll get back to mainly Vitality, Wisdom, and Intelligence.

“I’ll have to get used to these abilities, but I think I’ll just use them in addition to everything else. They’ll level up in time.”

“Yeah. Either way, congratulations on your third Class,” Claire said.

“Thank you.”

Ilea stretched, ready to get some food. *And then, hmm.*

* * *

Ilea kept her eyes closed, focused on the speck of energy she felt within. The armor helped to keep out any external sensations; her sphere and other skills were turned off.

She had first come into contact with the energy a few days prior. Her interest piqued, she spent a little more time in her Armaments of Trials, mostly meditating with a focus on the part of her she hadn't previously seen nor felt. She was in one of the Sentinel training halls.

The more she forced herself to look at it, to feel it, the more it became blurry, ending in a blinding pain that made her stop.

The pain felt familiar too, but she couldn't place it. As if a part of her had forgotten, had refused to cling on to the memory.

She tried a few more times before deciding that it was futile to force it. Instead, she tried to coexist with what she perceived, to accept it without showing any desire to unveil its secrets.

Meditation helped greatly, and soon, she felt the energy move closer, or perhaps she herself was moving.

'ding' You have learned the General Skill: Soul Perception – lvl 1

Soul Perception – lvl 1

You have learned to perceive your soul. Congratulations. A skill that didn't require killing and blood to unlock. Marvelous.

You have unlocked the Soul Perception skill – 1 Core Skill point awarded

"Haha!" Ilea called out from within her armor. Another unexpected skill gained from Goliath's gift. She would have to thank him.

Perceiving her own soul didn't seem to give her any immediate benefits, but she could already tell it would be useful in the future. Maybe the smith had known that as well.

And still, she knew there was more to her armor. She felt like she was on the brink of some greater discovery, but, as it remained just a small part

of her busy days, that discovery would likely take time.

Ilea left the training hall, and the gates closed behind her before enchantments flared up into place. She heard the Sentinels training in some of the other halls, now equipped with new skills and their Classes.

Christopher and Iana continued to expand their defenses. Every new room and hall in the Sentinel Headquarters had to be clad in enchantments before it was approved for use.

Ilea walked past a few more training rooms that had been added in the past weeks, glancing inside with her sphere. The enchantments were tuned to allow her mana signature to pass. The perks of having advanced enchanters.

A few students were meditating among piles of ash, specks of the element floating around two of them. Another student was trying to build something akin to a snowman. Quite an impossible task without control over the element.

Ilea didn't disturb them, moving on until she found two students fighting each other in another hall. She blinked inside, joining the few watching eyes. A guy with a staff was fighting a girl who wielded fire magic. They clashed and parried, dodged and weaved across the wooden floor. Other students and Aki each gave pointers from time to time.

She had to admit that the students were good. Much better fighters than she had been after a month with her own Class.

Blink and punch. That's all it had really been back then, she thought, watching the young man move his staff in an experienced manner, striking several times at the woman's legs as she danced backward.

The other fighter jumped and twirled, a whip of fire manifesting and moving in concert with her body, forcing him back as it lashed out.

Both were fighting defensively, probing each other's abilities. A test of endurance between two warriors who seemed to know each other well.

She wondered how much progress she would have made with teachers like Sidney or Orthan out of the gate. Edwin had given her some pointers, as had others, but nothing to the extent of a dedicated teacher.

Her own skills and pointers from the warriors she had met on the way had kept her from forming bad habits or straying too far from efficient and deadly movements. Most of it, though, she had learned herself through trial and error, through battling hordes of monsters and machines.

Their students would have the best of both worlds. Surviving in dangerous dungeons with nothing but their skills, learning to fight ravenous monsters with the sole intent to maul and kill. And, at the same time, training with calculating warriors who tried to hit weak points, using a variety of weapons and tactics. Who tried to exhaust and use every unfair advantage they could get.

Ilea didn't have to look at Aki to know that he was proud of the young fighters. He had filled the role of combat teacher and protector of the Sentinels perfectly.

She saw the fire whip slash into the man's face, ending the fight as he admitted defeat. He showed no pain, and the wound had already started healing. Ilea assumed the condition for the woman's victory had been met, nodding at her once before she vanished.

They're doing their thing, she thought, reappearing on a rooftop in Ravenhall. And I've got my third Class. Feels like I've accomplished my goals here.

She sighed. It felt good, yes, but she wondered what came next. *Probably testing and leveling my new skills.* She looked up at the gathering clouds and breathed in deep.

"I've been putting something off, haven't I?"

Elise and Dagon had found a lead on who Eve had once been. Coupled with a location that she hadn't visited yet.

Prioritizing other things. But I guess I don't have any excuses anymore.

THIRTY-SEVEN

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The Way of the Sentinel

Ilea landed in the forest near Farport on the eastern coast of Lys, supposedly where Eve was from. The town wasn't particularly large or fortified. Dozens of small fishing boats were visible from above. It wasn't difficult to locate the main square. There were two inns, and Ilea chose the one that looked less fancy. The Red Boar.

"You're new in town? Here on a quest?" the innkeeper asked, a bald warrior in the low hundreds, a few scars showing that he hadn't always been in this job.

Or I'm underestimating the dangers of owning an inn, Ilea thought as she took a sip of ale. It tasted good.

"You could say that," she said, taking a look around the common room. Adventurers and drunks, mostly. Most other folk seemed to be working at this early hour.

"Looking for someone? I hope you don't bring trouble," the man said, his tone nothing new to her.

"I'm looking for Olivia Sarken. Is that considered trouble?"

He glanced around the room and then back at Ilea. "Been a while since I heard that name. Good kid. Could be trouble, depending on who you ask."

"What if I ask you?" Ilea said and finished her drink. Her sphere showed that nobody in potential earshot was in distress. She was pretty sure nobody was even listening.

"Depends on why you're looking for her. She vanished years ago. Stories were told, and now she's just another one of them."

"One of whom?" Ilea asked.

“Troublemakers.”

She smiled. Eve could certainly be described that way. “Trouble for you?”

“No. Which is why I liked her. Is she still alive? You hunting her?”

Ilea looked at him for a long moment. “Why would you care?”

He shrugged. “Told you, she was a good kid. Probably pushed too far, too fast. Always wondered what happened to her.”

“I’m not hunting her.”

Ilea wasn’t exactly sure what she was doing here. Eve was dead. Looking for her past wouldn’t change that. And still, she was here.

The innkeeper let her think.

“She’s dead,” Ilea heard herself say. She was quiet for a long moment while the innkeeper grabbed two small glasses and opened a bottle of amber liquid.

He poured. “I’m Gerrard.” He took one glass and raised it, waiting for her to do the same. “To troublemakers.”

She smiled. “To troublemakers.”

* * *

There were three bottles now.

Ilea smiled. “Yeah, her mind magic was super impressive. Fought my fair share of mind mages, but she was one of the most subtle users.”

“Can’t believe she managed to reach that kind of power. Suppose she never stopped.”

“Yeah. I think I’m still a little pissed that she didn’t ask for help. Less than I was, though.”

“Her family never liked her, and most people thought she was more trouble than anything else. Father left, and her mother never loved any of her children. Makes it hard, I think, to trust people. To let other people help.”

Ilea nodded and drank.

“You know what she did? Here, I mean. You said she was a troublemaker.”

“Just rumors and stories. You know how it is. People complained about taxes back then. The former lord of the town was young. Too young, some

voices said. And he was cruel. Olivia wasn't the only one who knew something needed to be done.

"Others tried, resisted, spoke up, but it only made things worse. She was caught breaking into the lord's manor. Three of his men were found dead. She fled, and the entire guard hunted her down. Three days later, they proclaimed her dead."

"You knew that she wasn't?"

"I suspected. Heard some things later on, when everything had calmed down again. But never an outright confirmation. Either way, she was officially dead, and a few weeks later, the former lord had a hunting accident. And that was that. There was talk, of course. Quite a few people suspected foul play, but most were just happy to move on.

"There was an official investigation from the capital, but I could tell they didn't really try. Must have realized the lord wasn't well-liked, and more importantly, he wasn't managing the town very well either.

"I always suspected Olivia. Lord would have had her corpse displayed, but he didn't. And the timing was too close. Maybe she was even responsible for the quick investigation, found evidence of something in his manor. Who knows. Too exciting for an innkeeper like me, those kinds of stories."

"It does sound like her." Ilea drank another glass.

"I'm sorry for your loss," he said.

"I'm sorry too. Could have come here with better news."

"Demons and war. We're pretty used to bad news these days. I hear the Empire has finally started fighting back. Sure took them long enough."

"Yeah. Anything else going on in town? I guess I could help out if there's anything to do while I'm here."

He smiled and nodded. "You're one of the good ones. I can see why she liked you. But we're far from any fronts here. There's hardly anything worth the interest of a Shadow."

"Didn't say I was a Shadow."

"Seen a few in my time. I can mostly tell. There's something about you folks."

"And what's that?"

He poured another two drinks and looked at her. "Troublemakers."

* * *

Ilea didn't stay for long. She got a bottle of ale and strolled through the small town.

She sipped on her ale and watched a few kids run through the street, laughing as a shopkeeper tried to catch them.

She could hear the rush of the nearby river, no matter where in the town she was. It flowed through the settlement and into the sea.

The small forest surrounding most of Farport supposedly had spirits living in it that protected the town. It was interesting enough to check out, but other than some strange-smelling herbs, there was nothing of note to be found.

Ilea looked up at the suns and rolled her shoulders. Her third Class marked a milestone, and she was excited to see the Sentinels grow in the years to come. She hadn't been sure what she had come here to find, but it had felt right to visit. She had some closure, and now, she could look to the future.

* * *

"I believe I found out who Eve was."

Claire smiled. "You did."

"Didn't expect her to leave any traces," Trian said.

"Dagon and Elise found the potential match," Ilea said. "Her name was Olivia Sarken. She wasn't much older than me. Grew up in Farport with her mother and two siblings. She always had a knack for mind magic and hiding, got a Class before most of her peers."

She told them what she had found out.

"Killed the lord," Trian said, brushing a hand through his hair.

"Olivia was found in the woods and killed. The corpse was too mangled to identify, but the guards still reported the name. Of course, Olivia didn't die that day. Nobody knows what she told the guards or did to them, or if she fooled them entirely. All we know is that the lord died a few weeks later in a hunting accident. Taxes were adjusted again by his replacement, and that was that."

"Are the parents still alive? And her siblings?" Trian asked.

"The father died a few years back. Lost at sea. Nothing mysterious there, apparently. Most deaths in Farport happen like that."

“She made her choice,” Claire said and touched Ilea’s hand. “I’m glad you found her.”

“I know,” Ilea said. She felt like she understood Eve a little better now. She supposed it still hurt, but she felt less angry and confused about it all. And it was good to have her friends here.

Before long, scraps of food, plates, and empty bottles littered Claire’s usually immaculate workspace.

“But seriously,” Trian said, relaxing in an ashen hammock, “what is metal-boy doing?”

“You know he’s not stupid, right?” Claire said. “He’s probably just stuck somewhere.”

“He did like being in the wilderness, so it’s possible that he’s just enjoying a vacation,” Ilea said.

Trian sighed. “It’s been well over a year.”

“I trust that Iana and Christopher will figure out where he is in time. We just have to be patient,” Claire said.

“You think he’s already got his third Class as well?” Ilea asked.

“Who knows? For all we know, he’s fighting level one hundred creatures,” Trian said. “Wait, you’re worried he’s going to overtake you?” He laughed.

“It’s serious.”

Trian nodded in a serious manner. “Yes, of course. Well, you should find a suitable place to train, then. And I don’t think the low-level dungeons around here will fulfill that purpose.”

“I’ll find a place. Just a matter of time. The Specters are pretty good for me at the moment.”

“Have you two wondered who killed her?” Claire asked.

“We know she was looking for the Golden Lily,” Trian said. “I’m not sure it’s a good idea to pursue that knowledge. She killed a person or people that we don’t know of, and somebody retaliated.”

“I think I’d like to know,” Ilea said. “I’m not sure what I’d do with the knowledge, but she was a friend to me, and I’d like to know what happened.”

Claire nodded. “I’d like to know as well. And I’m interested in this Golden Lily. Even now that I help administrate Ravenhall and the Shadow’s Hand, this order remains a myth.”

“Well, what with Ilea fighting armies, she’ll surely offend the right people one of these days,” Trian said.

Ilea thought about what had happened in the capital. “Let’s just hope it doesn’t end the same way.”

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THIRTY-EIGHT

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Curse

Felicia twirled in the air, arrows and spells whistling past her before she landed on the ground, crouching low as her wind shot out.

Two soldiers were cut in half, another dodging the near-invisible blade. She darted left and rolled, feeling the glaive slash through the air above.

Major Braak finally reached the enemy group, his spear piercing through two skulls in the blink of an eye, the man vanishing before he slashed the neck of a third soldier.

Felicia rushed three mages preparing a group spell, blades of wind slamming into a hastily erected barrier. She pushed on, teleporting when the heat of emerging flames appeared around her.

She felt the fire burn through her armor, watching as her spells slashed through limbs, heads, and the ground alike. She breathed out, the wind picking up around her, quickly putting out the flames still clinging to her body.

She looked around, expecting more soldiers to fill in the contested position.

But nobody came.

“Something isn’t right, we’re advancing too quickly,” she said to the major.

He ripped his spear out of a dead mage and cleaned it off on the fallen’s robe.

“I agree. Something is amiss,” the man said. Joining her at her side, the two looked over the battlefield from their slightly elevated position.

Flashes of magic were flaring in many places – the Baralia slaves and soldiers were being overrun by the Empire’s troops.

Their strategy had worked well so far. They probed the defenses of cities and settlements, dealing as much damage as possible before artillery and numbers overwhelmed the defenses. Odiah was the fifth city they had approached, testing its defenses and the troops stationed within.

The Empress didn’t want to risk too many losses, nor did she have to. With both Asila and Nipha joining the war, it was only a matter of time until their enemy was overwhelmed.

Baralia had always been a split kingdom. Powerful nobles followed their own interests and only banded together in emergencies or if the high king commanded it directly. Now, they were scrambling to defend the wealth and power they had accumulated, slowly falling one by one.

Slaves were rising up in many towns and settlements, and some towns had already been taken over when the Empire’s forces arrived. One of the southwestern cities had defected after the siege of Riverwatch. The event had encouraged many slaves and dissidents to rise up in the southern parts of the kingdom, bolstering the forces available to General Velamyr Ryse.

It hadn’t surprised Felicia that many soldiers and guards had put down their weapons as soon as their masters and lords had been felled.

One thing was certain, this war would cement the power of Lys. And she would cement her place within it.

She looked over the lands before them and breathed in deep, feeling the presence of the wind.

“This is quite boring, Felicia,” Maria said as she appeared next to her. “I expected more.”

“We all did,” Braak said as he looked at her with disdain. “Butcher.”

Maria winked, a vicious grin on her face.

Lightning cracked in the distance, drawing their eyes. A powerful bolt of magic slammed into a group of soldiers on the ground, barely visible from this distance.

“General Ryse has joined the battle,” Braak said. “Regroup at Camp C, we need more information.”

“Why? Let’s just go in there and kill them. Might just be they put everyone behind the walls,” Maria said.

“It’s unusual. They don’t have the resources to stand against a siege. Nor would they keep any soldiers outside at all if that were the case,”

Felicia reasoned.

The void mage glared at her but didn't retort.

"We'll—" Felicia started when she felt an incredible surge of mana begin to manifest to her right.

All of them looked at the same thing: a beam of red light extending out from beyond Odiah's walls. It went up and into the sky, vanishing into the dark clouds above. It hung in the air, connecting the earth to the clouds, pulsing with a menacing glow.

"What the fuck is that?" Maria asked in an excited tone.

"A curse of blood..." Braak whispered. "Retreat, get as far away from that as possible!"

Felicia didn't have to be told twice. The power she felt from the eerie light eclipsed any manifestation of magic she had ever felt before.

A look back revealed the brightening of the beam. Chaotic power that was still building to... something.

She flew up and prepared her defenses, turning around and summoning an enchanted shield as she continued to flee.

A glance down showed Major Braak sprinting away, a group of soldiers and freed slaves in tow as he shouted for everyone to retreat.

Then a loud *crack* rent the air, as if the very fabric of reality had folded into itself. The wave could be seen from kilometers away. A pulse of blood magic that would devour all.

Felicia didn't dislike the major, but her reasons to descend and put herself and her shield between him and the approaching spell were primarily selfish. He was a well-respected and well-known major in the Imperial Army. And he had seen her efforts.

If he was gone, she would lose a powerful future supporter.

"Brace!" she shouted, sending a wave of air toward the approaching spell as the major and most of the soldiers tried to get behind her shield.

Felicia felt the force impact her defenses, the magic sizzling over the ground around her as she was pushed back. As part of the spell washed over her, her blood heated up. She screamed and fell to her knees.

Blazing agony was all she could comprehend, her very insides shaking as her mind went blank. She coughed and retched up blood, her mouth burning. Her breathing was dry and painful, but her senses slowly returned.

Her health was regenerating, a few of her skills activating due to the heavy damage. She took a deep breath and forced herself to get up from her

knees.

The sky had turned red, wisps of dark crimson energy clinging to the ground like flames, dancing mockingly.

Should never have come here, she could almost hear them say. *You will never get back what you lost*.

“Braak?!” she shouted, stumbling to her feet and finding the man covered in burns a few meters behind her.

He was standing, his breathing heavy before he spat out blood. Felicia hadn’t seen him in such a state before. They needed a healer. Her own skills wouldn’t allow her to regenerate indefinitely, not with enemies nearby.

A few of the soldiers had recovered too and stood up while a few others remained on the ground, dead or unconscious. One of them turned to Braak and formed a spell. A split second later, the soldier’s head exploded in a gory mess as Braak’s spear punched through the skull without resistance.

Felicia formed wind blades, assessing the situation. The man hadn’t gone mad.

She looked at the remaining soldiers. Their eyes had become bloodshot and unfocused, the veins on their necks and arms pushing through the skin with a dark crimson color. *Dead men walking*, she thought and formed a few blades of wind.

[Cursed Warrior – lvl 105]

The nearest soldier attacked. His footing remained sure, and he held his sword with both hands as he tried to dodge the blades of air. Unsuccessfully.

“Camp C!” Braak shouted, twirling his spear and knocking down the rest of the cursed soldiers.

Felicia finished them off with wind spears to their heads. “What did that spell do?”

The man just shook his head and started jogging toward the camp, erratic movements and smoke already visible in the distance.

Felicia left the major and floated up, where she saw the battlefield had turned into chaos. Soldiers were fighting their own, and spells formed and exploded in a rainbow of deadly colors. A quick glance at the city walls revealed only silence. The spell had done what it was supposed to do.

Flying down, she grabbed two unconscious soldiers who hadn't fallen to the curse and rushed back to the camp. They needed healers. She hoped a few had survived.

A sinking feeling remained in her gut, her spells cutting through groups of turned men and women who now attacked their former allies, most of the latter unconscious.

The cost of blood magic was no mystery to her. She would kill every last person responsible for this, every noble and high-ranking officer in these forsaken lands.

She gritted her teeth and flew onward.

* * *

Helena shifted in her chair. It was uncomfortable but necessary. Impressions were important, after all, and she wouldn't exactly be taken seriously if she sat on a comfortable couch.

It didn't mean she wasn't allowed to be annoyed about it.

"Your aura is showing," Amara said from the corner of the room.

Helena smiled. *Well done.*

She stood up from the chair and clapped. "You are getting better! My deary, your perception is impressive as always!"

"Don't act like you intended to do that," the woman replied without a hint of sarcasm or joy.

You have a lot to learn yet, Helena thought, happy to see that the girl still had the same spirit.

"There it is again," Amara said.

"You must stop. Please, my dear, this old woman can't take your grievous insults," she said, stepping past her table and toward the oven.

Having a small open-plan kitchen as part of her lounge-like meeting space was something she had *not* been willing to compromise on, no matter the impact on appearances.

The smell was close to perfection. Her creation was nearing completion. Another thirty-six seconds, according to her intuition. The heat was perfect, as were the ingredients. Not easy to come by in times of war.

And what a dreadful war it was. So much potential lost, so many people and cities. Wiped out because of the misplaced ambition of a simpleminded

barbarian.

“Aaah,” Helena breathed, tapping her foot to the passing of time as she ignored the moans behind her. “Now!” she exclaimed with an onset of joy, her hands moving in a blur as she opened the oven.

She grabbed the heated metal sheet with her bare hands and carefully lifted it out, looking at her delicious creation.

Perfectly calculated cracks showed on the top of the chocolate cake, veins of molten goodness showing in between. Enticing and sexy, heavy and full of promise. Helena smiled and twirled, hot plate in hand, before she vanished and reappeared next to a small table.

She had already prepared the tea, and now the cake was done too. “Amara, come and sit,” she said and straightened her dress, the pink apron vanishing into her enchanted hair clip.

The assassin reappeared already sitting in the chair opposite her. Her luscious black hair reached down below her shoulders, framing a pale, fair face with deep black eyes that showed neither joy nor care but focus alone. There was a small coffee table between them, the ovens against the wall off to one side. It was as if someone had taken a large baker’s kitchen, cut it in half, and stitched it to a cozy cottage sitting room.

The girl had had nothing but ambition from the start. Helena had been sure she would be eaten alive by her peers, but she had been proven wrong.

She loved being proven wrong.

Interesting surprises weren’t a daily thing at her advanced age and experience. Not that she would ever share that information with anyone, lest they learn she was older than most grandmothers in Myrefield!

“I heard you like chocolate,” Helena said in a casual tone.

“I can tolerate it,” Amara said.

You’re playing a dangerous game.

Helena feigned being hurt, clutching her chest as she closed her eyes.

Concern flashed on the girl’s face as she gingerly sliced into the cake, took a piece, and started to eat.

Good.

“You don’t have to play the part, Amara. I know very well that not everyone’s heart beats to the same drum. And yet it hurts nonetheless to see one’s creation rejected with such lack of care,” Helena said as she cut herself a piece.

The recipe demanded that the cake be left to cool, but Helena had found that by leaving her pain perception active and with Heat Resistance in the second tier, the slight tingle would elevate the taste. Almost like a mix of spicy and sweet.

She had tried various toxins, but nothing had been quite as subtle as simple heat. Everything else was usually too dominating in experience or flavor, sometimes both.

Poison cakes were an art she had mastered long ago, but there was a difference between trying to kill someone and using deadly substances to add to the taste. It was especially difficult when she had to evaluate her guest's resistance to various poisons.

Amara showed no reaction to the heat, nor did she smile due to the mix of sugar, butter, and chocolate. Really, if she wasn't so competent and if Helena was a hundred years younger, she would likely have taken care of her a long time ago.

"What did you bring me today?" Helena asked, taking a sip of her cherry tea infused with black vein ivy.

"A Baralia officer who was stationed in Odiah and a member of the Order of Truth, who was, in fact, hunting down the fleeing officer," Amara reported, still showing no reaction at all to the marvelous cake.

"Darling, don't be shy, eat up," Helena said, a friendly smile on her face.

The girl finished her cake. Like an animal. Or perhaps a slave obeying their master's order. She didn't understand what Helena wanted, but she had obeyed nonetheless. Misguided but young. Perhaps the girl simply needed time to adjust, her lust for power not yet plateaued.

"Tell me what you know," Helena said, sitting back. The veins on her arms slowly turned black as the poison took effect, the sensation of corruption mixing well with her cherry tea and the scent of fear permeating the room from the other 'guests'.

"The Order of Truth has more influence over the high king than we previously anticipated. The destruction of Odiah through an elaborate blood magic sacrifice of most of its population wasn't a last effort to repel the imperial forces but simply the first step in a plan I have not yet been able to unravel," Amara said, her head lowered.

Helena sipped her tea. "Continue."

“The ritual involved curse and blood magic on a scale I had never seen before. I have experimented a lot, and I doubt it is possible to fuel such a spell with human deaths alone. Something wasn’t right.”

Helena took another sip, crossing her legs as she sighed. “The world is vast, Amara. And we are just playing in the small part we claim as ours.”

Amara nodded. “Everyone who didn’t survive was turned, their identification was changed to ‘cursed’, and they attacked everything that had survived.”

“Retaining their abilities and combat sense?”

The girl nodded.

“Did they spread it further?”

“No. I tested it with a surviving Baralia soldier myself. He was simply slain by the cursed,” Amara replied.

Helena nodded. “Thank you. For your efforts and for bringing these to me. I’m glad you survived your mission,” she said and smiled. “I trust you have interrogated the prisoners already?”

The girl nodded, relaxing now that her report was done. “This officer knew about a dangerous spell and decided to defect. I’m certain he has nothing left to share.”

[Warrior – lvl 142]

Helena stepped over to the tense man. His body didn’t show any recent scars or defects, but she knew Amara took her job very seriously. He had tried not to make a noise, his hands and legs bound and his eyes covered in a thick dark cloth.

She broke his neck and, summoning her apron, wiped her hands clean.

“The priest might know some things, but I have failed to pry them from him,” Amara continued as the officer’s body fell with a thump.

The believing cling not to their own minds and ambitions but to something higher.

“Do not worry, dear Amara. We will find ways to make him talk. Rest for one day and return to Odiah. Support our forces in destroying the cursed. We do not want another wave of demonic creatures ravaging our lands.”

The girl bowed and vanished.

Helena looked over at the remaining prisoner. “Do you like chocolate cake, mister...?” she asked as she cut a piece and placed it on a small plate.

A few shrouded individuals appeared in the large open kitchen. One took the corpse away, while another cleaned the floor.

“I will not talk with savages,” the man said.

One of those. Helena’s smile wavered as she took her fork and ate a piece of cake. *Damn. I really am a master baker.*

She glanced at the fork and decided to get started.

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THIRTY-NINE

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Excursion

Ilea continued getting used to her new skills, walking through the streets of Ravenhall with a sphere of ash disappearing in the space around her, occasionally frozen in mid-air as she inspected everything with her new awareness.

With her third Class unlocked and most of her previous daily activities no longer quite as much of a priority, she wondered where to go next. Her fresh new Class and skills were at a low level, so her goal was obvious. It was just a question of where to go to train and level.

She suddenly stopped and grinned to herself.

That's an idea, she thought, spreading her wings. But first, I want to check on some old acquaintances.

A few seconds later, she was hovering above Ravenhall, her wings charging with power before she shot off into the night.

Dawn came as she sped over the lands, the suns slowly enveloping the forests, rivers, and hills with light. Monsters would be retreating into their dens as others were waking.

Ilea slowed down and teleported into the thicket below, switching between Blink and Displacement. Space Shift had halved the cooldown, but with Displacement available too, she could teleport nearly four times as fast as before. The new skill lacked in range for now, but Ilea knew that time and training would only improve it.

Her wings carried her through the forest. She avoided trees with quick maneuvers or teleportation. She wondered how many creatures noticed her, her movements almost without sound.

Eventually, she landed and let her wings vanish, cracking her neck to announce herself. Her prey looked up, opening its wide maw as it turned. Blood rolled off its massive jaw.

The Drake had been interrupted in its feeding.

It remained where it stood, roaring in Ilea's direction. She roared back and smiled as she approached.

The creature was frozen in place. She had enough time to rip off its head. But Ilea wasn't here to kill such a low-level creature.

Some of these things nearly killed me back then.

She wondered if their population had recovered since her time in the forest.

The Drake wasn't highly intelligent, but she could still see its apprehension. Maybe if it had a few more brain cells, it would know that, right now, running was the only thing it should be focusing on.

Ilea reached it and stopped in front of the creature. She looked down and saw the half-eaten deer. "An impressive catch," she murmured.

The monster opened its jaws and closed them around her head, biting down hard against her ashen armor.

Ilea could hear the teeth grinding against her ash. She used Force to slow the creature, grabbing its jaws and slowly pulling them open with her hands.

Displacement moved the Drake back a few meters as she summoned one of Keyla's meals.

She smiled when she saw the creature running away.

Finally got it.

The Drake was at level twenty, barely even a danger to most guards and adventurers. Their size could still be troublesome, she supposed.

And now I have a new Class.

She quickly flew to the temple and landed on it.

Maybe once I improve my space magic, there will be a way to return home. See how things are going back on Earth.

The compass rose remained where she had carved it.

A new world, hmm? Well, we'll see what else I discover here. Got another set of old acquaintances to meet first.

Ilea spread her wings once more and blinked up and above the tree line. With her new target in sight, she flew off toward Karth. She wondered if they were still there. She really hoped they were.

Cleaning up the Iztacalium dungeon was the least she could do for her elven friends and the city of Dawntree.

It would be quite disastrous if they came out and attacked innocent people, now wouldn't it?

Animals hid in the thicket and their dens, frozen in fear by the snickering they heard as a dangerous predator rushed by on dark wings of ash.

* * *

Ilea reached Dawntree in under an hour and landed a few kilometers away. Its distant shape was distinct, as if carved into the side of the mountain. She thought about her first time traveling here, about how long it had taken and how arduous it was.

I've really come a long way.

She moved her ash armor to her back and switched into a comfortable set of clothes with leather armor on top. People would ask questions either way, but she didn't feel like hiding in the shadows right now.

She was here to test her abilities against Taleen machines. The normal versions would be perfect to level her new class, and nobody would miss them. Adventurers were usually too afraid to approach Taleen dungeons. Considering the traps and machines inside, she didn't blame them for that opinion.

Ilea reached the main road soon after. There were no travelers in sight, but what she did see was a squad of armored people sitting around a campfire. They were still quite a ways off.

One of them was on the lookout, his eyes aimed straight at her, but it seemed he was unsure what he was seeing, given the distance.

Eyes of Ash, she thought with a smile, watching the man squint against the sunlight.

A few minutes later, he did spot her and informed the others. They were guards or low-level soldiers, judging by their gear and the apprehensive looks on their faces. Only two of the five were even wearing helmets.

"Who goes there?!" one of them shouted. The tall man was wearing one of the two helmets. A bushy beard poked out through the bottom.

Ilea wasn't sure if he was the leader, seeing as two of the others were looking at him with slight annoyance. Their armor didn't give her more information about their hierarchy. It was very basic-looking plate that didn't even look to be very good quality. Some of it didn't fit.

"I'm an adventurer!" she shouted back, summoning her Emerald Adventurer badge.

"Dawntree is off limits," one of the previously annoyed non-helmet wearers said as he watched her approach. He was clean-shaven but had a few small cuts on his face that suggested he wasn't great with a knife.

Ilea stopped a dozen meters away and held up the badge, the thing shimmering in a dull green.

"That's Emerald... She's above two hundred?" Beardy asked in a whisper, looking at Cut-face.

She couldn't identify them yet, but it was clear they weren't a threat to her.

"Dawntree is the only city in the west that still has a guild. Are you telling me I traveled for two weeks just to turn back?" Ilea said.

They seemed unsure of what to say.

She stepped closer, knowing now that only one of them was above even level one hundred. Quite a pitiful roadblock. If that was what it was. Maybe they were just preying on naïve travelers.

"What happened in Dawntree to make it off limits? Did the Elves finally take it?"

"The nobles of Dawntree are no more. Ziva has led us to freed—" Cut-face started, but he was interrupted by an elbow to his side. He looked young, excited.

Beardy, the man who had hit him, obviously didn't trust Ilea. "You're a healer."

"I am," Ilea said.

The other men stiffened a bit. The one with the other helmet even gripped his sword.

Ah, I see.

"I'm unaffiliated with the orders. Least of all the Corinth, if you're worried about that."

"How are we to believe you?" said Beardy, apparently their leader. In his fifties, he was the only one of the group not fidgeting uncomfortably at her presence.

These guys must be new at this.

Ilea thought about it. She could show her Shadow badge, or maybe show off her healing magic. But something far simpler came to mind. “Would a Corinth healer dress like this?” she asked, motioning at herself.

An approving murmur spread through the group.

“A spy might,” one of them suggested.

“You haven’t met them. They would rather kill themselves than dress like adventurers,” the leader said, then nodded at Ilea. “You may pass.”

Ilea grinned as she walked past them. They had a small pot resting over an even smaller fire. Something brown bubbled away inside. “That smells nice. May I have a bowl?”

“Food is scarce. Buy your own, adventurer,” Beardy said.

Ilea nodded and summoned an empty bowl. “How about one silver?” she said, summoning the piece.

Beardy did a double take, and suddenly, his demeanor changed entirely. “Of course, my friend. Help yourself,” he said with a suddenly joyous voice.

Ilea did. It was a simple stew with potatoes and meat. Well-cooked and seasoned. One of them should probably think about getting a cook Class.

They’re pretty inexperienced... maybe one of them actually was a cook up until recently. Or I suppose it could be a second Class.

“Thank you,” she said, infusing her voice with Monster Hunter as she tasted the stew.

She smiled at the frozen men, apprehension turning to fear in their eyes. “Very tasty,” she added before continuing onward to Dawntree.

“We should warn the city!” Cut-face whispered loudly after the effect had worn off.

“Are you crazy? With that kind of power? Leave her be,” Beardy said.

“A traveling healer... she’s alone too. Do you think that’s her? From the songs?” Cut-face persisted.

A fist hit his head. “Lilith has black wings, you idiot. Plus, she’s at least two meters tall. This one looked pretty normal. We leave her be. She didn’t seem out for trouble,” the leader said and turned toward the food. “Now eat. It’s going to be a long day.”

Ilea saluted his wisdom. Either way, she would have only scared them a little. Maybe some Displacement. They were just doing their job, and she had met far ruder guards.

The gates of the city were closed, but people were moving about on the wall far above.

“Who goes there?” a high-pitched voice called out.

Do they always have to scream like that when somebody arrives?

“Adventurer!” she shouted, raising her badge.

“Open the gate!” the woman shouted.

Ilea was welcomed by an armored team of ten soldiers, each above one hundred, with a few as high as one-fifty.

“What do you seek in Dawntree?” the highest-leveled man asked.

She showed him the badge again. “Does the guild still operate? Or did you burn that down too?”

One of them took a step forward, a woman who looked to be furrowing her brows a lot. She raised a spear toward Ilea’s chest. “Careful now. Healers aren’t welcome here.”

Ilea quirked up her eyebrows.

“The guild still operates,” the leader said. “Leave her be.”

“Sir,” the woman said respectfully, removing her weapon.

“Apologies for the treatment, adventurer. We’ve had a recent change in leadership. The guild should not be impacted by this, nor should the availability of jobs. I must, however, know if you are associated with a healing order. Few high-level independent healers roam these parts.”

“I’m not affiliated with a healing order,” Ilea said.

“I see. Then you are free to enter the city. Just don’t make any trouble,” he said and nodded to her, stepping aside.

That was easy. No toll either.

She winked at the guard who had confronted her, stepped through the thin hallway inside the wall, and came out on the other side to the familiar sight of the mountainous town sprawling downward.

I wonder if it was humans who built this, she thought, then nodded at a nearby soldier. “Where’s the adventurer guild?” she asked.

The woman gave her directions.

It seemed like a busy day, with plenty of people rushing through the streets. Though the movement was a little more hurried and subdued than it had once been. People on the streets traveled in groups and were constantly looking over their shoulders. Some sorted through rubble with worried expressions.

The sounds of workmanship accompanied her throughout the whole walk. Some buildings lay half destroyed, their walls caved in and roofs burnt, while others looked untouched entirely. The palaces and mansions, which she assumed had been owned by the nobles, had been hit the worst. Towers and entire sections had been destroyed.

She could see everything from a distance, once more appreciating her Eyes of Ash. The view was entirely different than the first time she had arrived here. Ilea did note that she got weird looks from time to time, but her high level seemed to dissuade any aggression toward her.

The guild looked untouched, well-armed and armored adventurers guarding the large building against whoever might cause trouble. Ilea had her badge ready and showed it to one of the guards out front, the man nodding her past.

Stone and wood had been used in the guild's construction, and the two-story building spanned a good thirty meters in all directions. The roof was tiled and angled downward on each side, the style reminding her of something she might see in a European mountain village.

It looked quite at odds with the surrounding houses, which were more built with an efficient use of space in mind and had obviously been trying to save on materials. The guild, on the other hand, would make a decently defensible fortress in a pinch.

A large hall with a few counters welcomed her, lit by both magical and oil lamps. The busiest employee inside was the barkeeper, the large man filling up mugs for the various groups of people occupying the stools and tables spread throughout.

Ilea got a few glances, but most people dismissed her, unable to identify her from a distance and unimpressed by her gear. She glanced over the noticeboard, which was packed with fliers. Most were related to rebuilding, repairs, and security details for wealthy employers or shops.

She hadn't encountered obvious unrest on her way here, but it seemed people were scared. *Or it was much worse in recent weeks.*

Ilea decided to ask one of the two clerks instead of reading through the whole board. Only three people were waiting in line, and their requests were quickly dealt with.

A few heads swiveled her way as she put the Emerald badge onto the counter, whispers about a high-level healer spreading through the hall.

“I haven’t seen you in Dawntree. Are you new?” the clerk asked. She was a young woman with long black hair going down her back and wore light armor.

[Mage – lvl 120]

“I just arrived, yes. Before you ask, no, I’m not affiliated with a healing order,” Ilea said.

The woman smiled. “I imagine you’re getting that a lot. The Corinth Order wasn’t exactly happy about the... change in government.”

“Was the guild?”

“Happy about the change? The adventurer guild provides its services no matter the local government,” the woman said, leaving it at that.

“Mhm... I’m looking for a job,” Ilea said.

“Plenty available,” the woman said, motioning at the notice board.

“Anything related to the Taleen dungeon previously in the Forkspear territory?”

The clerk blinked. “Iztacalum, was it? There are a few jobs, yes. Mostly about finding unrecovered bodies from the expedition that went down there some years ago. And missing people who took those jobs before and didn’t come back either.”

She shuffled some papers and clicked her tongue in thought. “I believe I remember a number of jobs requesting materials and any writings or artifacts from the Taleen as well. Let me see.”

She started looking through a filing cabinet behind the counter. More and more folders soon appeared. “Ah yes... this one was interesting too. A living Taleen Guardian. If they are alive at all. Though I think this noble... Yes, she’s dead.” She proceeded to stamp the file and place it into another cabinet.

“Do they pay to put up the job?” Ilea asked.

“Just a fee, and when completed, we pay the adventurers directly and then collect the fee. Untrusted employers are asked to pay upfront.”

“I’ll take everything that’s still active,” Ilea said. It was a whim. Perhaps she felt obligated to do a few jobs because she had the badge. And she hardly ever worked for the guild.

“These seven. Should I have them copied for you? Would be one copper each,” the woman said.

Ilea summoned her notebook and quickly wrote down some of the info, who it was for, and what they wanted. “No, it’s fine.”

She would bring back any corpses she found anyway, if only as a courtesy to the expedition she had worked with during her first visit.

Jeremy Creek was named as the client who had made the requests for both bodies and writings. “Is that the paladin and earth mage who teaches at the college?” she asked.

The clerk checked the file and nodded. “Yes. The college sided with the rebellion, so he should still be alive.”

“What if he isn’t?” she asked, continuing to take notes.

“Then we will cover the reward.”

“Good to know. Thanks for your time. See you later,” she said and turned, leaving the guild with a few sets of eyes still on her.

The walk down to the Root was uneventful, Ilea occasionally taking a few minutes to watch the mages repairing or adding to existing structures. The stone mages she had met were usually quite boring, but seeing it applied to structures with such control and precision made her respect that school of magic much more. While people needed to be efficient when battling monsters, in architecture, they could take their time.

When she reached the open field right in front of the tunnels leading into the mountain, she turned around and briefly looked over the city. It looked like the people were mostly content with whoever the new ruler was.

Ziva, was it?

She was about to turn back when she spotted something else.

Now who are you? Ilea thought, looking straight at a man currently watching her as she surveyed the city. He stood about a hundred and fifty meters away.

Their eyes locked, and he moved a hand through his black hair as he smiled. He winked and vanished.

Should I run now or find and kill him?

She saw something appear in her sphere and turned toward the apparition.

A much more subdued change appeared behind her in a separate location from the first. Skillful misdirection, but nothing Ilea would miss after her bouts with Eve.

She turned there instead, ignoring the illusion that had appeared first. “Who are you?”

The man's camouflage dissipated as he bowed. "Apologies for the display, Lilith. I couldn't resist."

He was clad in heavy, rough-fitting armor, some parts showing jagged damage and burn marks.

[Mage – lvl 214]

"My name is Hayden, fellow Shadow."

"A Shadow. We haven't fought together, have we?"

"Fields of Ravenhall. But I suppose we haven't met. Last time I saw you, you were less... terrifying."

"Do you need anything? I was just about to leave for the Taleen dungeon."

"I was tasked by the guards to tail you and find out who you were. I guess that answers why you're here as well. Anything else you want me to report? The atmosphere is a bit... tense at the moment."

Ilea gave him a look and a shrug. "Nothing I can think of."

"Great. I'll report to my employers then and let you be on your way. Good meeting a fellow Shadow so far from home."

She gave him a nod and teleported deep into the tunnel, repeating the spells a few times until she passed the lightly guarded entrance to the Root. Nobody noticed her when she appeared behind an inn clad in ash armor.

It's been a while. I wonder if she still works here.

FORTY

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Dungeon

The waitress did still work there, and Ilea stayed for a while. Sadly, her Lightning Resistance didn't gain a level this time around.

Ilea soon left the Root, following the path she knew well toward the Taleen dungeon that could have very well once been her grave.

A fist-sized ball of ash orbited her, keeping her mind focused as she rushed through the darkness, the lack of light meaningless to her enhanced eyes.

Ilea found the entrance caved in, only her memory letting her know that there had even been a way through in the first place.

How many forgotten cities lie hidden behind rubble? Especially in the north... there were entire kingdoms there.

She wondered if Maro could draw a map. To dig things up. *Probably all crawling with unspeakable horrors after all this time.*

Thinking about the Soul Rippers, a shudder went through her. *Could I kill them now? Hmm..., no, focus on your new skills.*

She looked forward and blinked into the stone mass.

And appeared within the Taleen dungeon.

'ding' You have entered the Iztacalum dungeon

"First try, baby," she whispered.

She looked around and soon found what she had been looking for. A Taleen Guardian. One of the ranged variants, either unaware of her or waiting for an opportune moment.

Ilea waved at the thing when it finally released its payload. Force activated but hardly did anything against the fast-moving steel slug.

It impacted her armored face without dealing any damage. The projectile itself flattened considerably. Ilea caught it as it fell and looked at the thing. *It is harder than some metals.*

Sometimes, it was easy to forget how much stronger she had become, given her tendency to look for creatures that could still hurt or even kill her.

She remembered struggling against these machines, fighting single ones for extended periods of time.

“Look how things have changed,” she said with a smile, slowly approaching the machine as it kept spewing projectiles. She used Force and Displacement to stop or move the small spheres, but neither was able to do anything about them.

Finally in range, she displaced the machine toward herself, covering it entirely in ash before Flare of Creation activated and set the whole thing aflame in white fire.

It took barely a second for the machine to melt sufficiently for destruction.

‘ding’ You have defeated [Taleen Guardian – lvl 150]

‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 6 – One stat point awarded

‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 7 – One stat point awarded

‘ding’ Body of the Valkyrie reaches lvl 2

Seems like I can still get something out of this place. Those were the easiest levels of my life, she thought and left the hunk of metal behind, entering the city. Memories of the Praetorians chasing her down flashed through her mind. *It’s been a while.*

Her ash moved around her in a lazy manner, covered by pale flames as she casually walked through the familiar street lined with ancient, uniform buildings. It seemed that the Guardians had spread out in the ruins again after they had rushed to the Great Hall to attack the expedition. One of the sword variants entered the other end of the street, its green eyes flashing as it looked at Ilea.

“Did you miss me?” she asked as her ashen limbs spread behind her.

Ilea smiled as the Guardian sped up and slashed its blades against her armor, which stopped them entirely. Her ash lashed out, cutting off the machine's arms.

"I'm back," she whispered, infusing her voice.

The Guardian remained frozen, its green shining eyes staring at her lifelessly. Absolute Destruction charged up as she positioned herself, sacrificing one thousand points of health to infuse her attack with all the power she could muster.

Her arm lashed out, hitting the creature square in its chest, denting the metal with a dull clunk. Cinders, Destruction, and Flare exploded into it, frying every last bit of its innards before the energy exploded out of the bent seams connecting its intricate parts.

The Guardian remained in the air for a moment, her space magic willing it so. She looked at its cracked eyes, their green light gone entirely.

Ilea grabbed the machine with her ashen limbs, twirling before she threw it as far into the city as she could. The sound of its landing traveled far as she charged her Monster Hunter skill.

Now, which creature should I imitate?

Ilea smiled. The last time she was here, she'd been terrified, forced to flee the carnage left behind by the ancient machines. She didn't have to imitate anyone or anything. She breathed in and shouted out her challenge. Ilea's challenge.

* * *

And the Guardians came.

Ilea had fought these creatures for days on end, knew their movements, weapons, reach, and speed by heart. But she was here to test and grow her new Class.

She had new skills and magic she needed to learn about, feel out, and understand.

Force kept them at bay, while Displacement made them appear far above her. The machines landed more gracefully than the Reaver, yet they still took damage.

Her ash moved as an extension of herself, a dark fog clad in white fire, its energy melting away the power that fueled her enemies. The farther it

reached, the more health it demanded.

But Ilea had health to spare.

Azarinth Fighting made her step back and to the side, letting steel slugs rush past, unable to even reach her as the ranged Guardians tried to bring her down.

Displacement moved her closer, Force slowing them down as her fire consumed all.

She took her time, even letting some of the machines hit her directly. Their blades could not pierce her armor – their slugs may as well have tried to penetrate a city wall.

Soon the street was clear, with dozens of Guardians lying destroyed and half molten on the stone ground, piling on top of each other. Ilea used Displacement and her ash to move the scrap metal aside as she stepped toward the lone Centurion waiting for her.

[Taleen Centurion – lvl 303]

A Guardian of Iztacalum, purged of its human explorers and blocked off to anyone who might enter.

She didn't know how much the creatures understood, how advanced or alive they truly were. Only the Praetorians had shown a slight sliver of intelligence; all the others had seemed far more rigid in their behavior.

Ilea watched the creature as it raised its spear before throwing it with blinding speed.

Her hand shot up and caught the weapon, holding onto it as the Centurion tried to summon it back. She held on for a second before the spear slid through her hand, caught by the creature as it went into a more defensive stance.

Ilea summoned her hammer, which was appropriately named Quiet, and spread her arms wide. "Here for a rematch."

Monster Hunter conveyed her meaning, making the machine change its stance once again.

She smiled as it approached, speed and grace in its movements as it assessed her.

Force and Displacement slowed and pulled on the being, Ilea dodging its attacks with practiced ease. The warhammer crashed into its side,

sending it stumbling. She followed it with another strike, but it dodged, causing her to split the stone of the road.

Ilea ignored the spear, its blade scraping against the ash protecting her face, the metal catching fire as Flare of Creation activated. She raised her hammer and swung, watching the Centurion jump back, confused as it waved its spear around.

It threw the weapon, but not at her.

Ilea watched as the spear slammed into a nearby wall, the flames slowly dying out.

A new weapon appeared in the machine's hands as it focused on her once again. The dent of her hammer strike remained.

She twirled the weapon and teleported. Reappearing, she slapped away the hand that reached for her, blocking the spear with her hammer. Flames spread as the being retreated, slowed by Force and stopped by her ashen limbs closing around it from behind.

The limbs fanned out as more ash came into existence, the pale flames spreading as they enveloped the machine entirely.

Ilea lifted her hammer, one ashen limb deflecting the spear rushing at her heart. Quiet met the Centurion's head, denting in one side. Its right eye flickered out, cracking as the fires deformed the green steel.

She lifted the hammer again, screaming as she brought it down. The Centurion's entire head caved in, joining the chest piece before it all burned.

Energy gathered as she formed a cocoon of ash around the remains, connecting the construct to her body. The explosion of fire was dull and contained, smoke and smoldering steel hitting the ground a moment later.

A ding filled her mind as the hammer vanished.

'ding' You have defeated [Taleen Guardian – lvl 205]

...

'ding' You have defeated [Taleen Centurion – lvl 303]

'ding' The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 8 – One stat point awarded

...

'ding' The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 15 – One stat point awarded

‘ding’ Force reaches lvl 3

‘ding’ Force reaches lvl 4

‘ding’ Flare of Creation reaches lvl 3

...

‘ding’ Flare of Creation reaches lvl 6

‘ding’ Displacement reaches lvl 3

...

‘ding’ Displacement reaches lvl 5

‘ding’ Space Shift reaches lvl 2

‘ding’ Space Shift reaches lvl 3

‘ding’ Body of the Valkyrie reaches lvl 3

‘ding’ Space Awareness reaches lvl 2

‘ding’ Warhammer Mastery reaches lvl 6

It was clear that the Guardians were neither a challenging enemy nor one she had no knowledge of. And she had still gotten eight levels out of them.

So it’s more about facing creatures I haven’t faced before with this Class.

Suits me well enough.

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FORTY-ONE

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Woman vs Machine

Ilea continued through the dimly lit streets of Iztacalum, systematically destroying every single Guardian and Centurion that patrolled the town.

With her advanced senses, speed, and now two teleportation spells, clearing the city was only slowed down by her self-imposed restriction to mainly use her new third Class's abilities.

She crouched down next to another corpse she'd found, this one likely not belonging to her original expedition. It was still quite fresh, his glassy eyes open and staring blankly. His shoddy leather gear spoke of desperation. She closed the eyes of the young adventurer and stored his body in her necklace, adding it to the others she had already found.

Monster Hunter allowed her to call forth all the enemies remaining in an area before moving on to the next. This meant she was able to efficiently wipe out any and all machines in each part of the dungeon she visited. Already, the levels she was getting were slowing down.

She smiled to herself after destroying another group of machines. When she had last been here, each day had been a difficult battle, each Guardian destroyed an accomplishment. The machines had been a constant looming threat, potential death hiding behind every corner.

And now, there's only really two of them left, she thought, reaching the edge of the 'bottomless' void, stretching down into the darkness, in front of the Great Hall entrance. This time around, her eyes let her see the rubble several hundred meters below.

On the other side of the cliff lay the battered gates that led deeper into the ruin. The gates had remained open. And beyond, she could already see

the patrolling machines that remained, both Guardians and Centurions.
Ilea checked her messages as she watched the machines.

‘ding’ You have defeated [Taleen Guardian – lvl 205]

...

‘ding’ You have defeated [Taleen Guardian – lvl 151]

‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 16 – One stat point awarded

...

‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 67 – One stat point awarded

‘ding’ Force reaches lvl 5

...

‘ding’ Force reaches lvl 13

‘ding’ Flare of Creation reaches lvl 7

...

‘ding’ Flare of Creation reaches lvl 15

‘ding’ Displacement reaches lvl 6

...

‘ding’ Displacement reaches lvl 14

‘ding’ Space Shift reaches lvl 4

...

‘ding’ Space Shift reaches lvl 9

‘ding’ Body of the Valkyrie reaches lvl 4

‘ding’ Body of the Valkyrie reaches lvl 5

‘ding’ Space Awareness reaches lvl 3

‘ding’ Space Awareness reaches lvl 4

‘ding’ Deviant of Humanity reaches lvl 9

‘ding’ Identify reaches lvl 14

‘ding’ Meditation reaches 3rd lvl 8

‘ding’ Monster Hunter reaches 3rd lvl 2

‘ding’ Warhammer Mastery reaches lvl 7

...

‘ding’ Warhammer Mastery reaches lvl 9

Over fifty levels. I really have to give it to the Taleen. They remain one of my best sparring partners. Can't wait to find out what the second tiers do.

She shouldered her warhammer and blinked over the vast divide.

The closest Guardians spotted her without a need for Monster Hunter. Ilea watched the first enemy approach, its spindly legs moving over the rubble and stone without issue.

She winked at the Guardian as it vanished, displaced into thin air above the gaping abyss.

"Careful on the way down!" she said and waved, smiling at the flailing creature.

This is where I first got my wings. Maybe you will too.

She discarded the thought when she heard the dull impact below.

One after the other, the Guardians fell. It was just too amusing not to do it.

Ilea wasn't able to teleport the Centurions, but she had another plan for them anyway. She punched the first one a few times, using her main skills to entirely shred the machine.

When its core started to glow, she cut off its arms with ash and grabbed one of its legs. A short twirl sent the grenade toward its approaching brethren. She danced a little in response to the ensuing cascade of explosions and shrapnel.

Flare of Creation receded as she stepped into the hall. All the gates were open, but she was only focused on one. Heart of Cinder started charging, soon reaching a point where the heat forced her to heal.

She spread her wings and approached the throne room.

It's been a while, she thought, noting the rotting corpses and the dried blood of those who had lost their lives here. For a moment, she thought back to the curse, the cold feeling in her stomach, the scythe, and the terror she had felt. She thought of all of those people who had died.

And now they were just more creatures she could fight for some levels and resistances.

None of them would have died if I'd been as powerful as I am now.

Well. Let's put an end to it, then.

Ilea slowly rose into the air, her wings moving as she passed the bent and broken gates.

The throne room still showed the damage from the long past battle. Cracks and shrapnel covered the walls close to the door, less so farther away. A few corpses remained here too.

“I’m back.”

Her voice echoed in the large and empty hall.

“Anybody home?” she said after a long moment had passed.

The ground in front of the throne opened up.

Ilea saw them within her sphere. She shifted her feet into a fighting stance, hands clenching into fists.

“Intruders,” one of the Praetorians said. “The throneroom has been breached.”

Ilea smiled and fanned out her ashen limbs. She didn’t give them any time to assess the situation, blinking close to the scythe-wielder.

[Taleen Praetorian – lvl ???]

[Taleen Praetorian – lvl ???]

The three marks weren’t as impressive anymore, nor was their size and speed.

Ilea dodged their attacks as she twirled through the air, her limbs delivering Storm of Cinders into the machines’ arcane shields, slowly burning into their defenses. Her precognition and spherical awareness allowed her to taunt them into new positions and maneuver around them with practiced ease. She kept the mace-wielding machine behind the scythe one.

Ilea sacrificed two thousand points of health, infusing her Azarinth Awakening before she aimed and released Heart of Cinder. The improved and buffed spell manifested in a blinding flash of light and fire, enveloping the first machine entirely before it spread onto the second.

Her third-tier healing recovered the lost health nearly instantly as she pushed forward, closing the distance to the slightly stunned scythe-wielder. A fist slammed into solid metal as Absolute Destruction and Storm of Cinders spread into the creature.

Its lack of a shield surprised her, and Ilea smiled as a pale flame formed around her. The clouds of acid forming as the mace-wielder cast its spell

behind the first Praetorian weren't a concern for now.

Her space magic barely inconvenienced the creatures, unable to move or slow them – not that it was necessary with her speed and teleportation. She only had to be aware of the blink-canceling field the mace-wielder had utilized in their last battle.

The scythes flashed past her, one of them scraping her arm without causing any permanent damage. Her fists continued slamming into the metal, slightly denting it.

She knew the mechanisms inside would be looking much worse than the machine's ruined outer chassis. Pale flames were also spreading on the surface but even more so within. The same was true for her other mana intrusion abilities, Storm of Cinders building up with each hit.

When the acid clouds came, Ilea simply let them spread over her. *It has difficulties even eating through my ash*, she thought with a smile, happy about the mana the Praetorian had provided her with.

Ilea dodged the mace and displaced herself behind the first machine, again negating their advantage in numbers by refusing to let them flank her. She twirled in the air to avoid two thrown scythe blades. A laugh escaped her. She couldn't help herself.

"Do you remember me?" she asked, sending a dozen ashen lances at the damaged first machine, its shield only slowly recovering. She wondered if she'd accidentally damaged the shield generator on the scythe-wielder, if it had such a thing.

Ilea didn't let up, blinking close again and continuing her assault. Whenever the position allowed it, she spread her ash and ignited the machines' shields with Flare of Creation, her extended body funneling vast amounts of destructive healing mana into its shields and body, dozens of fully charged punches adding to her overwhelming force.

An overconfident parry cost her an arm, only reducing her offensive capability for a moment before her third-tier Reconstruction rebuilt the limb, loud impacts echoing with every punch.

No teleport, no regeneration, lackluster damage.

"You're no threat to me anymore, Scythe," she said, feeling the energy build within her target. "Let's see who fares better."

She glanced at the second Praetorian with glee. It swung wide and quickly, but Ilea blocked the mace with hand, ash, Force, and body. She was

pushed a few meters through the air, her wings finally equalizing the momentum. No bones had broken this time around.

Another set of ashen spears slammed into the scythe-wielder, but Ilea found herself unable to blink toward it. She smiled, instead using displacement. It worked, her body appearing close to the damaged machine. Its shields had barely reformed, pushed back once more by expanding ash and fires.

Ashen lances sped out, four of them penetrating the scythe-wielder's body, a few more deflected by the mace of the second Praetorian, which quickly moved into a defensive stance before its ally.

Interesting, she thought, activating Flare of Creation once more before she vanished.

Three punches slammed into the scythe-wielder's slowly reforming shield, breaking through and delivering their payload into the creature. It turned and raised its scythes sluggishly to respond, the white flames joined by fiery red ones as Storm of Cinders continued to build within the being.

Another punch landed before she displaced herself, the second machine having circled its companion, once more holding its mace outward defensively.

Ilea advanced when she felt a surge of mana, the power washing through her before she blinked away. She knew what that pulse of energy meant. One more and it would be over.

She laughed as she circled the two beings, watching as the damaged Praetorian followed her, unable to keep up with her constant teleportation through the large room. It would be simple to leave, to distance herself from the coming blast, but that wasn't what she had planned.

She wanted them both here, both destroyed within the very hall where the expedition had first fought them.

Ilea felt the second pulse of energy and mana wash through her as she collected the bodies strewn around the hall, some more recognizable than others. They wouldn't be able to take the blast. She could.

I hope, she thought, a grin now on her face.

Last time, she'd had a few Elves, Terok, and Maro putting up defenses. This time, she just had herself.

And vastly improved defensive tools, she thought as ash formed around her, teleporting with her.

The Praetorian's core finally cracked and burst, and Ilea's sphere lit up with power, her eyes squinting slightly at the flash of green light.

What followed was a storm of power, all life leaving the Praetorian as it was ripped apart by the energy expanding outward. The stone floor itself was disintegrated, the explosion spreading through the hall with the certainty of death.

Ilea blinked, sacrificing two thousand points of health. She appeared between the retreating mace Praetorian and the expanding green light. All the heat and power she had gathered left through her arm, engulfing the remaining machine in fire and light, its shields cracking and shattering as if they were flimsy conjurations of an apprentice barrier mage.

She displaced herself before the energy reached her, reappearing behind the burning mace Praetorian.

Mana, six thousand. Health, topped. Ash, ready.

Checking her bone armor, Ilea spread her ash in front of her to form a wall. Her limbs moved into the barrier of ash as she landed near the room's outer wall, crouching down to form a smaller target.

Black wings joined the defenses as she watched the mace Praetorian tumble, the energy from the demise of its partner breaking through the remaining scraps of its shield before its steel armor bent and melted.

Very well executed, she thought, taking a last glance at her ninety-six available stat points. *Fuck it, I don't need them.*

The power washed over her. The stone behind her cracked and melted, and her conjured ash slowly burned away until the magic reached her more resilient ashen armor. It took a moment to entirely vanish, the energy of the blast fueling her mana as her healing took over.

She stored her bone armor before it was entirely destroyed, her skin and bones reforming as the power continued to burn into her.

Her laugh turned into a cackle as her throat melted and reformed, her ashen armor returning in parts before it was burned away once more. She screamed with all she had and stood up, her body buckling under the stream of magical power. But it was nothing compared to the energy she'd absorbed in the Descent. Negligible compared to the power of the Trakorov.

Liquid rock ran toward the ground in steaming rivulets behind her, but Ilea remained standing as her eyes reformed, looking at the bones of her hand, only partially covered with muscle and flesh.

She stopped her healing and watched as it all reformed, her ashen armor flowing toward her neck. The slowly closing wounds were healed by her natural regeneration. Her skills remained active, fueled not just by her remaining mana but also by the energy she had absorbed in the blast.

Ilea ignored the messages within her mind, instead turning her attention to the slow-moving mace-wielding machine before her.

It hadn't fared much better than her, its body's formerly sleek lines and predatory design unrecognizable as it straightened and made to rise. It grabbed the mace that had dropped to the ground, though the weapon was now just a lump of steel, all its spikes melted into its form.

She smiled at it, ash lazily swirling around her body as she spread her now unblemished arms. The Praetorian watched her with its one remaining eye, its green light shining brighter as it took a step forward before steadying itself as if surprised by its own weight.

"Let's finish this," Ilea said. "Finally."

FORTY-TWO

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Arcane Energy

Ilea focused on its damaged legs first, ripping through them with her ash. Without its shields present, she found it quite simple to cut through the steel.

The mace was easy to avoid. Displacement countered whatever teleportation aura the being had, doubling down on her speed advantage. Ilea didn't use her mana intrusion abilities, cutting off one leg after another until she moved on to the arms.

When its second arm was severed, the mace crashed down onto the ground. She grabbed its head, floating with her wings to reach it. Their eyes met as sixteen ashen limbs sliced into its neck, time and time again until its eye darkened, the half-molten metal headpiece vanishing into her necklace.

Ilea focused on the body, hoping for a moment that that was it.

A pulse of mana dashed her hopes.

Blinking close, Ilea charged Absolute Destruction before the second pulse came.

She waited until the last moment, creating ash and fueling her spells as she sacrificed a few thousand points of health.

Magic and energy flowed into her foe as her final punch landed, her fist digging twenty centimeters into the steel with an explosion of power.

Ilea jumped back and cursed when she felt the heat rise once more.

Still not enough, she thought and prepared her defenses again.

The energy washed over her, through her, and she remained standing. As she had before. All that was left of the two Praetorians was bubbling steel and rock.

This should have been how it ended back then. Suppose this is all I could do for them after all this time. The expedition is finally over.

She settled down and checked her messages, her mana quickly recovering as she floated in the destroyed throne room, the scorching heat from the two explosions lingering.

‘ding’ You have defeated [Taleen Praetorian – lvl 605]

‘ding’ You have defeated [Taleen Praetorian – lvl 603]

‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 352 – Five stat points awarded

‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 352 – Five stat points awarded

‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 68 – One stat point awarded

...

‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 86 – One stat point awarded

‘ding’ You have found and destroyed those you had feared – One Core Skill point awarded

Ilea had been intending to spread out her stats somewhat evenly, but with the Praetorians defeated, she had another idea. It felt like a milestone, so she wanted to get a fitting reward, pushing both her Wisdom and Intelligence to one thousand.

Come a long way since I got those first points.

She immediately felt the increased power of both her mana and her magic. She breathed in deep and raised her eyebrows when something else came up.

‘ding’ You have reached one thousand Wisdom – One Core Skill point awarded

‘ding’ You have reached one thousand Intelligence – One Core Skill point awarded

Oh, that’s worth a Core Skill point? Well, then, you leave me no choice.

‘ding’ You have reached one thousand Vitality – One Core Skill point awarded

Nice.

The change was less noticeable, but she still felt a bit of heat in her chest radiating out to her arms and legs.

Status:

Vitality: 1000

Endurance: 303

Strength:302

Dexterity:323

Intelligence:1000

Wisdom:1000

Health: 10000/10000

Stamina: 2983/3030

Mana: 11328/20000

‘ding’ Absolute Destruction reaches 3rd lvl 25

‘ding’ Blink reaches 3rd lvl 28

‘ding’ Azarinth Perception reaches 3rd lvl 24

‘ding’ Heart of Cinder reaches 3rd lvl 21

‘ding’ Storm of Cinders reaches 3rd lvl 19

‘ding’ Ashen Wings reaches 3rd lvl 25

‘ding’ Keeper of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 28

‘ding’ Force reaches lvl 14

‘ding’ Flare of Creation reaches lvl 16

...

‘ding’ Flare of Creation reaches lvl 20

‘ding’ Flare of Creation reaches 2nd lvl 1

Active – Flare of Creation – 2nd lvl 1

Let the fires erupt, burning away your health in exchange for devastating power. Attacks with your body are infused with the Flame of Creation, dealing lingering damage to health, mana, and magical constructs. You are immune to stunning, fear, and shout abilities. Your resilience is increased by 35.5% [284%].

2nd stage: The pale flame settles within your core. Flare of Creation now affects enemy health regeneration. This effect is higher for areas directly touched by the Flame of Creation.

Category: Aura – Body Enhancement

Ilea activated the spell and moved her ashen limbs in front of herself.

A worthy addition.

It wasn't the only skill that had reached the second tier.

'ding' Flare of Creation reaches 2nd lvl 2

'ding' Flare of Creation reaches 2nd lvl 3

'ding' Displacement reaches lvl 15

...

'ding' Displacement reaches lvl 20

'ding' Displacement reaches 2nd lvl 1

Active – Displacement – 2nd lvl 1

Shift space to your will, making an object or person appear somewhere else.

2nd stage: Your familiarity with teleportation and space magic allows you to move one additional object for each level in the 2nd tier. Magical constructs are now affected by Displacement.

Category: Space Magic

“Oh!” she exclaimed, creating a few ashen spears before she used Displacement on them.

The spears appeared where she willed them to.

She clapped her hands together and smiled. “Awesome!”

Which means I can teleport spells coming toward me... And with one more object for each level, I could even teleport a whole group of beings with this. Or a group of spells.

She created a small ball of ash, threw it, and moved it back into her hand with Displacement.

Coupled with her manipulation, her ash was now just as maneuverable as her own body. She created an ashen copy of herself and displaced it successfully.

Could be used as a feint. Looks nearly the same as I do with my armor on.

‘ding’ Space Shift reaches lvl 10

...

‘ding’ Space Shift reaches lvl 16

‘ding’ Body of the Valkyrie reaches lvl 6

‘ding’ Body of the Valkyrie reaches lvl 7

‘ding’ Space Awareness reaches lvl 5

I should probably get all these into the second tier before leveling much further. Just in case there’s an evolution, though I doubt it after getting the Class at three-fifty.

‘ding’ Veteran reaches 3rd lvl 5

‘ding’ Arcane Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 17

Ilea quickly checked if there was an upgrade option for Blast Resistance.

Blast Resistance

Taleen Praetorians are made to destroy their enemy. If they reach critical health, their remaining energy is channeled into a complicated set of enchantments, creating a magical explosion that could rival four-mark creatures. You have proven to be quite adequately prepared to face such power. Twice in a row.

Yes!

‘ding’ Blast Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 1

Blast Resistance – 3rd lvl 1

Explosions can be an unpredictable and chaotic thing. You have survived quite an impressive one to get this skill. It will help you negate the damage ever so slightly the next time you choose to stand in one.

2nd stage: Despite common sense, you just keep on doing it. Either you should start reading safety manuals or embrace the fact you are a true explosion elemental. Your organs, bones, muscles, and skin have become partially shock-absorbent. Please stop.

3rd stage: It's difficult to find a source of power strong enough to warrant such a resistance. Congratulations? We worry about you. Your bones and muscles have adapted to the stress you have put them under, weaving an even more intricate fabric of your ever-increasing defensive capabilities.

Ilea immediately felt the change happening. A weird feeling, though not entirely unpleasant. The added weight was noticeable to her enhanced perception.

She moved around a little, finding it hardly impacted her speed and flexibility.

‘ding’ Divination Magic Resistance reaches lvl 6

Cless!

She wondered for a moment if somebody else was watching her but ultimately dismissed the thought. Even if there was, what could she even do about it?

Ilea checked the rest of the hall and moved on to the areas she had already explored to mop up any stragglers. Perhaps if she eradicated every last machine here, no more foolhardy or desperate young adventurers would lose their lives.

No enemies remained in most of the rooms of the Great Hall. However, as she moved to check the Armory, her sphere revealed a hive of activity. Dozens of Guardians were inside, making it surprisingly busy compared to the previous areas.

What are they doing? she wondered, blinking behind a pillar to see more through her sphere.

She gasped.

What?!

It looked like they were setting up a foundry, similar to the many facilities and machines she had seen in the Centurion factory in the north. There were large oven-like forge fires, as well as iron caldrons, storage vats, steel worktables that moved like conveyor belts, and larger smithing machines still under construction.

They hadn't gotten particularly far, but she could see piles of destroyed Guardians already being melted down to create ingots.

When did this start?

She confronted the machines, using her third Class's skills to finish them off in the span of a few minutes.

'ding' Force reaches lvl 15

Ilea pushed aside the destroyed machines and inspected the finished forges already roaring with flames. Reaching a hand inside, she brought out what she had seen within her sphere.

A half-molten sword. Of Taleen making.

Raw materials. They're melting whatever they can find here?

She checked the hall before she quickly destroyed everything, ripping through the steel and stone with her limbs and Heart of Cinder.

Ilea vanished a moment later and teleported a few times, reappearing in the teleportation hall where Edwin, Felicia, and Aliana had left her.

A single Centurion remained, likely the last Guardian of this dungeon.

Her attention shifted to the small white stone pedestal behind the gate, atop which resided a Taleen Gate Key. That certainly hadn't been there before.

So it's connected? What happened here?

Ilea turned back to the onrushing Centurion, wrapping it in ash before she pushed destructive mana into it. Absolute Destruction charged for a few seconds before she tapped the machine, unleashing a large amount of mana and killing it instantly.

After receiving the kill notification, she waited for a moment.

Wait. It's not exploding. Which means...

She smiled to herself. When thirty seconds had passed, she deemed it safe enough and stored the remains of the machine. She hoped its insides weren't too fried to make it unusable.

“Now, what do we have here?” she whispered, walking toward the pedestal.

Another key could help Iana and Christopher.

Ilea reached the plinth and squinted as something caught her attention. She turned her head to the platform.

The wisps she saw here with her Space Awareness seemed a little different. More aligned than everywhere else in the hall. It felt more... dense.

No, more focused.

“It’s active...” she said.

That fact was quite obvious due to the mana she could see emanating from the platform. What made her pause was the fact that she could probably use it to go wherever it led.

She could destroy it – and make the dungeon effectively safe for future explorers. Or she could roll the dice and step through it, ending up wherever this gate linked to.

The place where the ingots were being sent to? The place where more machines might have been coming from?

But why did the Praetorians remain in the throne room if they could leave? Did they place the Gate Key to help repopulate this dungeon?

Ilea looked at the platform.

“I really shouldn’t,” she said. “But I do wonder.”

She stepped toward it.

Ilea felt a pull immediately. The device was trying to do its job but failed to grasp her. She could see the wisps of space converge on her, but she remained within the circle. More mana flowed out of the device as it tried to complete its primary function.

I see. Well, let me help you along.

She disabled her Space Magic Resistance.

The spell immediately took effect, and the world around her shifted before she appeared within another teleportation circle.

‘ding’ You have discovered the Izacan dungeon

‘ding’ Successfully infiltrated the Izacan dungeon – One Core Skill point awarded

Ilea blinked up into a darker space overhead, her Space Magic Resistance back on as she surveyed her new surroundings.

Holy shit, she thought as her enhanced eyes took in the hundreds of machines partially dug into the floor of the cavern or bolted onto its walls. Steam covered the entire ceiling a few hundred meters above her, gloomy, muted green light shining through the veil from somewhere above.

The ground space wasn't lit, nor was it particularly intricate. It was a mostly natural cavern, with only a few roads dug into it, not quite as well angled and clear cut as she was used to from the Taleen.

The space was filled with various pieces of machinery. Construction devices of all shapes and sizes littered the ground in every direction. The clanks, booms, and hisses of an active production facility filled Ilea's ears. She recognized many elements from the previous facility, but others were different and she could only guess at their function.

Liquid metal hissed in large vats, and forge fires roared with blue-green flames. Guardians darted to and fro, delivering various components. Large conveyor belts stretched into the distance. Machines whirled and sparked, connecting bits of metal to others in an endless cycle.

Eyes of Ash, coupled with her Light Magic Resistance bonus, allowed her to view nearly the entire facility. It was impressive and had clearly been busy for some time. There was a veritable army of Guardians, Centurions, and Praetorians steadily moving up and out a distant tunnel entrance.

All I wanted was to finish off an old dungeon and train my third Class skills.

She grinned.

Well, guess I'm here now.

Amongst the near-endless machine army, she spotted variants she had not encountered yet. One of them was hanging off the cavern wall, its green eyes finding her own as it raised its great bow.

Ilea watched in disbelief as the Praetorian, clad in steel as dark as night, pulled on a string as thick as her arm. Something manifested within the bow, but her sight of it was muddled.

She blinked away as far as she could, only to find the creature immediately turned its head toward her new location, the bow following with a fluid and near-instant movement.

You've gotta be kidding me, that thing is like two hundred meters away!
It loosed.

Ilea watched as an arrow of blue energy manifested a few dozen meters in front of the creature, the projectile slicing through the air at a speed rivaling even her enhanced flight.

Her brain was barely able to follow it, and it was only her precognition that allowed her to displace herself away from the arrow.

Ilea nearly choked in surprise as the arcane energy changed its direction midflight, moving at a completely unnatural angle, striking her defenses.

Her hastily prepared wall of ash barely managed to stop the spell, parts of it piercing through in a bright blue explosion that was entirely silent.

She felt the mana density increase around her, especially where the arcane energy weaved into her ash.

A rush of mana flowed into her, absorbed by her Sentinel Core, the spell burning through half of her armor before its power was depleted.

That fucker followed me!

She looked at the being, its bowstring already pulled back again, its eyes still trained on her.

I can take it, let's see how you fare once I'm closer!

Ilea dove at the being, forming ash in front of her to soften the inevitable blow. She wondered if a blink directly behind the projectile would help avoid the damage.

She blinked to the right as an arrow came from that same direction, suddenly appearing within her sphere.

Another one, she thought, finding the culprit standing a few hundred meters away by an outcropping of cavern rocks near the floor.

The creatures didn't give her even a split second to breathe, the next arrow hitting her. Her ash was pierced without issue, her armor punctured too, before the energy pushed into her body.

Ilea blinked away and reformed her armor and ashen walls. A sizable chunk of skin and muscle had been ripped out and burned by the energy, reforming near-instantly as her healing activated.

Another arrow came, and though it was stopped by her ashen walls, the following one broke through.

Is it lowering the defensive strength of my ash? Or unraveling the structure itself?

She couldn't tell. It simply happened too fast.

What she knew was that at least three of those black steel machines were now aiming at her, judging by the frequency of attacks.

She found a safe spot and blinked, displacing herself the rest of the distance. A few high-reaching stone outcrops provided some cover as she assessed her situation.

This is worse than Iz... What are those things? she thought as the first arrow dug into her rock sanctuary, fizzling out without taking much more than a basketball-sized chunk of stone with it.

She peeked out to see the machines moving in the darkness, adjusting their angles. She found one of them aiming up and above her.

When it loosed, rather than a single arrow, a streak of blue arrows appeared, flying through the air in what she perceived as slow motion.

Two of the fast-moving arrow variants flashed past her as she ducked back behind the outcrops.

Ilea reformed her armor and watched as the arrows approached, forming a cocoon of ash as she tried to displace the projectiles, Force not having a noticeable impact.

She managed to pull the arrows slightly apart. It was barely noticeable but perhaps detrimental to the inevitable cascade of arcane explosions.

When it came, Ilea didn't move, her defenses mostly holding as the rock around her turned to shrapnel. She healed the damage she sustained and found a new being within her sphere, quickly approaching.

[Executioner Praetorian – lvl ???]

The machine looked similar to the normal variant, but instead of the usual six arms, this version only wielded two blade-like extensions that curved slightly inward. The main difference in design was its entirely silver body, as opposed to green-tinged metal, that reflected the light of the arrows and explosions around it.

Ilea saw her reflection in its quick-moving body that was running through the air as if it were solid ground. She blinked, barely avoiding a slash that passed her cheek. It had a familiar feel to it.

Void magic, she thought as she reappeared as far away as she could. *It moved on mana platforms that appeared from thin air too.*

More arrows hit her as soon as she left her rock cover, forcing her to displace and blink in quick succession. Some of the arrows passed her by or hit the ground, only able to change directions once or twice.

Ilea saw more moving machines in the distance now, but the millisecond she took to look meant an arrow nearly scalped her.

She turned and blinked into the gate she had used to come here. She switched her Space Magic Resistance off, and the spell quickly welcomed her back into its embrace.

Eight arrows reached her armor as she teleported, five piercing through ash, armor, and flesh.

As her wounds closed, gouts of blood splattering to the ground, Ilea reappeared in the Iztacalum dungeon. She ripped out the Gate Key with an ashen limb, the rest of her limbs crashing into the platform below as her fists joined in to smash the stone gate. A ripple of energy dissipated a moment later.

You're not following me.

She kept bringing her ash and fists down until the whole area had simply been erased from the Great Hall, leaving only a small crater.

Just when I could reliably take on normal Praetorians, she thought, storing the Gate Key in her necklace.

[Taleen Gate Key – Ancient]

Way to put a damper on my previous victory. Then she laughed to herself. *Would have liked to test myself against them.*

“But it was nine versus one. No other way to stop me, eh?” she said to nobody in particular before Heart of Cinder flashed outward, adding another meter of depth to the crater she stood in.

FORTY-THREE

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Client

“There’s no way they can come here now,” Ilea murmured to herself. She was intrigued by the new Praetorian variants but knew a single one could likely raze a small city to the ground.

I wonder if there were some in Iz too. Probably, based on the sheer size of that place. But no arrows were fired at me there. Was I just lucky?

The size of that one was so fucking massive that you could put a hundred of those Izacan caverns in there. That probably helped me hide.

She thought back to the constant flow of machines moving toward the tunnel at the very back of the cavern.

Where were they going?

Since she had no way of knowing, she checked her levels instead.

‘ding’ Sentinel Sphere reaches 3rd lvl 26

‘ding’ Azarinth Perception reaches 3rd lvl 25

‘ding’ Ash and Ember Unity reaches 3rd lvl 28

‘ding’ Displacement reaches 2nd lvl 2

‘ding’ Displacement reaches 2nd lvl 3

‘ding’ Space Shift reaches lvl 17

...

‘ding’ Space Shift reaches lvl 19

‘ding’ Body of the Valkyrie reaches lvl 8

...

‘ding’ Body of the Valkyrie reaches lvl 18

‘ding’ Space Awareness reaches lvl 6

‘ding’ Veteran reaches 3rd lvl 6

There were so many of them in that small cavern. Didn’t seem like a ruin either.

Maybe a converging point for their armies? Close to the elven territories? Or somewhere entirely different. I don’t exactly have a lot to go on.

That Executioner would have cut right through me... Void on a blade? What even is that?

And yet, still just three marks... I wonder if I could have taken it if I’d faced it one-on-one. If only there hadn’t been an army to back it up.

‘ding’ Fear Resistance reaches lvl 11

She rolled her eyes at the notification and turned around, ready to leave this place behind. Izacan was an entirely different beast, one she had neither the power nor the desire to face right now. Not until her third Class had reached the power of her main ones, if that was even possible with its ‘subdued’ nature.

And she certainly had a reason to talk to her elven friends now.

* * *

Ilea checked the dungeon one more time, flying past the buildings and tunnels, making sure she hadn’t missed anything obvious. No more Guardians showed up, nor did she find any other corpses.

She made her way back to Dawntree and found the guild again.

“You mean to tell me that all these jobs have been taken care of?” the attendant asked. It wasn’t the same person as last time.

Ilea summoned her green badge, confirming that she had the power and dimensional storage to support her claims.

The young man sighed. "Very well. But it's on you if we call for the clients and you can't show results."

"I'll wait here. Call them here now," Ilea said and stepped aside, leaving the clerk with a stack of job descriptions. She approved when she saw him ask for help, two more people quickly joining him to arrange things.

It was early afternoon, judging by the suns. Ilea wasn't sure if a single day or two had passed. Maybe even three. It felt more cathartic than she had expected to finally face and defeat the dungeon that had once terrified her so much.

She ordered a few mugs of ale and a pitcher, choosing one of the tables near a wall and relaxing in one of the chairs. *This is quite good*, she thought, taking a sip.

The guild hall was somewhat busy, many of the tables occupied by one party or another. A few lone healers and mages sat around too, displaying various levels of gear, confidence, and power.

Ilea wondered what their stories were. Her gaze came to a stop at a healer wearing a tattered robe. Something had been cut off near the chest and right shoulder. A rough job it seemed, removing what had likely been insignias of her previous order.

Interesting.

She looked young, her eyes darting around the room as she assessed the various groups, a hood covering most of her face. So far, nobody had approached her.

Nobody came to me either... Think those guards on the way here mentioned something about orders too, she thought as she watched the girl.

Her eyes paused for a second when they met Ilea's. She scrambled to her feet a moment later, walking briskly toward the exit.

"You forgot your staff," Ilea said, suddenly standing next to the table the girl had been sitting at. She twirled it around, looking at the healer, who waited a few feet away with a hesitant look in her eyes.

Ilea could feel her distress. She also noted that nobody seemed to care. Only a few had even looked up after Ilea had called out.

"I'm a friend. Come, sit with me," she said, walking back to her own table and leaning the staff against the wall. She took another sip of her drink as she stared at the steady flame of a nearby oil lamp.

The chair opposite her creaked when the girl sat down, her eyes boring into the table at the noise she had caused.

“Don’t like the attention?” Ilea asked, displacing a mug of ale in front of her.

The healer looked at the mug and blinked, glancing around as if she had missed the person who put it there.

Ilea took a sip of her ale as the girl gingerly grabbed her mug.

[Healer – lvl 72]

Probably a high enough level to make alcohol ineffective.

“Are you hungry?” Ilea asked.

The healer took a sip of ale, coughing before taking another one. She looked at Ilea and nodded.

Now that she looked up from under her hood, Ilea could see her a little better. The woman must be around her age. Judging by her low level, that assumption was likely true. Her hair was brown, weaved into a single braid that hung down past her shoulder. It looked hastily done.

She had dark brown skin, her green eyes downright striking due to the contrast. She was smaller than Ilea in both size and height.

“What do you want to eat?” Ilea asked.

A stranded lone healer lost in a city with a recently changed government. If only there was someone who could help.

“Can’t decide?” Ilea added a few seconds later, then smiled. “Don’t worry.”

She went to the bar and ordered one menu.

The barkeeper nodded. “We have quite a few different things. What do you fancy?”

“No, you don’t understand. One menu. One of each of the things that you serve.”

“But you’re just two people,” he said, glancing at the healer and then back at Ilea.

Ilea nodded, looking thoughtfully toward the ceiling. “You’re right. Lots of people around who we can share with. Two, then.”

He chuckled. “Two it is. Can I ask you to pay upfront?”

Ilea summoned a piece of gold and placed it down on the counter. “Is that enough?”

“More than enough.”

She sat back down with a sigh, happy to notice that the girl wasn't quite as stressed out as before. Her mug was empty.

"I'm Ember," she said after a period of silence.

"Ilea, nice to meet you," Ilea said with a smile.

"You said you were a friend. What do you want?"

Ilea looked at her before taking a sip of ale. "You looked like you needed some food and ale."

"Th... thank you." Ember paused, seeming to consider. "Were... were you part of the order too?"

"What order?"

"The... the Corinth Order... before the city was taken," she said in a whisper, glancing around.

"Whispering doesn't exactly help. At least four people just heard you," Ilea said, lifting her mug at one of them, a roguish-looking man.

He raised his too and grinned, winking at her.

Ilea looked back at the girl. "The Corinth Order... one of the main healing orders. They should be pretty big around here, right?"

Ember blinked a few times before answering. "We... they were. Not anymore."

"I see. What happened?"

"I couldn't see it... I thought we were doing good, helping the poor, healing those who required it," the girl said, getting more agitated with each word. "To think what they taught us, what we did, amounted to political maneuvering..." She gritted her teeth. "They fought the rebels... Many were killed – the rest fled the city, exiled from its walls."

"I only met a few of your order," Ilea said. "One, I believe, tried to poison me... I found the other one in a smuggler's den."

Ember's mouth was a thin line. "Not all of us were like that. I was chosen simply because I had a talent for healing and a keen mind. That's what they told me, anyway. I didn't know they leveraged my healing for political influence and gold. At least at first," she admitted.

"Well, you're here now. Any plans for the future?"

"The Corinth Order isn't gone. They've just been removed from Dawntree. And they won't stand for that. I'm sure they'll try to weasel themselves back into whatever group is ruling this city in the months to come. And if they catch me, I'm dead. Or back in the order." She looked up and smiled. "Now that I think about it, I'm not sure which is worse."

“That’s exactly what I thought. And maybe you’re in luck. I could offer an alternative – if you don’t want to stay here, that is.”

“Look, I appreciate the food, but I don’t know who I can trust.”

Ilea raised her eyebrows, ignoring the healer for a moment as she saw someone she knew enter the hall.

Blonde hair reaching down to her back and blue eyes. A formal dress, but one that would still allow her to fight.

She had changed quite a bit.

Really?

Wait.

Ilea recognized the parchment the woman held. She had posted one of the jobs!

Ilea shook her head slightly, downed her drink, and then smiled and waved at her, noticing Ember was now frozen in place.

“Ilea!” Jaime, Alice’s butler, called out as he entered behind Alice. “What a wonderful sight!”

He quite literally dragged Alice behind him toward the table.

“I thought you wanted to get out? Don’t tell me this whole revolution was your doing,” Ilea said, gesturing for them to sit down.

[Healer – lvl 115]

[Mage – lvl 141]

Already at a hundred. She did it. She became an Azarinth Healer. Or she probably did.

“It was a lucky coincidence. Nothing more and nothing less,” the man said, sitting down with an unreadable expression.

Alice was still standing.

“Right, well, I can feel your sphere. Well done, Alice,” Ilea said with a smile.

Jaime looked back at the girl and cleared his throat. “What did you want to say?”

Alice looked at him with pleading eyes, but he didn’t relent. She sighed and turned toward Ilea. “It’s... a surprise to meet you here. Look, I’m sorry for what happened. You seemed inexperienced, so I took advantage and sent you to that dungeon. It was selfish of me.”

Ilea kept her expression neutral. “It was.”

“But you gave me the means to fight for my own fate. I don’t really know what else to say. I’ll do better. I promise.” She bowed.

“Now I feel embarrassed. Come on, we’re all still alive. Sit down and have a drink with us. This is Ember. Ember, these are Alice and Jaime.”

“What brings you to Dawntree, Ilea?” Jaime asked.

“Just traveling around, mostly. Testing some things. Thought I could revisit a certain dungeon. Seems like I finished a job you posted. Retrieving corpses and information on the expedition.”

Alice leaned forward. “You’re the one who took those assignments?”

Ilea nodded.

“I appreciate it. There were friends who never returned.”

“You got the Class, then?” Ilea asked, changing the subject.

Alice nodded.

“Can I see?”

“See what?”

“How you fight. I’m sure we can order a sparring hall here or something.”

Alice met her eyes and grinned. “Sure.”

Ilea smiled and asked the barkeep if they had anything that would work for a friendly bout and when the food would be done.

“With that order?! An hour at least! Damn adventurers,” he said, grumbling the last bit before he rejoined the two cooks. He did point her to a training room down the hall, though.

“Okay, let’s see what you learned then, Azarinth Healer,” Ilea said, brushing down her clothes and leather armor.

“What was... um, your offer?” Ember said, more to herself really as she glanced around, a little confused.

Alice looked at the girl with pity, lightly touching her shoulder as she walked past her.

“Later. You can come and watch if you want,” Ilea said, blinking to one of the clerks to rent the training hall.

It was a fairly easy process, and they were soon standing in a simple room with bare stone walls and a floor covered in hard sand.

“I assume you’ve found your Class to be quite good. Got a second one yet?” Ilea asked.

“It is! The sphere is incredible, and Destruction can damage even higher-level monsters and people. I coupled it with my enchanter class,

using runes to trap or slow down people before I attack,” Alice explained, quite restless. She was already in a stance, prepared for battle.

Azarinth Fighting, Ilea noted. “What about the healing part? You made no mention of that.”

Alice grinned. “It’s good to trade blows, but I haven’t had to rely on it too much.”

I see.

Alice winced slightly.

Was I that obvious?

“You can prepare your runes and enchantments. I’ll wait,” Ilea said.

Alice shook her head. “I’m ready. This is a fair duel.”

Ilea looked at Jaime, but his eyes were looking through her.

“Okay,” Ilea said and walked toward the girl. “How is your Veteran skill coming along?”

“My Veteran skill?”

“Yes,” Ilea said, infusing her voice.

Everyone in the room was frozen in place, their eyes darting around as they read the message they must have received.

Ilea casually walked in front of Alice, her face close to the woman’s. “How about your Pain Tolerance?”

She touched her with one arm, assessing her health and her strength. She grabbed her arm and threw her into the nearby wall.

Alice groaned, falling to her knees before she caught herself, looked up with a grin, and vanished.

Oh!

Ilea turned and caught her fist.

Healing already.

Her hand closed, breaking a few bones in Alice’s hand before she let go.

Alice blinked and reappeared close by again but was pushed right back by Force.

She crouched and seemed to consider her approach, a glint of fear and excitement in her eyes.

I remember when we met in the forest. Look how far we’ve both come. Now let’s see who’s more durable – an Azarinth Healer or any of the Medic Sentinels I’ve helped train.

FORTY-FOUR

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Reminiscence

Ilea could spot the rune stones that Alice had dropped during her fall but didn't bother doing anything about them. She approached, crossing the runes quite deliberately.

A zap of paralyzing lightning flashed through her, slowed down by her resistance and entirely useless against her defenses.

Ilea did her best villain laugh. "You think that will stop a monster at my level?"

"I wouldn't fight something as strong as you in the first place," Alice countered. She blinked close and swung a fist at Ilea.

"You've grown quite a bit, that much is clear," Ilea said, dodging the punches. "But you're not quite a Shadow yet."

She punched once, sending the girl tumbling over the floor. She landed on her feet, crouched, and coughed up blood.

No wonder I managed to fight and win against a group of low-level adventurers back when I was level fifty. She's as tough as a Sentinel.

"I admit defeat. You're the same monster you were back then," Alice said and straightened.

"I wouldn't say the same," Ilea said as she made her way to the exit. She saw in her sphere that the food would soon be ready.

"Lady adventurer, another client has come to check on the bodies," the clerk said to her as she passed the counter.

Ilea smiled at the face she immediately recognized.

"Still with that ridiculous sword," she said as she approached.

[Warrior – lvl 241]

Some progress at least. And he's still alive.

"I knew it! I fucking knew it!" Lorcan shouted as he stood up and spread his arms. "The mad healer returns! Tell me, did you kill them?"

His smile was broad and his breath not pleasant. Ilea hugged him, patting his back before she summoned the Praetorian's head, tossing it at him as she sat down in her chair.

Lorcan caught the head and turned it around in his hands, looking at the half-molten thing. His confusion turned to joy before he raised it up high and shouted.

Many of the adventurers shouted their approval, most likely not knowing that the monster had been Taleen in the first place. Slaying a powerful beast was worthy of approval either way.

Lorcan placed the head on the table and sat down when the cooks started to bring out the first plates of food. "You took the job, then. I was in the area and thought I'd post it. If no one took it, I thought I'd try and get some of them out. I'm not exactly the best at infiltration, though."

"Yeah, me neither," Ilea said, glancing at the other three sitting down quietly so as not to disturb the large man and his even larger curved greatsword.

Lorcan shook his head as he stared into the cracked remaining eye of the Praetorian. "I remember the way they looked at us," he said. "And you've faced them. Alone?"

Ilea gave him a nod and smiled when she glanced at the entrance. She hadn't planned on organizing an impromptu get-together with the former expedition. It seemed like she wasn't the only one who wasn't entirely done with that dungeon.

Jasper entered and immediately caught her eyes. He was followed by Jeremy and Rin, all three once part of the expedition. The old swordmaster had been one of the leaders, just as Lorcan had.

A smile tugged on his lips as he approached. "I hadn't expected it to be you, nor that anybody would fulfill the job in the first place."

Ilea raised her mug. Jeremy and Rin joined too, the latter staring at the ground.

"I suppose we'll need a third menu," Ilea murmured, hearing a plate clatter and a muffled curse from the kitchen.

“Miss Forkspear,” Jasper said as he greeted Alice.

“Mr. Horim. You know her?” Alice said, gesturing at Ilea.

“Of course. She was part of the expedition, after all. And she’s made quite a name for herself in the meantime. Who hasn’t heard of Lilith?” he asked as he sat down.

Alice, Jaime, and Ember all looked at Ilea with slack jaws, mouths hanging open.

Lorcan roared with laughter. He calmed down after a few seconds and leaned over to her. “You got to three hundred before me. I’ll need some details later.”

“You... are Lilith?” Alice asked, finally bringing herself to speak.

“Yeah, it’s become more of a thing lately,” Ilea said.

Jeremy smiled, a hand on Rin’s back. “Thank you for returning after all this time.”

“I wasn’t entirely done with it either.”

She supposed she *still* wasn’t done with the Taleen, but she didn’t have to go into details here, considering the somewhat recent history of elven attacks.

“If you’ve retrieved the bodies, we could set up a pyre at the Forkspear estate,” Alice said. “Part of the mansion was destroyed, so there’s both plenty of wood and space. To be honest, part of me would like to see it all burn. But that would be a waste.”

“I heard about your brother,” Jasper said. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry?” Alice asked. She opened her mouth to say more, but Jaime stopped her.

Ilea brushed past it. “I think a pyre would be fitting. Enjoy the food, everyone. We’ll be moving on to the Forkspear mansion shortly. Oh, and obviously I won’t need payment for all those jobs. Felt like it was the least I could do.”

There were a few arguments, but in the end, they agreed. Food was served, and they were soon on their way to the Forkspear manor.

Together, they set up a pyre in the manor’s large courtyard. It was now mostly rubble and collapsed stone. But it was easy enough to clear some space.

Ilea summoned all the bodies she had found, and the others identified them.

“That is most of the missing. Almost the entire expedition finally accounted for,” Jasper said.

“I did a full sweep. It’s possible that I missed a few. But the dungeon is clear now if anyone wants to go check.”

“You cleared it? Sure. Yes, we will. Though I’d like to believe they escaped,” he answered.

The atmosphere was somber in the city that had seen so much strife in the last few years. The group shared quiet thoughts as they set the pyre alight. The fire soon attracted a crowd of people and guards who came to see what was going on.

Many joined in once they were informed of what was happening, with a variety of spells being sent toward the sky. Perhaps they had known someone from the expedition, or perhaps it was a gesture for a fellow adventurer, guard, or friend they had lost during the elven siege or the recent uprising.

Ilea joined in, her ash swirling around the rising smoke and other spells slowly rising.

These had been adventurers of Dawntree. Many of them, at least. Some had been well-known, for better reasons or for worse. And now, they could finally be sent off.

She stayed until most everyone had left, but the young healer she had first approached still waited in a corner of the ruined courtyard.

“You think you can trust me at this point?” Ilea asked her.

“Y... yes, Lady Lilith,” she said.

“I don’t know how much you’ve heard, but I could set you up in Ravenhall. A normal job, or maybe even something a little more interesting.”

“Ravenhall... That’s a long way from here,” Ember said. Then a smile began to creep onto her face. “And a long way from the Corinth Order.”

FORTY-FIVE

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Inquiries

“Now, now. That doesn’t sound good at all,” Helena said as she sliced into the freshly baked lemon cake. The fourth try had yielded something quite marvelous. Perfect moisture.

Her guest sighed. A rare show from the near-mythical bard. His shoulder-length blond hair looked perfect as always, lightly curled today. His skin was lightly toned, the Virilya-based man having relocated before the siege had started. He wore utterly ridiculous clothes, unfit for battle or business alike.

Tight black pants ending above his ankles. Above his pants, he wore a skirt of all things, ending right above his knees. A ruffled white shirt covered his chest with broadening sleeves nearly reaching his fingers. It would have been decent enough if it hadn’t been mostly see-through.

The silver chains around his neck would have been acceptable if they were his weapons, but she knew for a fact that they weren’t. Helena knew the man well. She’d worked with him for more than five decades. He was capable, ruthless, and still clung to his ridiculous attire and demeanor.

Elijah smiled his perfect smile as he received the plate. “Thank you, my dear. I do so love your baking.”

She could not detect a lie, nor did she care. “Shush, keep those compliments for your concubines.”

“I would never insult you with a lie, Helena,” Elijah said, and this time, she almost believed him.

“The situation is dire,” he said, going back to the topic at hand. “Half of the forces that were to attack Odiah have fallen in the wake of this blood

ritual. But Alyris won't relent. Circumstances have changed, however. Numbers won't make a difference anymore. Infiltration and powerful individuals are necessary to overcome the rituals they have prepared. The loss of life will be unprecedented."

Helena bit into a piece of cake. She closed her eyes and took a moment to appreciate it. Then she swallowed and patted at the corners of her mouth with a cloth. "The fall of Baralia is certain either way. Though it seems the fanatics believed their magic to be more than just revenge."

"What have you uncovered?"

"Not much. I'll be honest. But it seems the Order has goals beyond this war. Perhaps they were hastened, or they're using the chaos to fulfill their purpose, whatever that purpose may be."

"You must have an idea, at least," Elijah said.

Helena smirked. "Several, my dear Elijah. But I'm not interested in theories. I am interested in fact." She sipped on her tea.

"What will you do?"

"I will suggest an intervention. Michael will be interested. And Acantha has been involved from the start."

"Velamyr fought in Odiah," Elijah said.

"You don't seem happy about that," Helena commented.

He waved her off and summoned a filled glass of wine, taking a sip. "Always the hero. He's going to rise even higher than before."

She nearly smiled because of the unintended pun. General Velamyr Ryse cared about his soldiers. He wasn't doing this for political power, but someone like Elijah would hardly understand. The general would even skewer the high king if he could maneuver himself into the right position.

"Inform him that we are sending a team," Helena said.

"They will need fighters too. Cursed humans are not the only things the Order has brought forth. Skorn has been in touch. He is already involved, though not personally."

Not that Helena had expected anything different from the man.

"Good. I'm sure Elizabeth is too. How is Virilya?" she asked, making him focus on something else.

"The same. People are returning. Alyris is doing an adequate job. Surprisingly."

She smiled. "It's a shame Arthur died. How is his daughter doing? Any promise?"

The bard nodded. “Last I heard, she may be a good replacement. However, her inclination to join the Order might be impaired. Perhaps in a few decades, if her ambitions are as grand as her father’s.”

Helena smiled, cutting herself another piece of lemon cake. “That is promising.” She’d be surprised if the girl would ever even consider it. After the treatment they’d received from their father. Arthur was capable, but he lacked empathy and common sense.

Helena had greatly enjoyed the news of his death. His obsession with teleportation gates had made him squander everything else. Besides, all he could ever talk about was himself. She hoped his daughter wasn’t the same, but considering that it was likely she was responsible for his death, she could but hope.

“No news on Edwin and his... friend?” she asked.

“He remains within the family mansion. The void mage has joined Felicia Redleaf and the war effort, but her allegiances remain uncertain,” Elijah informed her.

Helena had some ideas as to her allegiances, but she wouldn’t share them with the bard.

“We may consider her in the future. What about that girl you mentioned last time?” she asked.

Helena had made up her mind a few weeks ago, and this may prove a good time to invite her. She may be interested if the challenge was interesting enough. It would help put the order in a good light too.

“Lilith. She is... well, certainly interesting,” Elijah said.

“You like her.”

The bard smiled. “Her methods are crude. And with all the stories and reports, it’s hard to really pin down who she is, but yes. I do like her, if only for her sense of style. Ashen wings do make for a beautiful painting.”

“They certainly do,” Helena said. “I will meet her.”

FORTY-SIX

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Arrangements

The prospect of traveling to Ravenhall, far away from the influence of the Corinth Order, seemed rather enticing to Ember as an ex-member. Enough for Alice to suggest looking for other interested parties remaining in the city – she was apparently still quite well-connected in town. Ilea was slightly taken aback and said as much.

“Why are you so surprised?” Alice asked. “Is it so strange that I would think about helping someone else?”

“I’m more surprised that you’re still here and walking about freely, let alone still have standing and connections, when it appears nobles were the main targets of the rebellion. I don’t assume the damage to the manor came out of nowhere.”

Alice looked at the damaged family home and sighed. “I used to have dreams about taking over this estate.” She glanced at Ilea. “I still have much to learn, but choosing to stand against my family was one of the first right decisions I’ve ever made. I won’t go into details, but Jaime and I are somewhat well-connected at this point.

“And I’m pretty sure that Ember isn’t the only healer hiding out in the city. I’d like to say it’s entirely selfless, but having them out of Dawntree will give the Corinth Order less leverage in the future. We could even frame it as an alliance between Ravenhall and Dawntree.”

Ilea smiled. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. I’m sure your new leaders are already in touch with the council. But whatever healers you find, I’ll happily receive them in Ravenhall. They’ll be under my protection, and I’ll make sure they get work and opportunities.”

“I’ll make sure that any healers found make their way to you, if they so choose. And I’ll pay for high-level fighters to protect them on their journey. Maybe the beginnings of an apology for sending you into that dungeon.”

“You can even hire a Shadow. There’s at least one in town.”

“I’ll look into it. You don’t plan to stay? I’m sure there’s a lot of work here for someone like you.”

“I did what I came here to do. I should be checking in with my team, and I’ve got a few things to work on myself. I’ll swing by if the opportunity arises, though. Good to see you again, Alice.”

Alice bowed her head. “Thanks again, sincerely, for all the help you’ve provided since you found me back in that forest. I’ll do better.”

Ilea smiled at her.

“And let me know when you plan to leave. I’d like to accompany you to the gate.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Ilea said, activating her third-tier Blink. As the complex runes formed above the ground and spread out, Alice took a step back and watched in awe. “Until next time, Alice.”

Ilea reappeared in her dusty apartment on the cliffs south of Ravenhall. She coughed and chuckled to herself. “God damn, that was such a cool exit. Love me some teleportation shenanigans.”

And we’ll have a few more healers coming our way. Now, I’ve got a very damaged Centurion to deliver, courtesy of my first, and now fully completed, Taleen dungeon.

She informed Claire about what had happened and then Trian about the potential new recruits before going to meet Iana and Christoper. She delivered both the Centurion’s body and the second Gate Key she had found but was surprised to find that the enchanters were far more interested in her new space magic abilities.

She agreed to stay for a little while.

* * *

“This part here doesn’t look perfect,” Ilea said, moving her ash onto the section of the platform where the wisps didn’t look like a perfect circle.

The two enchanters stood there and murmured to each other, trying to figure out the problem.

Ilea had noticed the patterns quite quickly, the wisps in the small hall flowing together a little upon the gate's activation. They generally moved about, but after a few tries, it became clearer what exactly the movements entailed.

Whenever the gate came close to activation, some of the wisps would move closer, even forming something of a circle. When the magic happened, a few parts were disturbed, some flowing out with greater speed.

The practical result was the teleportation of chunks of Ilea instead of her full body.

She was honestly impressed at how far they had come without the help of such an awareness.

"Let's try again," Christopher said.

Her right leg was ripped off this time, as well as a chunk of the platform itself.

Both appeared on the other side, accompanied by a groan from Iana.

"We should take a break. I've told you what I can – let me know when you have more," Ilea said, marking the parts where the wisps had moved. This time, there were four.

"Sure... I need a break too," Iana said.

"We need to repair the gate first," Christopher said as he stepped onto the second platform.

"Don't worry, you'll figure it out," Ilea said. "My awareness is getting better too."

'ding' Space Awareness reaches lvl 7

...

'ding' Space Awareness reaches lvl 9

Quite successful for just a few hours, Ilea thought, wondering if the second tier could help with the gate even more.

She decided to use one of the training halls to work on her Armaments of Trials in combination with all her perception abilities and newfound space magic. It didn't make much difference to the experience yet, but she felt she was close to something.

A few hours later, she joined a few Sentinels to help with sparring. It was rewarding to see how far they had all come – and how many seemed to be embracing her slightly crazy fighting style.

* * *

Ilea relaxed on the terrace of the Golden Drake, enjoying a rich breakfast as she checked her gains.

She had spent the last few days on teleportation gate testing and training with Trian, her Armaments, or her space magic. Putting it all together meant some decent gains for her third Class's skills.

'ding' Force reaches lvl 16

'ding' Force reaches lvl 17

'ding' Space Shift reaches lvl 20

'ding' Space Shift reaches 2nd lvl 1

Passive – Space Shift – 2nd lvl 1

You can wield space more easily, allowing you to unravel its mysteries.

Teleportation abilities can be used again 60.5% faster [121%], and you can travel 30.5% farther [61%].

2nd stage: Interrupt or stop an enemy teleportation spell within a distance of 10.5m. Cooldown and efficiency are affected by available teleportation spells. You cannot teleport while this skill is active.

Category: Space Magic

Ilea had tested it briefly in one of her training sessions. The spell could be used whenever either Blink or Displacement were available. Neither skill could be cast while the disruption was in use.

The potency was quite high – Ilea had managed to prevent Trian from teleporting entirely. She assumed it had something to do with Blink being high in the third tier.

She wondered if her having two spells increased the power of this ability or if it would work against her own spells and resistances. It would certainly come in handy against enemies that constantly teleported away. Or people who fought as annoyingly as her.

'ding' Body of the Valkyrie reaches lvl 19

'ding' Body of the Valkyrie reaches lvl 20

'ding' Body of the Valkyrie reaches 2nd lvl 1

Passive – Body of the Valkyrie – 2nd lvl 1

The Flame of Creation flows through your veins, increasing your resilience by 25.5% [229.5%], Physical Damage Resistance by 7.1% [63.9%], and Magic Damage Resistance by 7.1% [63.9%]. You won't be fazed by heavy damage or powerful sources of light and sound anymore. 2nd stage: Your body has withstood incredible damage and endured the hardships of battle. The fires flowing through you have hardened your bones and muscles. Your health is increased by 5.1% [45.9%].

Category: Body Enhancement – Space Magic

It had been quite simple to level the skill – Trian and the Sentinels had used their magic against her without using her resistance or auras. In the second tier, however, her progress had been nonexistent so far.

Either way, the health bonus was incredible, mainly due to the multipliers her Class provided.

'ding' Space Awareness reaches lvl 10

...

'ding' Space Awareness reaches lvl 12

The leveling of her perception skill proved difficult. Their progress with the teleportation gate had slowed steadily until she hadn't gotten a single level in several hours.

But the enchanters seemed to be getting closer, understanding the issues more as her perception increased. Even minute changes and fluctuations were now visible to her, but she felt that, like with her ash manipulation skills, Space Awareness could not simply be brute-forced.

'ding' Soul Perception reaches lvl 3

...

'ding' Soul Perception reaches lvl 5

'ding' Deviant of Humanity reaches lvl 10

At the end of her last session, her Armaments shifted a tiny bit, but she wasn't sure exactly what that meant. She was pretty sure it didn't have anything to do with her Soul Perception's growth.

Claire waved as she joined Ilea in the Drake.

"I knew I'd find you up here," she said, a smile on her face.

"The administrator leaves her office. For what reason am I bestowed such honor?" Ilea asked, spreading a little bit of cream cheese on a halved bread bun.

Claire moved one of the chairs to sit down. "Am I not allowed to visit a dear friend without reason?"

"You always have a reason. I'm the one always visiting you without one."

Claire frowned. "Yes. Disturbing my schedules. Every. Single. Time."

"With world-shattering information or artifacts," Ilea retorted.

"That just makes it worse," Claire said and sighed. "How do you like your resistance-training-free days?"

Ilea took a bite of the bun, chewed, and swallowed. "It's quite relaxing, actually. Feels a little like a vacation. Experimenting with new skills is quite interesting too. And I'm so close to a breakthrough with that damn armor, I can feel it."

"The armor from your smith in the north?"

"Mhm," Ilea said and continued eating, gesturing for the woman to help herself. "It's like a puzzle."

Claire took a plate, piling some bacon, cheese, grapes, and bread onto it. "Appreciate it," she said. "I'm glad you're enjoying yourself. However, it seems the world won't simply let Lilith train peacefully in her favorite city."

She summoned a letter. The paper itself looked expensive, but what caught Ilea's eyes was the golden seal.

A lily.

Ilea formed a small dome of ash just in case the thing was some sort of assassination attempt.

Claire chuckled a little at that.

"What?" Ilea asked, opening the letter with an ashen limb.

"Nothing," Claire said, drinking some juice.

Ilea took out the letter and looked at it. "Do you want to hear?"

"Of course." Claire activated a few runed plates and casually threw them around the table. Just in case someone was listening in.

Esteemed Lilith, Ashen Shadow of Ravenhall.

I have heard much about you in these past months, your name traveling to the inns of my town and beyond. Your exploits in Riverwatch are most impressive, as are your endeavors in the retaking and subsequent rebuilding of Ravenhall and its order of Shadows.

The Golden Lily is interested in making your acquaintance.

I formally invite you to join me for cake and tea in Myrefield, whenever it is convenient for you to do so.

In anticipation of our future cooperation,

Helena Pierrot

The letter burst into bright golden flames as soon as she was done reading, the fire neither harming her nor creating any heat. The paper vanished nonetheless.

“I’m intrigued,” Ilea said. *The flames were a nice touch.*

“Because of the cake?” Claire asked.

“Only reason,” Ilea agreed.

These were the people Eve was looking for. And most likely the ones who killed her.

It felt strange to be contacted by them after all this time. Ilea didn’t know what she would have done back then. Maybe she would have burst in and tried to find whoever was responsible.

Now? She wasn’t entirely sure what to do. Most of the anger and frustration had faded.

Claire had summoned a small booklet and was flipping through the pages. She stopped, likely having found what she was looking for.

“Helena Pierrot. The sole owner of Heavenly Sweets, a baking business and, unofficially, an assassin’s guild. Neither is deemed a threat to Ravenhall or the Shadow’s Hand. Based on past interactions and their general behavior.”

“Hiding an assassin’s order behind a bakery... seems a little eccentric. I wonder what it says about the offered cake,” Ilea said.

“I know what you’re thinking, but this is a little different,” Claire said, four books on the table now. “The bakery business isn’t a front – it’s the main part of their business.”

“Really?” Ilea asked, trying to think if she had ever seen one of their stores. Her memories came up blank.

“It’s the major provider of cake and baked goods for large parts of the Human Plains. There are even records of sales and connections to the northern plains, dwarven kingdoms, the independent cities of the west... However, Ravenhall is suspiciously not one of their customers.”

Ilea raised an eyebrow.

“There are no records as to why they’re not in Ravenhall,” Claire said in a disappointed tone.

“Turns out this mysterious organization we’ve heard about for years is a bakery,” Ilea murmured.

“The information on the assassin part is scarce. With how successful their bakery business is, it’s very much possible that the same is true for the shadier part. Perhaps it *is* just a front after all, but I don’t want to think about the implications that would have for the size of their assassin operations.”

“What do you think?”

Claire looked at her. “We have no idea what they want from you and Lilith. Them avoiding Ravenhall for one reason or another would speak of apprehension of either the Elders or the Shadow’s Hand. You are beyond most of them, if not all.”

“Arthur Redleaf was a member... and he wasn’t exactly at my current power,” Ilea said. “I think it’s safe to have a look, at least. I can dispel the mark on your hand as a way to signal you in case things get dangerous.”

“Myrefield is in the southern part of the empire, but it’s not exactly close. I know we’ve talked about Lilith before, but you don’t have to do this if you don’t feel like it.”

“I’m not exactly eager to meet the head of an assassin’s guild, but I feel like it’s the least I should do on Eve’s behalf. Maybe I can find out a few things. Worst case, we’ll know a little more about them. And I am honestly intrigued as to why they’re contacting us now.”

“Your interference in Riverwatch. I’m pretty sure that put you on the map. But you’re right. If that was the only thing, we should have gotten a letter weeks ago.”

“Good. So I go and find out what this is about.”

“I still want to have a team nearby. Just in case.”

Ilea nodded. “Four hours away. Get a bunch of people that can fly. If I dissolve your mark, you come in.”

“That sounds reasonable. When do you want to go?” Claire asked.

“Any suggestions?”

“Be neither too eager nor too disrespectful. I suggest three to four days.”

Ilea leaned back in her chair, remembering the first time she’d had dinner with Kyrian and Eve here at the Drake.

So, I’ll finally meet them.

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FORTY-SEVEN

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Myrefield

Ilea landed on the outskirts of the small town, much of its surroundings looking agricultural.

The suns hung low on the horizon as Ilea patted her leather armor down. She had decided not to hide her face. If the Golden Lily really was as influential and wide-spanning as they assumed, it would hardly serve a purpose.

Besides, she had to make it clear that Lilith did not need to hide.

She took a last look at the far-reaching fields, knowing that two Shadow teams were waiting a few hours away. Ready to intervene if anything went wrong. She steeled herself and started toward the distant buildings.

The meter-high wall suggested either low monster populations or some other defense. If this really was an important location for the Lily. An adventurer in mediocre gear greeted her as she approached.

“Evening, traveler,” he said, eyeing her lazily.

[Warrior – lvl 58]

“What brings you to Myrefield?”

Ilea looked at the man and smiled. “An invitation,” she said simply.

He nodded. “I see. Go on, then. It’s getting late. Dangerous for lone travelers out there.”

She didn’t protest, entering the town proper.

Few people were out at this time of day, but the dirt roads were well-lit, dull light shimmering through most of the windows she could see.

The houses weren't particularly tall, most of them only reaching one story. A few had two. What stood out to Ilea was the variety and, most of all, the workmanship. It reminded her of Salia or perhaps a few wealthier districts of Virilya.

No house stood empty. Each store she strolled past sold high-quality goods. Other than the low-level warrior occupying the main road leading into the settlement, there were no guards. Every person she saw was well-dressed. Some glared at her, while others just shook their heads in disdain.

She didn't know if it was because of her clothes, sheer arrogance, or because they knew something she didn't.

Ilea turned her head to a nearby alley. She'd had more than a hunch, but it was already gone.

Interesting.

She didn't mind the eyes on her and was unwilling to hunt them without further provocation.

I was promised cake. And I will get some.

Ilea found herself entering a large square, blooming trees dotted throughout providing shade against the evening suns. She looked around and strolled toward a prominent two-story house, a dozen people occupying various tables on a veranda and inside behind high-reaching windows.

Ilea could see them well with her enhanced eyes, and she had a feeling that many were trained fighters. Seeing the variety of magic exuding from them confirmed it when her sphere came into range.

The façade of the house was colored white and looked pristine. The shutters had a lavender color. The low-angled tiled roof suggested the absence of an attic. Ilea's sphere confirmed this when she entered. Waiters sped through the room with grace as they took orders and delivered food and drinks.

Only about a third of the guests even glanced at her. She identified a few of them as she passed through the room and found most were below two hundred. Four above. An unnatural number of powerful people for a small town like this.

What looked like the head waiter observed her with an unreadable expression, flipping through a book of reservations.

Before either could speak, a waitress appeared out of thin air. A young woman with short hair and brown eyes, a friendly smile on her face.

She bowed before she spoke. "Welcome to Myrefield, Lady Lilith. The mistress will see you at your leisure. If you wish to dine first, we have reserved a discreet table. Everything is free of charge, of course."

[Mage – lvl 245]

"Happy to make your acquaintance," Ilea said.

She meant it too, liking the way this woman looked and moved. Her confidence was obvious, and she got the feeling that she would be ready to fight and die right here if their 'guest' was trouble.

"I'm ready to meet her now," she said with a smile. "What's your name?"

She could feel no sense of distress, and nothing showed on the waitress's face or through her body language either.

"You may call me Maya. Would you be so kind as to follow me?" she asked, still smiling.

Ilea was led through a few corridors, noticing a few more hidden forms within her sphere. Some were up in the rafters, others hidden in alcoves, behind walls, or even following nearby. Ilea didn't react, simply counting her potential enemies.

If they had such advanced illusions or shrouding spells, she didn't think of them as massive threats. If anybody managed to get close, her precognition and, in the worst case, her Azarinth Perception would prevent her from being taken down quickly.

A flight of meticulously polished wooden stairs led up to the second floor, and Ilea's sphere cut off at the set of double doors she was being led toward. Not the first similarly enchanted space she'd found in the house so far, but this one was by far the largest she had perceived.

The affected area suggested a rather spacious room. If there was an obvious trap, it would be in there.

"The mistress will see you now," Maya said and opened one of the doors, holding it for Ilea.

She could perceive only one person within. Anybody else close by was either hiding too well for her to see or had kept themselves at a distance.

Ilea nodded to Maya and stepped inside. "Thank you."

Maya bowed and closed the door behind her, the enchantments falling back into place.

“It’s just about right,” the only person occupying the room said in a warm voice, her eyes fixated on one of the many ovens set into the wall. “Tell me, Lilith, how high is your Heat Resistance?”

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FORTY-EIGHT

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Cake and Tea?

Ilea didn't respond, raising her eyebrows at the question.

The room was quite large, separated into what looked like an office or lounge area and a kitchen. The various ovens were only part of the picture; three large, connected counters were covered in various exotic-looking ingredients, dishes, tools, and, most curiously, daggers.

Some of the storage units in the kitchen were enchanted; others were half open with visible potions, monster parts, or just plain old flour.

The floors were different too. The kitchen was tiled, while the other part of the room was done in parquet. Every piece of furniture looked like the handiwork of a master, but the styles differed.

Next to two couches facing each other stood a small round metal table and two garden chairs. On it were two plates and accompanying tiny forks. A large office desk with an armchair behind it stood at the very back of the room.

"If you plan on killing me with fire, I'd like to see you try," Ilea said, answering the question and perhaps asking one in return.

The woman smiled and looked at her, her face kind and her smile warm. She looked to be in her early thirties. Her brown hair, specked with flour, was bound in a messy bun. She wore no makeup, her skin a healthy tone. She had freckles and deep brown eyes and wore a black summer dress covered in a pink apron.

[Warrior – lvl 322]

She smiled and started singing. *“No bounds has her power, no bounds has her heart. Her armor stands unbroken, through fire and through steel.”*

“If the songs are to be believed, then killing you is *quite* the venture,” the woman continued. “I had my doubts, of course. Every guard and soldier watching turns into a bard of great renown after a well-fought battle.

“But seeing you in the flesh, I can’t help but believe the songs.” She turned away. “Now!” the woman suddenly called out and opened the oven.

Ilea hadn’t perceived magic or an attack, and the sudden call caught her off guard.

“Your Heat Resistance is high... that’s good to hear. How about Poison Resistance? I would assume someone as influential as you has encountered one assassin or another?” the woman asked as she carefully removed a cake from the oven with her bare hands.

Ilea looked at the cake curiously. Its color was as black as night, veins of pulsing red moving through parts of it.

“I have some experience in the matter, yes,” she admitted.

“Wonderful! You might like this, then. I have heard that you are quite fond of food. I bet this will be like nothing you have tasted before.”

She set the cake onto the table. She sat down and motioned for Ilea to join her.

“Welcome to Myrefield, Lilith. Or should I say Ilea? I’m Helena. Come, sit with me and tell me what you think,” Helena said, her lips quirking upward and eyes sparkling with excitement.

Ilea was a little apprehensive, but the woman seemed nice enough. And the cake certainly looked interesting.

“Either name is fine, Helena,” she said, storing her leather armor and casually sitting down across from the woman. She wasn’t surprised Helena knew her real name. If anything, it led credibility to the people she represented.

“Ilea, then. It sounds a little more personal. Your real name too, I presume. Now, I must warn you, this poison is quite potent, and the heat alone would burn through someone’s skull without resistances in the second tier,” she said as a blade appeared in her hand, a simple design made for kitchen work. It shimmered with magic, runes etched into each side.

Helena looked entirely absorbed as she cut two pieces, steam rising from the cake.

Ilea wasn't sure if this was some horrible joke, a test to check her resistances, an actual attempt on her life, or if Helena was just plain eccentric. Perhaps all of the above? She was too curious either way and confident that whatever poison was in there didn't have the capacity to overwhelm her third-tier resistance.

As soon as the woman placed one piece on her plate, she identified the poison within to be of medium danger.

Nothing to be concerned about, then, she thought, quite aware also of the special plates that seemed enchanted to handle the heat.

"How did you even get it this hot?" she murmured.

Helena smirked in a self-satisfied way. "That is a trade secret, my dear."

The woman looked at her with expectant eyes.

The most obvious, then? An attempt to kill me? Well, there's no choice either way. I can't resist a good cake, and if she did her research, she knows that too.

Ilea smiled at potentially her stupidest move so far and bit into the piece of cake.

Her eyes fluttered as the poison took effect. She didn't fight it, instead letting it flow through her. The heat was barely noticeable, making her disable her Heat Resistance. She kept her Poison Resistance up, though, just in case it paralyzed her or something without it active.

Holy bakery, she thought, savoring the combined experience that came from not only her tongue but her entire body. The poison pulsed at regular intervals, faint black veins showing on her arms as the heat intensified the various flavors in the hellish chocolate creation. The pain was subdued, a slight itch to enhance the rest. It felt both confusing and heavenly.

Ilea sat there, enjoying the cake, her eyes closed so as not to distract her from the sensation. She was awoken from her reverie by Helena's joyous laughter.

"What is it?"

"You liked it?" the woman asked, smiling wide.

Ilea gave her a long look. "I might need to ask you for the recipe."

"A secret. But perhaps we can come to an agreement at a later point. I'm sure that interesting cake recipes aren't the only things we can offer each other," Helena said and started eating.

She summoned two cups and poured a bright blue liquid into them, the air above them cooling visibly. "Try it, it pairs well." This time, she took a

sip herself before waiting for Ilea.

Ilea took another bite before taking a sip of the blue liquid that felt colder than some ice magic she had been hit with in the past.

“People of your power tend to be focused on the bloodier aspects of life,” Helena said. “The potential that enhanced bodies and resistances provides the arts of alchemy, cocktails, cooking, and baking has always fascinated me. Few ever get past three hundred, and even fewer are creators by nature.”

“I appreciate you sharing this with me. I certainly haven’t experienced anything quite like it,” Ilea said. She enjoyed Keyla’s dishes more, generally speaking, but the experience was certainly worth her trip here already.

Helena ate another piece of cake and leaned back, chewing softly before she swallowed. “So, you are Lilith. The legend, the myth.”

“And you are Helena, member or perhaps leader of the Golden Lily?”

“It’s validating to learn that even someone with your resources has no clear grasp of our organization. I am primarily Helena, head of Heavenly Sweets, distributor and manager of baking goods and assassin services. The Golden Lily differs from my main ventures in that it neither represents personal ambition nor passion but was born out of necessity.”

Ilea raised her eyebrows in a questioning manner as Helena poured both of them more of the chilling liquid.

“You were first seen in Riverwatch. You traveled west as an adventurer, trained in a Taleen dungeon, and bravely fought off the Elves that had attacked both Dawntree and Salia. And then you joined the Shadow’s Hand. It is not a particularly unusual path, though perhaps your ability to survive a Taleen dungeon and your willingness to engage an elf in battle were early signs for your continued and explosive growth.

“You are quite extraordinary, hence the invitation. For one, you have garnered quite a lot of support and allies. But more importantly, you have reached personal power equal to some of the most dangerous individuals in our lands. The human lands, that is. Lys, Kroll, Asila, Nipha, the northern plains, Ravenhall, and every other independent city that remains.”

Helena looked at her and waited. When Ilea didn’t respond, she smiled and continued.

“The power you wield is extraordinary. But there are others like you, like me. When a Shadow or a noble decides to act on their ambitions, a

family may die, a company may go bankrupt, or a village may be massacred. But when Lilith moves, armies falter, entire towns are razed to the ground, and perhaps even kingdoms fall. And chaos would follow. Starvation, looting, unmitigated monster attacks, crime, and murder.”

“And you are the alternative? To keep everyone in check?”

Helena drank some of her chilling drink. “Not the alternative. Nor an arbiter. We simply intend to connect those of us who cannot otherwise be stopped and provide incentives for cooperation instead of mutual destruction.”

To protect their own interests? And to stay in power?

“To protect the status quo?”

Helena smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “To prevent chaos. Change is inevitable and people must adapt, but wanton destruction and conquest will leave our species crippled and unable to respond to any internal or external threats. I invited you here to find out if you are such a threat. And I invited you here for an opportunity.”

“Am I?”

“A threat? No. You don’t like me. You don’t like what I represent, though I suppose you have a sweet spot for cake and poison that might soften that somewhat. There may be conflict between us or between you and other members of the organizations and the governments they are a part of, but you understand the responsibility your wealth and power represent. Which hardly makes you any different than our other members. We will see what the future brings, but I believe your addition to our Order would benefit the whole of humankind.”

Ilea processed the words. *She’s talking as if we can influence the fate of every human living in these lands.*

Well... I did fight off an army.

How much could I destroy, if I really tried, before being stopped? How many could she kill before someone manages to take her down?

“How many members are there?”

“Twenty-six, after the recent loss of Arthur Redleaf.”

They locked eyes for a moment.

“I understand he was not a kind man,” Ilea said.

“He was not. But he used to be an important name at the Empress’s court before he focused all his time on his obsessions. His death, I understand, was a family matter. And not a concern to any other member.”

“What would be expected of me, should I join?”

“The main goal is to resolve potential grievances before bloodshed occurs. And if such is impossible, we strive to keep aftershocks and collateral to a minimum. Of course, we cannot control each other, but our organization provides a way to conclude things in a civil manner.”

“Unlike your assassin’s order?”

“You’re not the first to challenge me, and once you are a member, you can do so officially. The business of murder may be the most ancient, contrary to popular belief. Limitation and regulation have historically been more efficient than any effort at suppression.”

Ilea raised her eyebrows. *Really? That’s how she justifies leading an assassin’s order?*

“As to another part of membership, and at the same time the opportunity I mentioned, sometimes there are problems we cannot solve alone. Invitations are issued and discussions are had, and when a majority agrees, action is taken by those who are willing. In this case, this concerns the actions of King Baron of Baralia and the Order of Truth.”

That piqued Ilea’s interest. “I thought the war was decided.”

“So it seemed. Until about two weeks ago, when Odiah, one of the larger cities in the eastern part of the kingdom, was made the stage of a large-scale blood magic ritual that wiped out nearly all of its inhabitants and many of the Empire’s soldiers besieging it.”

Ilea leaned forward slightly. Memories of the demon summoning came to her mind.

“Affected people were turned into cursed monsters, much like the demons your order foolishly released upon the world,” Helena explained. “Luckily, they cannot infect others, making the problem much more contained. Other issues have cropped up, but my information isn’t conclusive.

“Rather than sheer lunacy, it seems the Order of Truth has a concrete goal in relation to these sacrifices. While I’m sure the present forces can deal with the cursed beings, they cannot survive the rituals themselves nor effectively fight the creatures that have emerged from whatever depths of magic the order has conjured up.”

“You’re asking me if I will help?”

“You enjoy battle, do you not? And killing monsters is a specialty of both you and the Shadow’s Hand. Three cities have already been

massacred, each home to tens of thousands of people. The Lily has decided a more direct intervention is necessary. All members who are interested in joining the conflict have been asked to do so.

“We also ask that personal gains and political affiliations are ignored during this mission to incentivize both participation and cooperation. The territories of Baralia have turned into lawless lands, and if this problem is left unchecked, tens of thousands more will perish. Many of our members disagree on fundamentals, but wanton destruction and loss on such a scale is unacceptable.

“Your help in this mission would be seen favorably by many. I’m sure the Empire would reward your efforts handsomely as well, including your associates, and make considerations related to the security of your recent independence.”

Ilea narrowed her eyes. “I see what you’re doing.”

“A common enemy is a great way to foster cooperation and future stability. I intend to use this opportunity to the fullest, and I suggest you do the same.”

Ilea had come here with a variety of ideas, but she had to admit that Helena had got her here. She was sure that Eve hadn’t been looking for this organization for no reason, and the person who had finally invited her here was the head of an assassin’s guild. She assumed many of the other members were involved in shady business as well.

She saw the benefits of what Helena had outlined. Keeping each other in check and preventing large-scale destruction. But at the same time, she saw the threat. If she moved against them openly and caused too much chaos and change too quickly, the other members would come for her.

She wondered how old the organization was and who had started it.

If Helena hadn’t told any obvious lies, her participation in this mission would benefit everyone. And if Helena was as smart as Ilea thought she was, she didn’t lie.

“Is that why you only invited me now?”

Helena sipped her drink. “You were largely unknown until your recent involvement in founding a new healing organization and, of course, in the battle for Riverwatch. I told you already that I would use this opportunity to the fullest. Don’t get me wrong, I would have preferred to meet you in a few years or decades and have the war in Baralia conclude as it should have. But here we are.

“I appreciate that you came, and in such a timely manner too. I’m sure we have our differences, but at the scale we’re working on, compromises must be made, and the greater picture has to be considered.”

Is she scared? Or annoyed? If you’re that powerful and influential, shouldn’t you be the first to try and be better? Change the status quo, call out people who do obvious evil?

Of course, Ilea didn’t say that. Because she was being threatened. She understood that the people involved with this organization could endanger her and her friends and would attack if they saw her as a threat, so instead, they tried to involve her. But they wouldn’t have if not for her recent displays and quick rise to power.

Would they have assassinated me if they’d had the opportunity? If I hadn’t gone north but instead had grown more steadily here in the south?

She didn’t know, couldn’t know. But she didn’t like Helena. The words she said made sense, but they smelled of hypocrisy, a need for control, and, most of all, a fear of change, a fear of losing control, of losing power.

She looked at her and wondered when she had last fought a monster that could kill her with a few strikes. Perhaps it would give her some perspective.

Either way, Helena was right. They were here now, and based on everything she’d said, the most good would come out of her joining this mission to prevent more massacres.

“What’s the level of the cursed and the new creatures?” Ilea asked. That could give her an idea about the danger she would be in but also about what kind of allies she would meet. It seemed to her that Helena was one of the higher-ranked members, but perhaps she was wrong.

“The cursed’s level is similar to that of whoever they were before they died. Most are below two hundred,” Helena said. “The new creatures? Three hundred and above. The highest reported so far was close to five hundred.”

Which means they have people who can kill those kinds of beasts, Ilea thought. Let’s meet the competition, then.

FORTY-NINE

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Assignment

Helena remained in her chair for a little while after Ilea had left.

The meeting had been quite productive.

Maya glanced into the room and quietly closed the door again as soon as she confirmed that Helena was alive.

A ridiculous notion.

Is it? she wondered. Ilea hadn't shown many of her skills. She had ways to detect even the best of her assassins, had an armor-like defense hidden under her shirt, and had the aura of someone with Veteran in the second tier, perhaps even the third.

The sphere Helena had felt around the girl felt like a perception aura, but it could have very well been something else entirely. The way she moved suggested more than one high-level combat skill, and the thin lines of fire on her skin suggested body enhancement skills. Likely more than one.

A healer with body enhancement and ash at her side. It could be quite dangerous, but her level isn't much higher than mine.

Helena assumed she had fought far more than Ilea, the difference in their experience surely quite vast. Especially against human opponents. She had admittedly gotten a little rusty in the last few decades, but experience didn't just fade at this level.

The girl was young. Perhaps as young as she looked. Helena hadn't detected any acting or falsehoods, meaning the character Ilea had portrayed was likely her real one. Someone who enjoyed battle for the sheer sake of it, not a noble or someone interested in political influence.

She had risen in power quickly, perhaps faster than most. She thought it unlikely that the girl would have remained hidden and unknown for long, especially with her erratic and sudden appearance on the board.

It suggested a powerful Class – or several. Reaching level two hundred with luck alone was possible, but three-fifty? Helena thought it highly improbable. The girl was dangerous, that much was clear.

The fact that she hadn't actually joined the war herself and only acted to defend Riverwatch suggested she wouldn't intrude on other territories without very good reason, even though, based on some reactions and reports, she was somewhat idealistic. However, she wasn't so dull as to miss the veiled threat and the consequences that would follow brash actions on the board she was now playing on.

The recent developments in Ravenhall were slightly worrying. The Elders had done such a good job of infighting and never truly realizing the potential of the Shadow's Hand. Until that *stupid* demon summoning. She clenched her teeth at the thought. She wanted to know why he had done it. And then she wanted to kill him.

Now they had an independent Ravenhall with a nearly united Shadow's Hand, a newly founded healing order training young and driven battle healers, and a council headed by Sulivhaan and Dagon, two people she'd hoped would never move into the foreground.

Should have had them killed when I had the chance. She shook her head. Her own ambitions and history with the Hand wouldn't get in the way of stability.

The recent developments in the south would change things. And there was too much change as it was.

She would focus her efforts on the Empire and Alyris. Once this war was over and the dust had settled, Lys would be more powerful than ever before. She had to commend the young Empress, as much as it annoyed her.

Helena hoped that Ilea would prove herself in Baralia. Perhaps some experience fighting alongside some of the older members would temper her.

She tapped her desk, ready to receive the daily reports. For some reason, the meeting had unnerved her.

She came in here as if she owned the place. A mere Shadow.

At least she liked the cake.

* * *

Ilea was already halfway back to Ravenhall, keeping her eyes out for pursuers as she focused on Claire's mark to find her.

Ten minutes later, she joined the flying group of Shadows. It felt good to see them in their familiar black armor and robes. Warriors and adventurers, all of them. There was none of the haughty posturing she had felt in Myrefield.

Soon, they were back in Claire's office, and the Shadows had returned to whatever jobs and interests they had lined up for the evening. The entire council had assembled for Ilea to share what she had learned in the meeting.

"I believe Verena had a confrontation with Helena some fifteen years ago," Dagon said. "She and all of her associates and companies have since been banned from Ravenhall."

"There was nothing about that in the reports," Claire said.

"There was nothing official. Verena enforces it herself whenever she's around. Nobody ever cared enough to question it."

"She might see you as a way to get back in," Sulivhaan said.

"We will be careful about any trade deals," Claire said.

"I'll join their mission, meet whoever's there, and try to find out more about who's involved with the Golden Lily," Ilea said.

"It would be good to learn more, and it is concerning to learn about these rituals. I support your decision to join them," William said.

"Can we not send a few teams of Shadows to investigate this independently?" Charles asked.

"Alyris tolerates our independence," Sulivhaan said, "but I think it would be hasty to get involved in this affair directly. It could imply that the Empire isn't capable of handling this war on its own. If they require our assistance, they know where to find us."

"Is it not possible that this is an indirect request?" the Shadow named Anna asked.

"It is possible. Either way, I support your decision, Lilith," Sulivhaan said. "And I suggest you join their order as well, if it becomes possible afterward. Any allies and trade partners we can add now will secure our position within the Plains for the foreseeable future."

"Even if those allies are the heads of assassin's guilds or worse?" Warren asked.

"Any decision will be subject to a vote," Dagon said. "We don't know enough about this organization to make a general judgment or decision in

terms of trade and cooperation. However, I do believe we have the power to ignore them, should we decide to do so. And with Lilith, we can claim plausible deniability as well. If you agree,” he finished, looking at Ilea.

“What does that mean?” Ilea asked.

“If we don’t want to deal with them, we’ll just say that you don’t like them,” Anna said.

“I already don’t like them.”

“Perfect. Me neither.”

I like her. How have we never trained together?

“So, considering this could impact Ravenhall as a whole, does anyone oppose Lilith’s addition to this mission and subsequent potential insertion into the Golden Lily?” Sulivhaan asked.

Nobody opposed.

“Great,” Sulivhaan said. “Then we’ll continue with the lower-priority items for the day. Most regard grain and food storage and a few changes to the sewage system. I suggest anyone without an interest should leave.”

FIFTY

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Ruins

Helena had given her a deadline of two days. Anyone not at the meeting location by then would have to find the group on their own.

The flight took her toward Virilya, though she avoided the city and kept east of it. She followed the map Claire had prepared. She had made markings for aerially visible landmarks, towns, and villages on the way.

Only the last half hour of her journey proved a little tricky, when Ilea had to fly low to avoid various troops and small camps she spotted in the distance.

The journey took her through a small part of Asila before she entered Baralia. She avoided settlements and focused on the landmarks mentioned.

The meeting place was an ancient ruin said to be cursed. Adventurers avoided the place due to the monsters in the dungeon below. Curse magic frogs.

The little buggers were mostly harmless to someone with a second-tier resistance, both Helena and Claire had confirmed, though they didn't like to come to the surface.

This would be exactly the place where I would train my Curse Magic Resistance. If it weren't as high as it already is.

The ruins were situated on a range of forested hills, standing out in the landscape to anybody either flying or on foot. Claire assumed the choice was mainly due to its distance from any cities or towns. It was unlikely any army would choose this area as a forward base.

Ilea flew the last stretch below the treetops, blinking through the forest until she came close. She immediately spotted a few people within the

ruins, all heavily armored in deep blue and gray gear, their faces covered by hoods or helmets.

Secret order business, she thought and grinned to herself.

One of them wasn't armored, the man dressed instead in dark leathers that seemed entirely out of place. There were so many belts and straps that she couldn't discern their use. The most striking piece of attire was a large leather hat with a single red feather affixed to it.

He had a rather meticulously cared-for mustache that twirled slightly upward at each end. The rest of his beard was just as impressive, long and black, braided in a more complex pattern than her own hair. Granted, Ilea didn't spend hours taking care of her hair every day.

This man, however, just might.

Long black hair flowed out from under his overly large hat, wavy and thick as it rested on his dark brown leather coat.

He looked like a pirate.

She found herself locking eyes with him, his deep blue eyes staring into her own for a long moment before he smiled.

Ilea mimicked the gesture before realizing that she was still floating, hidden among the foliage, over two hundred meters away, her face covered by ash.

Perceptive.

You're being unfriendly, Ilea, she thought, floating toward them before her wings dissipated and she continued on foot.

She blinked a few times to shorten the walk before she entered the decrepit ruin. She couldn't discern what its use had once been.

Only then did the armored people notice her. Their postures tensed slightly, their hands going a little closer to their gear.

"Finally!" the man with the hat called out and spread his arms. His coat was dripping wet.

Ilea waved at them all, keeping her eyes on the pirate. He was missing the swords and guns, but other than that, he fitted the image incredibly well.

She identified the people around her, finding all of them in the low two hundreds. There were eight in total, each with their own weapons and magic. There were at least five perception spells she could recognize within her sphere and another ten or so active spells she couldn't quite place.

"How very tense," she commented, glancing at the group before looking at the pirate. "I'm Lilith."

He smiled. "Lilith! Of course. The ashen Shadow. As much as I liked the songs, I can't fucking stand hearing them anymore."

"And who might you be?"

A smile curled across his lips. "Some call me... the Destroyer."

Ilea noted that some of the others present reacted to that slightly, shifting uneasily.

"Who?" she asked. The name was utterly ridiculous. She expected a legendary Dragon or other calamity to carry that name, not some wet guy looking like a pirate.

[Mage – lvl 362]

Yet she couldn't deny that he was the most powerful human she had ever identified. Was he one of the members?

He narrowed his eyes. "The Destroyer...? Most famous pirate in the sea? The conqueror of the Wainu Islands, the caller of the deep, the bringer of war?"

It sounded more like a question than anything else.

Ilea shrugged. "I'm not particularly familiar with legends and myths. Your level supports the claim at least, I'll give you that."

He stared at her for a long moment before he burst out laughing. He glanced at some of the silent armored fighters and gestured toward her. "Can you believe her? Don't engage in a major conflict for some ten or twenty years and the youth immediately forget your name."

They glanced at each other, seeming unsure how to react.

"Did Skorn tell you to be quiet? Can you not at least introduce yourselves? This is the legendary Lilith. Surely you must want favorable relations with her?" His sarcasm was obvious, but Ilea was unsure if he was more annoyed with her or them.

"We are not affiliated with this man," one of them suddenly said, looking at Ilea. He had heavy armor with a copper tint and stood stiff and straight-backed as if at attention on a military parade ground.

"Skorn?" Ilea asked, going through her brain until she remembered. Walter had that last name, or was she remembering wrong?

The armored man didn't say anything more.

"Nero Skorn. Filthbag, cocksucker, and, as I hear, ruler of Asila," the Destroyer spat. "Self-proclaimed, of course, as I doubt that old fucker could

rule his own bathroom without the help of his groomed slave bitches.”

Four of the people gathered drew their weapons. Two more prepared spells.

He grinned, a dangerous glint in his eyes. And then it was gone, and he laughed out loud. “I didn’t mean to insult your daddy. This is just how I speak.”

“We are here for the same purpose, Destroyer,” one of them said. They didn’t seem scared, but everyone here knew how a fight would end if it started. And Ilea wasn’t sure where to intervene if it came to that.

The pirate seemed like an asshole but also very direct, which she preferred compared to the way Helena talked. More than anything, she was interested in his magic.

“Lilith, I like the way you feel. Let’s fight, or fuck, or both, before these clowns kill us with fake politeness and semantics. I hate being so far from the sea,” he said.

Ilea looked him up and down. “You are one of the least attractive men I have ever met, but I won’t say no to a fight.”

He laughed. “And here I thought your perception was good. Guess I was mistaken.”

A wave of water formed below him, pushing him backward toward the forest below the hill the ruin sat on.

Ilea spread her wings and followed. “Who are we waiting for anyway?”

“You, for one,” the Destroyer said. “I think Velamyr is coming too. The old lightning lad is calling himself General now. I really, really hope that’s it, but with everything going on in this shit country, I’m sure others will come.”

His wave moved through the forest unhindered, carrying the man above the trees with surprising speed. “So you have a third Class?” he asked.

She smiled. *He’s past three-fifty.*

Given how direct he was, she could probably get a lot of information out of him if she wasn’t too obtuse. And, even more selfishly, she could maybe even get a few resistance levels.

“Yeah. Still settling into it. How about you?”

He grinned. “So this little adventure may actually turn out to be more interesting than I thought. You’re the first person I’ve met who’s actually managed to unlock one.”

The first person? So nobody else at the Lily is past three-fifty? Or they haven't met the requirements. I suppose it's also possible he hasn't met all of them.

"Enough talk, let's fight," she said.

He cocked his head over at her and grinned. "I'm starting to like you, Lilith."

More water formed around him, flooding the forest in all directions.

Ilea was reminded of that one spell Aliana had used, but this seemed on an entirely different level. Nor did it stop.

A sphere of water formed around him, spanning three meters.

Ilea smiled and charged, ashen limbs expanding behind her as a few spears formed.

She shot them at him, watching with fascination as they were stopped entirely as soon as they entered the sphere of water. Her ash dissolved within.

Question is, do I want to enter that?

A thin stream of pressurized water suddenly shot out of his hand, reaching her fast enough for her precognition to take over.

She dodged to the side but found him following her movement with the stream.

Ilea blinked instead and kept approaching.

Four more streams formed out of thin air and slashed toward her.

No need for his hands. He's not even looking at me, she noted, moving through the water jets with practiced ease, adjusting her movements and blinking whenever necessary to react to the changes.

Ilea reached his small sphere, her limbs slashing inside.

Her ash was slowed and finally stopped, unable to reach him as she started to deliver reversed healing magic.

The pirate shot her a grin before seven jets of water drilled into her.

Ilea couldn't dodge without letting go of her ash, instead just taking the hits head-on. Her resistance tried to redirect the jets, but they simply came too quickly for it to make a noticeable difference.

Ilea felt her ash slowly being eaten away by the high-pressure water as it bored into her defenses.

Heart of Cinder released through one of her limbs, the explosion of heat and energy pushing into the sphere. It looked too small and slow to her eyes, but it still managed to reach the pirate.

He watched with fascination as the fire reached him. He moved a hand closer to the energy, his skin visibly burned before some of the fire flowed around his body, as if he could control it.

“Third-tier Heat Resistance?” she asked with a smile, the water jets now drilling into her flesh and slowly past her skin and muscles.

“Oh yes. It’s been a while since someone could even hurt me. A human, that is,” he commented. “Your Water Resistance isn’t in the third tier yet, I see. Maybe I can help you there. You fight well, and you’re durable. Most others, even in the low three hundreds, would be chunks of meat by now,” he said and laughed.

Ilea ignored the comments, but she couldn’t deny that she was enjoying herself as well. If this pirate was joining this mission, who could stand against them?

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FIFTY-ONE

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Preparations

Her reversed healing continued, and she added Storm of Cinders to the mix.

The Destroyer glanced at her, considering. “Mana intrusion... and destructive healing. No wonder you got to this level so quickly.”

It's not affecting him.

The water jets slowly pierced through her body as she healed against them. Then his sphere expanded suddenly to trap her inside, neither Blink nor Displacement working as she flew backward in an attempt to avoid being engulfed.

Ilea was surrounded a moment later, suddenly feeling immense pressure and understanding why her ash had difficulties moving through the sphere. Her wounds healed near-instantly as she looked at him. She wasn't worried about drowning, instead charging her Heart of Cinder for her eventual escape.

Is this how it feels kilometers deep underwater?

Ilea couldn't help but be impressed that he had managed to immobilize her this easily. Not even the Ascended had managed such, and back then, she had been quite a bit weaker.

The pressure increased, threatening to pop her eyes before her ash armor covered them.

She first used her reversed healing but stopped after a while, realizing that her magic just seemed to dissipate in the water. Force and Displacement proved entirely too weak to do anything against the water either.

Ilea finally released her spell, Heart of Cinder spreading out with the help of two thousand sacrificed health. It evaporated a large chunk of the water, allowing her to blink out in the split second before more water rushed in.

He grinned at her. "Tough nut to crack, I'll give you that."

Ilea quietly flew in a circle around him. "The water is part of your body, isn't it?" she asked. "That's why I couldn't teleport."

"It's not uncommon for creators to have such an ability. Your ash is the same, I think."

"It is. How did you stop the reversed healing and intrusion spells?"

"I didn't. Not all of it. The sphere around me can absorb some of the mana from enemy spells."

"Interesting. I have a similar ability," Ilea admitted.

He raised his head slightly, his casual attitude slipping for a split second before it returned.

"And you have space magic at your disposal too. Quite rare. Perhaps we can help each other with some resistances after all."

He glanced over toward the ruin.

"More have arrived. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lilith of Ravenhall. I'm looking forward to continuing this." The water suddenly vanished as if it had never existed, the small lake that had formed below doing the same. Only the wave he stood on remained.

"Likewise," she said, refusing to use his made-up name. At least her made-up name was an actual name.

He gave her a look before returning to the ruin. Ilea followed to find two new people, each quite distinctive compared to the shrouded warriors.

One was a man who looked to be in his thirties. He'd have looked rather ordinary if it weren't for his gear, heavy golden armor that seemed to move or flow slightly like liquid. Ilea wasn't sure if it was an illusion or one of his skills. He had brown hair and brown eyes, glancing at her before he seemed to lose interest.

[Mage – lvl 275]

"Hey," she said.

He looked at her for a long moment and nodded in a polite manner, either choosing not to speak or unable to do so.

“What the fuck are *you* doing here?” the Destroyer asked as he landed next to Ilea, water dripping to the ground.

“Greetings, Destroyer. I have come at the request of the assassin,” the man said and repeated his polite nod. “Same as you.”

The pirate paced as they glared at each other. He sighed and instead spread his arms as he approached the other new face in the group.

She was a woman with piercing black eyes, her long hair as dark as night. She wore a beautiful dark blue dress, its color bordering on black and heavily contrasting her white porcelain skin. She should have looked entirely out of place in the ruin, but somehow, she fit right in.

[Mage – lvl 318]

“Elisora, it’s almost as surprising to see you here as it is to see Michael,” the pirate said with a grin. “What honor it is for your eyes to find mine, oh glorious Leya of Lys.”

Elisora seemed to ignore him, but Ilea didn’t miss the incredibly slight twitch of her right eye.

The Destroyer must have noticed too, laughing out loud as he sat down on a nearby rock.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Lilith of Ravenhall,” Elisora said instead. “As our dear *ally* has already revealed, I’m Elisora Acantha. I’ve not come to take part in your endeavors personally but to make your acquaintance and, more importantly, to make sure this won’t end in a bloodbath,” she said, smiling a perfect and friendly smile.

Bad vibes, this one.

“It seems that my ploy to claim you was foiled before I even arrived,” she continued, giving Ilea a look.

Something brushed against her mind.

“Impressive defenses,” Elisora said. “How do I fare compared to the beings you’ve faced before?”

Ilea could tell the magic had come from her. She was quite powerful, evidently a mind mage far surpassing Eve. However, compared to the Enavurin or the Goliath Veramath, she didn’t compare.

“You’re the most powerful human mind mage I’ve encountered,” she said honestly.

“I see,” Elisora said. “I do hope you will join. I’m sure trade between Lys and Ravenhall could be smoothed out far more quickly with our insistence.”

Ilea didn’t comment.

“We can have that bloodbath now, if you want to,” the pirate said.

“Not amongst us. The rituals the Order of Truth has initiated are not to be taken lightly.” Elisora glanced at the man in golden armor, Michael. “It seems, however, that Helena agreed with me.”

She looked at Ilea. “I will see you around. Do visit me in Virilya if you’re ever in the area,” she added before she vanished.

I don’t think I will, thank you.

The Destroyer made a few hand gestures as if to protect himself from a curse.

Ilea stretched and then summoned some wood to build a fire. The pirate gave her a curious glance.

“A fire would give away our position,” one of the armored people said.

“What’s the point of coming here if we can’t fend off whatever shows up?” Ilea asked. “Who are you, anyway?”

The man seemed a little frustrated. “We are the Dawn Company.”

Ilea didn’t know what that was.

“They’re an elite group from Asila,” Michael supplied. “Under direct orders from Skorn.”

Ilea nodded. “You can hide if someone shows up. Or is that a problem too?”

The man considered for a moment before shaking his head. “No. Not if you don’t expect us to participate in whatever battle might ensue.”

“I don’t,” Ilea said, and that was that.

She summoned her fire sphere and set light to the wood before she formed an ashen chair.

The pirate summoned an armchair and sank into it with a sigh.

“Who else are we waiting for?” she asked after a few minutes of silence.

“Velamyr Ryse,” Michael said. “A general of the Lys army and a member of the Golden Lily. I assume he’s the main reason this whole endeavor came to be. He’s a military man.”

Ilea appreciated the explanation, but she really hoped this general was less eccentric than everyone else she’d met. At least the mind mage had

decided not to join.

The pirate seemed both angry and dangerous. Michael seemed quiet and reserved so far, respectful but oddly cold. And none of the armored people from the Dawn Company seemed eager to have a conversation.

Lovely chaps. I hope we get to fight something soon.

* * *

Felicia stood close to General Ryse. The war council wasn't exactly going as planned. She had expected as much.

"The country is defeated. Surrounded on three fronts and hiding within their cities. The rituals are horrendous, but we cannot stop here," General Karrick said.

Murmurs went through the large tent.

"Our victory is secured," another high-ranking officer said. One of Walker's men. "Though we cannot ignore the cursed. Or the monsters that have sprung to life. I suggest we continue our approach and burn down everything these fanatics have summoned before moving on."

"I believe there is more to this," General Ryse said. "The interrogated members of the Order have confirmed as much. If we stall, there won't be anything left of this country to conquer. And if their plans succeed, we might not want to march any further."

His words caused another round of murmurs.

"The interrogations were uncertain. We have nothing to prove their ramblings other than the efficiency of the rituals," Karrick said.

"Isn't that enough? Coupled with the tens of thousands who died?" one of Ryse's majors countered.

"We lost few soldiers. The loss of life is regrettable, but they are citizens of Baralia. We were prepared for savagery when we got here. Let us not give up on military discipline because our enemies are willing to commit atrocities."

"I simply suggest we form strike teams of high-level soldiers and Shadows, let them scour the lands and cities, and fight the creatures in the cursed areas. We must call for more elite individuals from the Empire," Ryse said.

"Shadows," Karrick scoffed. "They have chosen their allegiance."

Murmurs of agreement rippled through the tent.

“You may risk your own troops, Ryse, but I won’t do the same with mine. You are free to include this request in the report that will be sent today,” General Walker said.

* * *

Felicia followed General Ryse back to his own command tent with a sizable group of officers.

“Send letters to the Empress directly. We need to hire every high-level mercenary and adventurer we can get our hands on. Otherwise, there won’t be a country left to conquer,” he said as soon as they were inside, enchantments making sure nobody could easily listen in.

A few people nodded and left.

“We already have eighteen teams ready, sir. They mostly consist of imperial scouts led by minor nobles,” Major Braak said.

“Braak, I’ll leave the coordination to you,” Ryse said and looked around. “I will be part of a separate group infiltrating the enemy. We have to clean out those cities and prevent more of these rituals from taking place.”

“Shadows?” Felicia asked.

“Possibly. I called in some favors. We won’t let our troops die, nor will we let them destroy their entire country and people for illusions and arrogance.”

They discussed the next steps for a while before most of them excused themselves to brief their troops.

“I can lead a strike force,” Felicia offered. She had already garnered enough trust to be amongst the general’s closest majors. This war was full of opportunities, after all.

If she had his support, her status as the head of House Redleaf would be all but unquestioned. Velamyr Ryse was well respected, despite his often-controversial suggestions and decisions. The results spoke for themselves. He was a patriot ready to sacrifice everything for the Empire. And it was rumored that he had quite a bit of pull with the Empress herself.

The generals challenging his concerns could very well just disagree because he was the one who brought them up. They knew Alyris would

likely approve the requested resources and Shadow contracts, but by delaying it all, they could strike directly at him and the success that would be attributed to the man.

Ryse wasn't unaware of this, which was why he was maneuvering himself into a place where he could question their rank and ability to lead after the war.

Felicia wasn't well-versed in military politics, but she understood some of the maneuvers and plans. The mistake she thought that many of them made was thinking that the war was already over. That Baralia no longer posed a threat.

She wondered how much of this thinking was responsible for their slow progress. They could have likely prevented a few rituals already.

Felicia listened to the winds, calming down as she thought of the thousands of people who had lost their lives, children, and loved ones. She made sure to remember every name responsible for the sluggishness of the Imperial Army. Ryse did the same, she knew, but perhaps for different reasons.

"You've proven loyal to both me and the Empire," he said. "But I won't appoint you to lead a strike team. Not yet."

Felicia nodded, unperturbed by the news. She had expected as much, with her short military history and quick rise to the rank of major. He had few reasons to fully trust her.

"I knew your father," he said suddenly, surprising her with the change in topic. He was usually focused entirely on the war.

"He was a horrible man," Felicia said honestly.

The general smiled ever so slightly. "A horrible father, perhaps," he said. "Now, as to your question from earlier. As to who would accompany me. He might have been one of them, though admittedly, he rarely showed up personally. Especially in the last ten years."

His secret organization? The one Ilea mentioned. If he's also part of it, this might be a problem.

Or an opportunity.

"I'm listening," she said.

The general nodded. "This operation won't be easy, but you managed the best against the blast of the ritual in Odiah. The majors speak highly of your combat ability, and I could use someone I trust to fight by my side. I will be blunt. I cannot risk them, but I can risk you."

And how can I refuse? Does he really need my assistance? Is he merely being pragmatic? Or is this akin to him taking me on as his apprentice?

The answer, of course, was obvious.

“I accept,” she said, deeming the potential gains far higher than the risks. Felicia hated her father with all her heart, but that didn’t mean she hated his connections and wealth. If anything, it filled her with a morbid joy to use this to her advantage. And, perhaps, she could find information for Ilea.

* * *

Ilea sat with closed eyes and a hot chocolate in her hands, enjoying the warmth of their little fire.

Actually, it was a large fire. Massive, perhaps, by some people’s standards.

Their third bout had taken down a few dozen trees. Some of those had been cut apart by her and added to their fire.

“So, why did you join this operation?” Ilea asked, sipping her drink.

The pirate sat nearby, Michael standing a little farther away but still in earshot.

“The loot, of course,” the Destroyer said and smiled brightly. “I’d imagine Alyris would have sent her personal guard after me if I’d chosen to come here alone. But now, I can do whatever I like.”

“As long as we stop the rituals,” Michael said.

“And you?” the pirate asked.

“To stop the rituals,” Ilea said.

He gave her a smile. It was clear that he didn’t believe her. He looked up and smiled.

“More coming?” Ilea asked.

He nodded and sipped his drink. “Can’t wait to see his face.”

“The fire?” she asked.

“The fire,” the pirate confirmed.

The general didn’t take long to appear at their side, a massive lightning strike forming in front of his outstretched palm before the entirety of their fire was blasted away.

“You finally made it,” the Destroyer said, still sitting in his chair. “It’s been a while, boy.”

Boy?

[Mage – lvl 302]

The general had blue eyes, long, wavy black hair, and a short beard. He wore an armored robe with two lines of red going down from his shoulders. The man looked around thirty.

And he hadn’t come alone.

Felicia glanced at her, her eyes widening slightly before she schooled her expression.

Ilea smiled. *Now that is unexpected. Guess I’ll just roll with it.*

The general ignored the pirate entirely and instead addressed Ilea. “You must be Lilith. It’s good to make your acquaintance.”

She stood up and shook his hand, dissolving her ashen chair. “You must be General Ryse, then. Good to meet you too.”

“This is Major Redleaf. She’ll be supporting us in this endeavor. I’m glad you three have chosen to come. I will be giving a short briefing with information on the most dangerous cursed areas and targets in Baralia.”

“That’s my cue.” The pirate stood up and stretched. “Can we finally go and fight?”

The others joined as General Ryse summoned a table. “The briefing will be short, and then we will leave for the first target. The city of Mophis, northwest of here. Our scouts have seen a ritual take place despite our armies having yet to reach the city.

“The implication, of course, is that the Order of Truth, either of their own volition or ordered by King Baron, is conducting these rituals with a goal in mind beyond the destruction of the Lys military.”

He summoned a few papers onto the table, sketches depicting insect-like creatures.

“We are tasked to find and analyze the source of the ritual, eliminate as many hostiles as possible, and find any survivors who could provide information. If there is nothing to gain, we will move deeper into the country.”

He pointed at a map. “First to Nara, and then onward as we see fit. There are other strike teams working with the same target in mind, most

moving into the kingdom from different directions to the south.”

Velamyr glanced at the various gathered fighters. “Considering our lack of familiarity and training together, I suggest a simple approach of infiltration and distraction. The team tasked to infiltrate will look for the ritual sites and any survivors while the others distract and eliminate as many hostiles as possible until we leave. Objections?”

“I want to be in the distraction team,” the pirate said.

“Of course. I think our most combat-inclined members should handle the distraction. Lilith, does your skill set fall into that category as well? Or would you prefer to join the infiltration group? I have reasonable knowledge of runes, and Michael is our expert on blood magic.”

“I’m happy to join the distraction group,” Ilea said.

He gave her a look and nodded. “The two highest-level fighters in the distraction team then. I suggest the rest join our group so that collateral and risk can be kept at a minimum.”

Two devices appeared in the general’s hand. He handed one of them to Ilea. It looked like a very small staff with edged runes around its metal length.

“Aim it toward the sky and fuel it with mana to send out a flare of red light in case you need assistance or have found something of value for our operation. We will use the same to send for you.”

“You already trust her more than me?” the pirate asked with mock sadness.

“Of course I do. I already know you. If there are no further questions, we will move out. The fastest flyers will support the others.”

“That really was a quick briefing. We don’t know a lot, do we?” Ilea asked.

Velamyr looked at her. “We don’t. Which is what we’re here to change.”

Ilea spread her wings, the group quickly checking everyone’s strength and speed before they decided who would be the main flyers. Ilea, Velamyr, and Felicia were chosen, plus four members of the Dawn Company.

Ilea gave Felicia a glance, their eyes locking for a moment. She seemed determined.

She went back to Virilya to take over House Redleaf. Did she succeed? Is she part of the war efforts, or is this something more personal with Velamyr Ryse?

It felt exciting to have her here. She wanted to pull her aside and catch up, find out why she was here. She would do so when it felt safe, but the people here were part of the Golden Lily, the same order that Arthur Redleaf had belonged to. Felicia was playing a dangerous game, but then again, so was Ilea. At least now, they each had someone here they could trust.

Velamyr took the lead, and a moment later, they were off at breakneck speed, rushing over the forests and hills of Asila, quickly entering Baralia territory.

* * *

Once the forests gave way to dusty plains, it took less than an hour before they set down on a small hill a few kilometers away from the city walls of Mophis. It felt strange. Ilea could almost taste the blood magic and curse lingering in the air. And the city looked strange as well.

Michael had summoned a golden telescope, and some of the others were watching the city with similar devices.

Ilea could see well enough with her eyes. The walls were high but not impressively so. In every way, Mophis seemed like an average city. There were no massive structures towering over everything nor any monumental city gates glittering in the sunlight. A functional city, but now it had a few additional bizarre qualities.

The magic in the air was one thing, as were the empty roads leading to and from the city. Most of all, it was the green grass growing over the walls and out onto the plains, the tree-like growths clinging to many of the buildings with roots breaking through stone as if the city was an ancient ruin slowly retaken by nature over the past centuries. But there were no trees out in the sandy, dust-covered plains, which gave the city an ominous feel.

“There are creatures fighting inside,” Michael said.

Ilea could see flashes of movement too.

“Let’s not waste any time then. Lilith? Ready to cause a distraction?” the pirate said.

She looked to the general, and he gave her a nod.

“Be careful out there, you two,” Felicia said.

Ilea smiled. "We will be, Major."

She followed the pirate as he floated upward, the two slowly making their way toward the city without any attempt to hide themselves in the air.

"Lilith, a word as we continue," the pirate said.

"Speak your mind, Bob. You don't mind if I call you Bob, right? I refuse to call you Destroyer, and I don't suppose you'll give me your real name."

"Anyone else I would dismember for that statement, but it wouldn't really make a difference with you, would it?"

"You're free to try."

He laughed. "Well, I'll give it to you. I like you, but that's not very impressive considering the competition. Listen, I know you're here with all those noble intentions, and sure, I won't stop you from slaughtering your way through those creatures and cursed humans, and I plan to have a bit of fun here and there as well, but this is a city recently cleared of any security and nobility. I'm pretty sure nobody has gone in there since that ritual happened. Do you understand what I'm trying to say?"

"No, Bob. Are you saying there's a ton of enemies for me to kill?"

He reeled his head back and made a pained sound. "No, you stupid fucking battle maniac. There's loot! Tons of gold, relics, art, weapons, armor, clothes, and booze. The good stuff too, if you know where you're looking."

"You plan to ignore why we're here to loot the city?"

"No. We will do what we have to do. And as much as it pains me, we won't have the time to properly search through everything. But, here and there, I might get a hunch as to a hidden vault, the kind where more than a little bit of wealth is stored, the kind where a lot of security measures and enchantments will still be in place, the kind where I could use the help of a downright indestructible juggernaut with high-level mana intrusion abilities. If we work together, we'll be in and out before Ryse even knows we've looted anything."

Helena had already mentioned the potential opportunity. The city had been wiped out as far as they could tell. Depending on how powerful the monsters were, it would take the Empire quite a lot of resources to clear them out. Ilea was happy to do that work for them, but she would also be happy if some of the gold left here made its way to Ravenhall instead of into the Empire's coffers.

“As long as we don’t neglect the main reason we’re here. Do you have a way to locate said vaults?”

He grinned. “I do. I’ll let you know when I find something good. Let’s get to killing, then.”

Ilea spotted individual creatures as they got closer.

“They’re fighting each other,” Bob said and pointed toward one of the buildings.

Ilea looked, and indeed there were a few brown ants the size of dogs spitting and clawing into what looked like crazed humans, killing several with each strike. She spotted thin spider-like beings with dozens of legs using wood magic to pierce and cut the humans.

It looked like absolute chaos.

Bob laughed and moved toward the city, the lake growing below him changing into a rolling tsunami.

Ilea checked her skills and blinked into the fray.

FIFTY-TWO

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Invasion

Ilea went ahead of the pirate and first checked on the different creatures and cursed humans, trying every communication method she could think of to figure out if any of them were sapient. She was attacked by every single one.

She decided to fight back and get on with the plan when the pirate arrived with his waves of water bursting over the city walls, washing away the living, dead, and everything else in its path.

She blinked into a hall overgrown with roots, her ashen limbs fanning out to slash through the creatures and cursed humans.

Dozens of humans were instantly ripped apart, a swath of them stumbling over each other as they tried to get to her. Heart of Cinder incinerated all of them.

[Pearl Mantis Sire – lvl ??]

Ilea let the blade of the mantis creature dig into her ash, unable to penetrate the hardened defenses before its head exploded from a punch fueled with her spells.

[Wildflower Ant – lvl 320]

[Willow Mother – lvl 382]

She displaced three swaths of acid spit sent toward her by the ants crawling on the walls. The poisonous acid appeared and landed on the thin-legged spider creature, interrupting its wood magic.

Four more mantises appeared in the room, finding a quick end when Heart of Cinder expanded outward, their incinerated corpses slowly falling, still affected by her Force, as she moved on.

More monsters stumbled and rushed into the hall, having heard the battle or simply looking for their next prey. Ilea slaughtered dozens of creatures before she blinked up and onto the roof. A large tree with pink leaves had grown on it.

The creatures were strange, insect-like beings but fought as if they had battle experience. The mantises had the highest level, wielding two blade-like arms with flowing motions that almost reminded her of a dance.

How did they get here?

And why are they fighting the cursed?

Either way, she was here to garner their attention and kill as many as she could while the others tried to find and investigate the ritual site. The roots and grass felt strange and otherworldly, but something else bothered her.

The wisps she saw with her Space Awareness behaved strangely. They felt different to her here than everywhere else. It wasn't the same gathering and alignment she saw with her tests with the enchanters; instead, it felt as if everything was in disarray.

'ding' You have defeated [Willow Mother – lvl 382]

'ding' You have defeated [Wildflower Ant – lvl 320]

'ding' You have defeated [Pearl Mantis Sire – lvl 457]

'ding' You have defeated [Cursed Mage – lvl 68]

...

'ding' You have defeated [Wildflower Ant – lvl 375]

Velamyr was right. This ritual hadn't simply been done to damage the Empire. And still, with the danger these creatures posed, she didn't know what kind of damage they would do once all the cursed were dead and they were left to swarm into the surrounding lands.

She would kill as many as she could.

She cleared another few squares and buildings, using her charged Monster Hunter to call as many monsters toward her as she could, many of them frozen for a time before they rushed her way.

Flying above a mound of corpses, Ilea looked for more enemies. She felt numb at all the death and destruction caused by these rituals. As far as she was concerned, she and Bob were just cleaning up.

To one side, Ilea saw another wave crashing through an alley, taking with it dozens of creatures as the pirate laughed from above.

She quickly checked her messages. For now, she was uninterested in the skill gains and Class level-ups, but she did check one change.

‘ding’ Force reaches 2nd lvl 1

Active – Force – 2nd lvl 1

Push objects, magical constructs, and people away or stop them from reaching you with space magic.

2nd stage: The strength of Force is increased against schools of magic you are familiar with. You may use Force freely within its sphere of influence, pushing in each direction.

Category: Space Magic – Aura

I can push in all directions now? she wondered, testing it with a ball of ash she threw up into the air.

A few seconds later, she had already gotten the hang of it. Her sphere helped quite a bit with applying the Force spell. She could essentially push at something within Force’s sphere of influence, slowing it down or putting pressure on it from all sides. She would have ample opportunity to test it here.

Flying up, she found and teleported close to an ongoing battle. There were flying creatures too, which approached her as she reappeared. They looked like massive mosquitoes with loud, buzzing wings and were already sending wooden projectiles her way.

She used Force to push against herself from the side, effectively getting her out of the projectiles’ trajectory. She tried to stop the wooden projectiles with her space magic and found they slowed down considerably before they clattered onto the ground.

Ilea blinked into a large plaza and used Monster Hunter to taunt everything in the surroundings, the humans freezing for a few seconds as she charged Heart of Cinder.

As she stood in the center of the plaza, she heard the buzz of dozens of monsters rushing toward her from all directions. Her third Class's spells were already getting to work as she waited for more monsters to converge.

When the cursed humans started moving again, everything turned into chaos.

The mages retained their ability to cast spells, but very few were even above level one hundred. They fought against the monsters, but thanks to her use of Monster Hunter, many kept their focus on her.

Hundreds of creatures were incinerated by her lifeforce-enhanced blast of fire and energy. Ashen spheres zipped through the plaza, punching through heads as she displaced any projectiles coming her way back to one monster or another.

Anything that got closer to her was shredded by the six limbs of ash she kept active. A net made of ash caught a few monsters before it lit up with white fire. Another blast of fire turned dozens of creatures to ash.

She crossed paths with the pirate from time to time as the city was growing less populated by the minute, the two of them hunting down every last creature and cursed human.

Ilea had to admit that his methods for clearing out open spaces were quite a bit more impressive than hers. He simply flooded everything, drowning or crushing the weaker creatures and using increased pressure to literally burst the higher-leveled ones.

She did a double take when she saw dark shapes moving in the water, biting through whatever resisted the waves. *Sharks! Is that his third Class? Some kind of summoning ability? Like Adam had?*

"Ash girl, I got something. Follow me," Bob said.

She looked around and couldn't see any large congregations of monsters, so she followed. They flew past a few buildings and reached a large square structure made of stone, each window protected with steel bars.

A wave of water smashed through the large double doors before they went inside. Bob rushed down the stairs, occasionally stopping before he continued. Less than a minute after they had reached the building, they were standing in front of two heavily enchanted gates.

"We split it fifty-fifty, fair?" he asked.

Ilea glanced at him and charged Absolute Destruction.

The vault cracked open with a boom, stone and debris flying inside as many of the protective enchantments were destroyed.

The two rushed inside and stored everything they could get their hands on, ash and water quickly encompassing the whole treasury as dense mana gathered below.

Ilea blinked and stored one of the last batches of valuables before there was a massive explosion of dark red flame, shrapnel and curse magic washing over her. As the ceiling caved in, she tried to stay upright. A few seconds later, the noise had stopped.

“Are you alive?!” Bob called out as the dust was settling.

Ilea pushed away the chunks of stone that had fallen on her with Force and her ashen limbs before they teleported out of the building. “That was the worst heist in history.”

“We got most of the valuables. In and out in less than a minute, I’d say it was pretty impressive,” Bob said, summoning a small chest full of gold coins.

“The ceiling caved in, and I’m pretty sure we just evaporated a few hundred gold’s worth of valuables.”

“A shame that their buildings aren’t built to take a few explosions.”

Ilea shook her head, but she couldn’t help but smile under her armor. This whole situation felt so absurd. Fighting cursed humans and monstrous insect-like creatures inside a destroyed city and breaking into bank vaults with a pirate. It certainly wasn’t what she had expected when she had read Helena’s invitation.

“Enough side-tracking, Bob. Let’s get back to it,” she said and rose into the air.

“I’ll grab you when I find another one,” he said and followed. “By the way, my real name is Hector. Now that we’re looting together, you’re practically part of the crew.”

She gave him a look and nodded. “I’m Ilea.” She ignored the rest of what he’d said and carried on.

Everything Hector had said so far painted him as a selfish and cynical man. She didn’t like him, but she had to admit that he was efficient and powerful, providing enjoyable duels and resistance levels and now helping to clear out the monsters in this city.

He talks about looting a lot, but he doesn't seem to care much that we just took hundreds, if not thousands, of gold's worth of equipment. Is that really why he's here?

She wondered about the Lily, wondered how much of what she had been told was the truth. Was he here to evaluate her? Was he playing a role? She didn't think it impossible considering his high level, but she didn't feel watched or in danger either.

Of course, she considered the possibility that the Lily was involved in all of this and that she was helping them clean up, but even then, she was killing dangerous creatures. And Felicia was here too, though they hadn't yet had the opportunity to talk amongst themselves.

They continued clearing entire sections of Mophis when a bright flare of red light shot up into the sky from near the city center. They both immediately headed to the location, checking to see if there were any monsters nearby, but it seemed Hector's waves and her Monster Hunter had managed to remove many, if not most, of the creatures from the city.

The flare led them to a temple-like building. Ilea immediately felt that the surrounding mana was denser than in the rest of the city, and the spatial wisps seemed even more disturbed here.

They appeared inside a large hall to find the rest of the group already investigating large arrays of runes covering the ground near the center. There were hundreds of corpses, most of them human and wearing robes. The building's chairs and benches looked smashed, monster corpses lying between the human bodies here and there.

The ritual site.

"You made it. How is the situation out there?" Velamyr asked. Nearby, Michael, the blood magic expert clad in golden plate armor, was crouching above a group of runes, taking notes.

"We did a full sweep of the city. The monsters are quite aggressive," Ilea reported. "They didn't respond to any attempts at communication, so we took them out. There should be quite a few cursed humans remaining, but I'd say most of the more dangerous creatures are dealt with."

"Good work. We had our hands full with the few dozen we encountered. It seems the—"

Ilea watched in fascination as a few nearby wisps interlinked, waving her hand at the air in front of her as if to touch them. A burst of mana expanded from nothing.

With it came a Wildflower Ant. It landed on its feet and screeched, looking around frantically before it spotted them and attacked in a frenzy.

A burst of lightning came from General Ryse's outstretched arm, killing the creature near-instantly.

"The fabric of space is distorted here," Michael said as he stood up. "My analysis of the ritual is not conclusive. It's complex. Too complex for most blood mages I'm familiar with. And I've found dozens of flaws.

"The space magic aspects are concerning, but I'm not an expert. I'm getting the impression they're trying to rip the fabric of space, but everything was so hastily set up. Even with the few aspects of their ambitions I can grasp, none of it would require a sacrifice this extensive."

"Perhaps they're trying to make up for their lack of understanding with sheer power?" a robed member of the Dawn Company said.

"Either way, much of the circle has been damaged by the chaos and fighting following the magic's activation," Michael said. "We're too late to find out more. Whatever they attempted to do here, it failed."

"Is there a way to stabilize this space?" Velamyr said. "Our soldiers can deal with the cursed humans, but the constantly appearing monsters will cause casualties."

"The effects of the ritual are still fueled by the remaining runes. The space should stabilize if we destroy everything here."

"Destroyer, do what you do best," General Ryse said, signaling the others to leave. "We regroup above this building and leave for Nara."

While everyone else left, Ilea stayed and watched. Hector chuckled as he flooded everything, beams of water slashing out into the ground, walls, and ceiling, collapsing everything. The two reappeared in the air above the temple, watching it collapse.

Ilea could tell that the space was already stabilizing, the wisps' movements returning to more familiar patterns.

So this Michael fellow didn't lie. Though it does seem like he understands all of this very well. I wonder what his goal is in all of this.

"The power of the ritual is waning," Felicia said.

"I feel it too. Let's not waste time here, then. We leave," Velamyr said.

Ilea looked around at the half-collapsed city, flooded in parts with hundreds of corpses visible. It was eerily quiet.

FIFTY-THREE

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Rituals

Ilea checked her final tally from all the fighting as they flew over the lands of Baralia.

‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel reaches lvl 353 – Five stat points awarded

‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel reaches lvl 354 – Five stat points awarded

...

‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel reaches lvl 360 – Five stat points awarded – One Core Skill point awarded

‘ding’ Kin of Ash reaches lvl 353 – Five stat points awarded

‘ding’ Kin of Ash reaches lvl 354 – Five stat points awarded

...

‘ding’ Kin of Ash reaches lvl 360 – Five stat points awarded – One Core Skill point awarded

‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie reaches lvl 87 – One stat point awarded

...

‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie reaches lvl 103 – One stat point awarded

‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie reaches lvl 104 – One stat point awarded

...

‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie reaches lvl 114 – One stat point awarded

‘ding’ Absolute Destruction reaches 3rd lvl 26

‘ding’ Absolute Destruction reaches 3rd lvl 27

‘ding’ Azarinth Sphere reaches 3rd lvl 27

‘ding’ Azarinth Perception reaches 3rd lvl 26

‘ding’ Heart of Cinder reaches 3rd lvl 22
‘ding’ Heart of Cinder reaches 3rd lvl 23
‘ding’ Heart of Cinder reaches 3rd lvl 24
‘ding’ Storm of Cinders reaches 3rd lvl 20
‘ding’ Storm of Cinders reaches 3rd lvl 21
‘ding’ Ashen Wings reaches 3rd lvl 26
‘ding’ Eyes of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 18
‘ding’ Keeper of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 29

‘ding’ Force reaches 2nd lvl 2

...

‘ding’ Force reaches 2nd lvl 6

‘ding’ Flare of Creation reaches 2nd lvl 4

...

‘ding’ Flare of Creation reaches 2nd lvl 8

‘ding’ Displacement reaches 2nd lvl 4

...

‘ding’ Displacement reaches 2nd lvl 10

‘ding’ Space Shift reaches 2nd lvl 2

‘ding’ Space Shift reaches 2nd lvl 3

‘ding’ Body of the Valkyrie reaches 2nd lvl 2

‘ding’ Space Awareness reaches lvl 13

‘ding’ Space Awareness reaches lvl 14

...

‘ding’ Space Awareness reaches lvl 17

‘ding’ Deviant of Humanity reaches lvl 11

‘ding’ Harmony of the Drowned reaches lvl 9

‘ding’ Wood Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 2

‘ding’ Wood Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 3

‘ding’ Monster Hunter reaches 3rd lvl 3

Over 20 levels in my third Class. And a ton of skill levels. Whatever this mission turns out to be, it’s definitely been effective for my personal growth so far.

Feels good to freely level my main Classes again as well.

This time, she increased her lower stats. Now that she was getting more used to her new magic, she could tell that balancing her stats a little more would help smooth things out.

And her bouts with the pirate had paid off too.

Water Resistance

You have survived attack spells specialized and perfected over centuries by none other than the great Destroyer, the outrageous power of magical creatures imitated by sheer ingenuity and perfect control.

‘ding’ Water Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 1

Water Resistance – 3rd lvl 1

Over time, you’ve learned many things. One of them is that water pressure is not a joke. This resistance helps a little with reducing the damage.

2nd stage: You’ve taken so much damage from water-based attacks that it might be good to check that you’re not actually on fire. Getting more used to it, your body and armor magically redirect the pressure to lessen the burden on you.

3rd stage: You have seen the true power of the sea. The structure of your body has adapted, forming microscopic webs that will make you more resilient to cuts and pressure, most notably against water.

It was yet another benefit. Yet another resistance in the third tier. But she had a lot more to work on.

They reached the hills overlooking the outskirts of Nara late in the afternoon, the group landing and spreading out. Nara looked quite different from Mophis – or any city Ilea had seen so far in Elos.

The walls looked like the lowest fourth of a pyramid, sloping up and reaching at least thirty meters in height before they revealed the high-reaching buildings and towers beyond.

Where Mophis had been a sizeable town, Nara looked and felt, at least from a distance, like a fortress city. Not unlike Ravenhall.

Yet there was something eerie about its design, and Ilea realized what she felt. Where Ravenhall looked imposing, Nara seemed oppressive, the

walls keeping monsters out but at the same time keeping everyone locked within, watched by whoever was living in those towers.

Fiery light came from beyond the walls, heavy plumes of black smoke rising out of the city, the sounds of battle audible.

“The ritual has already taken place,” Michael said. They could all feel it, the residual blood and curse magic lingering in the air.

“We’re too late,” Felicia said.

“We will use the same approach as with Mophis. Some of those noises sound like spells, so we may not be the first ones here,” General Ryse said.

Ilea glanced at him and then spread her wings. “We’ll get started then.”

“We’re getting into stronghold territory of the Order and Baralia. It shouldn’t make much of a difference, but I doubt many of the nobles in Nara were taken out by the ritual.”

Ilea gave Velamyr a slight nod and ascended, followed by Hector. She tried to make out details as they approached, spotting five large Colosseum-like structures of various designs, nestled into the city between the many towers reaching up as if to try and escape the densely packed stronghold.

It looked like the high-reaching walls had forced them to build vertically. The buildings were interlinked with bridges of stone and wood, while stairs and abyss-like openings showed glimpses of an underworld below.

Rain soon started falling, the first strikes of lightning already flashing in the distance.

“This is going to take a little longer,” Ilea said as the real size of the city became clear. She wondered how many people had once lived here.

“Not an issue,” Hector said. “It just means that there is more for us to gain.”

With that, he lifted himself into the air on a large wave of water that broke over the walls of Nara.

The battle within was raging, screeches and spells audible as the cursed fought against the summoned creatures. But the walls of Nara were large and enchanted and their gates remained shut, containing the slaughter.

Ilea silently flew over the walls and into the city, her wings moving in serene quiet before she dived down and into battle.

* * *

Captain Erian steeled herself and took a deep breath as she once more pulled on the stone and earth below. The defenses had to hold, otherwise their whole team would be wiped out.

A retreat was bound to be messy with the high-level creatures teleporting through the large plaza they had been assigned to.

The cursed had been taken out silently and with precise spells and attacks, allowing them around twenty minutes to dig themselves in and create traps and trenches.

It was a well-tested approach against waves of less intelligent monsters, especially undead. With the recent demonic scourge, most imperials were somewhat well-versed in these tactics. Especially the scouts.

She was glad that no high-level nobles had been assigned to her group, allowing them to work in peace and with the efficiency that was needed.

A glorious battle wasn't necessary – they just needed to be safe and secure, taking out the enemy without pause until none were left standing. Her main goal was to prevent casualties, something that looked like it was going to be more and more difficult to accomplish.

She formed another layer of earth over their defenses, making it as dense as possible. The walls of ice, water, and wind helped mitigate a lot of the enemy damage.

Even as an adventurer, she had rarely seen creatures of such a high level, let alone faced them. The plan was to channel many of them into clustered spaces and have them fight the cursed that would be attracted by the noise.

It had sounded possible to take down the monsters themselves, but their spells were dodged or brushed off, only a few of them dying after countless attacks had struck them. Early reports had suggested a level range of two to three hundred, but it turned out that they were much higher than that.

Erian knew each member of her team well and could trust them, even though the enemy was vastly more powerful than expected. They had a few high-ranking officers that could likely face these monsters, but right now, she wasn't sure if any of them would arrive in time.

She watched as hundreds of cursed humans tried to kill the insect-like monsters. It was a terrible slaughter and the result of whatever madness had driven Baralia to sacrifice their own citizens. And yet, it gave them time to deal with this – and, hopefully, to clear the city in time.

“Hold your ground. We will outlast them!” she shouted and summoned a wall to intercept an acid projectile flying straight at them.

Then Erian turned her head, curious at some strange new sounds now added to the screeches and spells.

Almost like... waves?

Erian’s eyes widened when a blinding flash of light and fire enveloped half the square, cursed and high-level monsters alike flaring up like torches before they turned to ash.

She was getting closer to one of the slits on the walls of their defenses, trying to figure out what was happening, when a loud whistle cut the air.

‘ding’ You have heard the call of Lilith. You are paralyzed for two seconds.

I’ve gone mad, she thought, preparing for whatever was to come. Her entire team was paralyzed, dust, debris, and burnt limbs raining down outside.

“Lilith, the one from the songs... what’s she doing here?” one of the others said excitedly.

“She came to save us!”

“Shut your mouths and focus. Don’t assume – watch and think,” Erian hissed, stopping the speculation before it could take root. “Keep your attacks up and add to the defenses while the enemy is distracted.”

Is it really her? The one from the songs? It’s said she’s a Shadow and that she protected Riverwatch against Baralia slavers. Is that why she’s here?

She decided to follow her own advice, adding more defensive structures as she tried to clean out the nearby trenches.

The sound of waves had never left, and now she saw them too. A river flowed over the square, taking with it every creature unfortunate enough to meet its path. Erian thought she saw some of them implode into a gory mess beneath the waves, but it was difficult to say for sure.

A black shadow appeared within the clusters of monsters, thin near-black protrusions whipping through the mass of creatures before the being vanished again.

Dozens of cursed fell, their bodies sliced open or their heads missing. Erian took a step back when she realized the high-level monsters had shared

the same fate, their bodies falling apart like wooden training targets hit by a wind mage.

She felt something brush against her back and turned, her spells ready to strike, when her eyes fell onto a female form covered entirely in hardened ash. Black wisps moved in a mesmerizing pattern as her blue eyes appraised the scene. Broad black wings spread from her back, touching the ceiling of their defensive position.

Erian couldn't breathe or talk. She could see the thin ash protrusions touching everyone in her team and knew that their lives were at the mercy of this being.

[Battle Healer – lvl ??]

"No injuries. Good," the being said, her ash retreating.

Erian pushed past the oppressive feeling and chastised herself for letting her guard down like that.

"You're Lilith," she said.

A spark seemed to light the woman's eyes. "Did you get that from the whistle?"

"Wha... yes. Yes, it said that I heard the call of Lilith," Erian said. She hadn't expected such a casual tone from a being that screamed death.

"Yes! It worked," Lilith rejoiced, her large wings fluttering slightly, apparently not an inconvenience in the tight space.

A gout of water flowed in through one of the slits before a full-fledged person formed from it.

"Square's clear. We should move to the next position," the man said, looking around.

Erian could feel his disdain, knowing not to say a word. *Like some of the nobles in Virilya.*

Compared to him, Lilith seemed downright approachable. She knew the woman was powerful, but now that the initial shock had worn off, her presence made her feel safe. It made her feel like they could win this and clear out this nightmare of a city.

"More reinforcements are on the way," Lilith said. "Have you located the ritual site already?"

"We haven't, ma'am," Erian answered immediately.

Lilith nodded, glanced at the water mage, and vanished.

Erian saw his eyes linger on her before he vanished as well. A shudder went through her. She had met people like him before. The ones who enjoyed having power over others. She was glad this one seemed to have other reasons to be here.

“Don’t just stand there – add to the defenses and prepare for the next battle,” she ordered her team.

With high-level individuals like these arriving in Nara, their chances of defeating the monster populations were much higher, but at the same time, other factors became less predictable.

Either way, their position was secure, and her team was alive.

For now.

* * *

Ilea followed the loudest noises, her wings carrying her through the streets before she entered one of the larger arenas.

Imperial troops had used earth and ice magic to create trenches, traps, and a secure bunker in the middle, two flyers bringing reinforcements. The Wildflower Ants crawling through the arena’s stands shot acid down toward the bunker, mostly just hitting the cursed that continued to run into the burning traps.

The imperials must have put up anti-teleportation enchantments around the bunker as the Pearl Mantis Sires appeared close by but never within their twenty-square-meter structure. The creatures were instantly distracted by the traps and cursed around them, fighting them before a plethora of spells rained in from the slightly elevated central position.

Ilea didn’t wait long to assess the situation, quickly crashing through the beasts, occasionally displacing a few projectiles or pushing monsters into the cursed masses.

Hector basically pressure-washed the whole arena, cleaning out the gore-filled trenches and sprung traps with waves of water to make them usable again.

“Reinforcements,” Ilea said and nodded up to the two flying imperials carrying two more people.

“Needles,” Hector said and shot up.

Ilea followed, blinking toward the two people, using her sphere to pull the wooden projectiles her way. Three Needle Flies were following the soldiers, shooting their wood magic.

Ilea displaced their projectiles and extended her ashen limbs toward the soldiers. They had no time to react to her quick movements.

Only one of them was injured. "Let me heal him," she said, grabbing the man from the dumbfounded soldier.

As Hector took out the Needle Flies, his precision and speed of attack overwhelming their unnaturally quick reactions, Ilea used Displacement on herself and the man she carried to enter the bunker.

No enchantments at all, which means the mantises are too small to teleport in here. Either well-planned or very lucky.

The injured soldier wasn't in critical condition and quickly recovered as Ilea silently checked the bunker's other occupants.

A few cuts, a broken arm... that one wasn't as lucky, she thought, seeing the headless corpse in her sphere. He had been covered with a thin sheet of cloth.

"We didn't expect you," a woman said, her armor a little more decorated than that of the others.

"Any luck finding the ritual site?" Ilea asked.

"Not yet, ma'am. A few specialized teams are looking for it," she said.

Ilea nodded and went back out into the fray.

* * *

It became clear rather quickly that the high towers weren't just a show of wealth.

The lower levels on the ground and below were dirty and cramped. Apartments and stores were close to each other, and the side streets barely had enough space for two people to walk past each other.

While the cursed humans had a low level, there were so many down here that the monsters were quite literally ripped apart after engaging in close-quarter combat. Even a level four hundred Pearl Mantis Sire would eventually die from repeatedly sustained injuries, and they didn't seem to have any sense of self-preservation.

Ilea fought through entire sections of the lower levels, thousands of monsters dying in her wake. She didn't shy away from invading the underground either, the lack of space, visibility, and even partial flooding not slowing her down in the slightest. The city was large – and larger still now that she understood how deep into the ground it went.

Dozens of cursed waiting in ambush within dark rooms were slaughtered in less than a second as she moved past, checking her sphere for any survivors, but her search was unsuccessful. She fought for close to an hour, perhaps longer.

To think a single magic ritual can just wipe out most of the population of an entire city...

She came out into a square close to the center of the city, finding a massive, armored beetle currently in battle with a thirty-meter-long black eel whose mouth was about twice her body's size. Standing on a nearby building was Hector, who waved her way when she noticed him.

The eel was half-wrapped around the beetle that thrashed against its pure muscle, pushing back with summoned rock and debris from the surrounding buildings.

"Which one's yours?" Ilea asked when she appeared next to the man. She needed a break anyway.

"What do you think? Underwater beetle?" Hector asked with a smile. A sphere of water surrounded him entirely.

"Both are triple marks?" Ilea asked. Not because she didn't know but because she was surprised he could summon or control such a being.

"The Class doesn't have a restriction when it comes to levels, as long as the requirements are met and I manage to dominate and bond with a creature," he said. "I like her a lot. The regenerating powers are quite fascinating too."

"A summoner? Your third Class, then."

He didn't comment.

"Sure you don't want to help? She seems to be struggling."

"She wouldn't like me getting between her and her prey," he explained.

The battle caused two large buildings to partially collapse. The eel had difficulties piercing the beetle's stone armor despite her ridiculously large teeth. A few of them even broke upon the defenses, her body cut, pierced, and bludgeoned by earth magic spells as the battle wore on.

But she did regenerate, making the fight much more even than it would have otherwise been. Eventually, the black eel crushed the beetle, working through the armor with her teeth and pure muscle.

“Is she eating the rock?”

“Why not?” Hector asked.

Ilea gave him a look and watched the massive creature gulp down entire sections of its prey before she checked her messages.

‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel reaches lvl 361 – Five stat points awarded

‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel reaches lvl 362 – Five stat points awarded

‘ding’ Kin of Ash reaches lvl 361 – Five stat points awarded

‘ding’ Kin of Ash reaches lvl 362 – Five stat points awarded

‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie reaches lvl 115 – One stat point awarded

...

‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie reaches lvl 132 – One stat point awarded

‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie reaches lvl 133 – One stat point awarded

‘ding’ Absolute Destruction reaches 3rd lvl 28

‘ding’ Sentinel Sphere reaches 3rd lvl 28

‘ding’ Azarinth Perception reaches 3rd lvl 27

‘ding’ Heart of Cinder reaches 3rd lvl 25

‘ding’ Heart of Cinder reaches 3rd lvl 26

‘ding’ Storm of Cinders reaches 3rd lvl 22

‘ding’ Eyes of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 19

‘ding’ Force reaches 2nd lvl 7

...

‘ding’ Force reaches 2nd lvl 12

‘ding’ Flare of Creation reaches 2nd lvl 9

...

‘ding’ Flare of Creation reaches 2nd lvl 13

‘ding’ Displacement reaches 2nd lvl 11

...

‘ding’ Displacement reaches 2nd lvl 14

‘ding’ Space Shift reaches 2nd lvl 4

‘ding’ Space Shift reaches 2nd lvl 5

‘ding’ Identify reaches lvl 15

‘ding’ Meditation reaches 3rd lvl 9

Sometime during the fight, Ilea had noticed a few small fluctuations in the wisps around her. She turned, following the irregularities until she found more. The trail led her to one of the many towers and, finally, into a large round hall at the very top. She checked for dangers and blinked inside.

There were dozens of dead bodies, circles of runes, grass growing through the cracks of the stone floor, and roots growing up the walls. Most interesting to her was the very distorted space all around. Far more than in Mophis.

Ilea killed the few insect creatures that rushed her and went to one of the windows. She summoned the device that Velamyr Ryse had given her and activated it, sending a bright red flare out into the rainy sky.

Then she turned around and focused.

The space around her felt almost alive, twisting and turning, under such tensions that she feared reality could break at any moment.

‘ding’ Space Awareness reaches lvl 18

Maybe that was what it was. Reality breaking apart. And yet it felt strange. As much as she enjoyed a brute-force approach, this felt savage. As if someone was trying to break their way into another world with a sledgehammer. Looking at the distortions and walking around the hall, she understood that it simply didn’t work that way.

‘ding’ Space Awareness reaches lvl 19

She had no idea exactly what the runes did. But with her awareness of space alone, she could tell that whoever had designed and executed this spell had only a little knowledge of the spatial fabric connecting everything.

The only impressive thing about this phenomenon was the sheer amount of power it must have taken to create and sustain it.

This is a rushed job. Were they trying to get away? To summon something here?

Something about the space and how the magic lingered made her pause. She closed her eyes and felt as if she heard a faint whisper.

Others appeared in the hall, the team she had come here with.

And then she realized it. The reason this spell required so much power.

‘ding’ Space Awareness reaches lvl 20

‘ding’ Space Awareness reaches 2nd lvl 1

Passive – Space Awareness – 2nd lvl 1

You become more aware of the density and shifts in the fabric of space itself.

2nd stage: Further understanding of the spatial fabric allows you to manipulate its forces with greater ease and higher intensity. You learn to perceive even the tiniest ripples in space. In the case of active fissures, you find yourself able to peer into the other side.

Category: Body Enhancement – Perception Aura

Ilea breathed out slowly. “They were trying to set up some kind of permanent connection.”

Michael gave her a long look. And then he nodded. “You should have shared your understanding of space magic. And you’re right. Everything I’ve seen so far suggests the goal of bridging two realms on an ongoing basis.”

“I’m learning more as we go. I’m not an expert,” she admitted. “Not every day you get to see something like this.”

He gave a curt nod. “I agree. As horrific as the execution is, the result offers fascinating insights,” he murmured as he inspected the runes.

Ilea left the others to their work, focusing on her new second tier. Felicia joined her at her side for a moment, glancing at her before she went and stood by the general.

She could see hundreds of ripples in the hall. The teleportation spells the others had used to get inside had added more.

Which means I can now see when someone has teleported. Can I figure out where they went?

She would have to do some tests. Right now, it was difficult to make sense of the mess she perceived, but there were definite beginnings and ends she could see, at least here and there.

Ilea tried to peer through the fractures around her, but despite all her resistances and healing, the effort quickly made her nauseous. And it was hard to interpret the blurry and fractured images that came to her.

"I can see a tree on the other side. Feels very strange," she said. "More insect creatures are close by, and there's snow in the distance."

The others perked up but didn't comment.

"This ritual... this fracture, it needs incredible resources to be kept open. As imperfect as it is, I feel like it should've collapsed the moment it was created."

It was a feeling based on her own space magic abilities and what she could perceive with Space Awareness. What she saw here simply didn't make sense.

Michael gave her an intrigued look.

"You've come to the same conclusion?" General Ryse asked him. "There are no more people around here to sacrifice or supply it, and I don't see or feel any mana flowing toward this place from Nara. Quite the contrary."

"It was just a theory," Michael replied. "But yes, it is probable that something on the other side is fueling the connection. Something so powerful that the mana density in a third of the city is measurably higher than it should be."

Ilea blinked. She hadn't noticed that.

Hector joined them as well, the others searching the dead and the tower as Ilea quickly tested her abilities and how they had changed with her new second tier. She had considered hiding her third Class from the others, but since she had used her abilities during the fights, anyone who had kept an eye on her already knew.

She could activate her spells far quicker, greatly increasing their intensity and precision. Their distance and cooldowns weren't affected, however, nor could she move or stop more objects than before. Flare of Creation had become stronger too, but it mostly affected how easily she could cover the ashen constructs connected to herself.

Sometime later, Michael stood up and closed his notebook. "No further insights."

“No suggestions on the next target either,” one of the Dawn Company mages said.

“Then we look through the towers, see what we can find,” Velamyr said. “I can see Mophis being a test ground, but Nara? Some of the nobles at least had to have been informed, or even involved. See if you can find anything. We meet here again in one hour.”

“Can we collapse it now?” Hector asked as another monster came out from a fissure, a Wildflower Ant that was immediately cut apart by a thin beam of water.

“Do it,” Velamyr said when most of the others had already left.

He watched the man as a sphere of water formed around him, a dozen water jets cutting through the stone floor like knives through warm butter. The ritual immediately winked out, the runes no longer supporting this side of the fractured space.

Ilea looked on with fascination as the space stabilized, the wisps returning to normal nearly instantly, as if a vacuum had been filled once more with air.

‘ding’ Space Awareness reaches 2nd lvl 2

A nice farewell gift, she thought before turning to Hector when she heard a strange cracking sound.

He had an excited smile on his face.

“I might have cut a little m—” he started before a loud groan echoed through the hall and the entire room began to slide to the side.

Ilea blinked outside, watching as the whole top third of the large stone tower slid off, falling in almost perfect silence before hundreds of tons of stone crashed onto the city below. A wave of dust billowed through the streets.

“That’s why you don’t build high,” he said, shaking his head sagely.

Ilea spent the hour clearing out more monsters and working on her skills. The single upgrade to her Space Awareness made her third Class far more effective. Displacement now easily sent creatures up into the sky to let them fall to their deaths, whilst Flare of Creation burned everything in its path.

‘ding’ You have defeated [Cursed Baker – lvl 42]

‘ding’ You have defeated [Rock Beetle – lvl 538]

...

‘ding’ You have defeated [Cursed Mage – lvl 82]

‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel reaches lvl 363 – Five stat points awarded

‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel reaches lvl 364 – Five stat points awarded

‘ding’ Kin of Ash reaches lvl 363 – Five stat points awarded

‘ding’ Kin of Ash reaches lvl 364 – Five stat points awarded

‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie reaches lvl 134 – One stat point awarded

...

‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie reaches lvl 156 – One stat point awarded

‘ding’ Azarinth Reversal reaches 3rd lvl 21

‘ding’ Heart of Cinder reaches 3rd lvl 27

‘ding’ Storm of Cinders reaches 3rd lvl 23

‘ding’ Force reaches 2nd lvl 13

...

‘ding’ Force reaches 2nd lvl 16

‘ding’ Flare of Creation reaches 2nd lvl 14

...

‘ding’ Flare of Creation reaches 2nd lvl 17

‘ding’ Displacement reaches 2nd lvl 15

...

‘ding’ Displacement reaches 2nd lvl 17

‘ding’ Space Shift reaches 2nd lvl 6

...

‘ding’ Space Shift reaches 2nd lvl 8

‘ding’ Body of the Valkyrie reaches 2nd lvl 3

‘ding’ Monster Hunter reaches 3rd lvl 4

‘ding’ You have cleared a major human settlement of a city-wide infestation – One Core Skill point awarded

It took two more hours of searching until the others found something. Letters that a noble had failed to destroy, hinting at the next target of the Order of Truth.

They were catching up, and Ilea hoped that this time, they would arrive in time.

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FIFTY-FOUR

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Impressions

A single lone hill stood in the distance, bordered by a large lake. Their group had landed and hidden on a forested hill several kilometers away from their target.

“Wagons going in and out, no blood magic in the air,” Michael said.

Felicia glanced at the various members of the group. They knew that Yinnahall was another target of the Order of Truth, as long as the evidence they had found had not been planted.

“Which means we will infiltrate instead of charge in. Suggestions based on your talents?” Velamyr asked.

Felicia saw Ilea shaking her head. She suppressed a small smile. Her abilities certainly weren’t those of a rogue, but when they had worked together, Ilea had been surprisingly good at getting into places without being seen.

She’s just so genuine all the time. Makes friends so easily.

Even now, Ilea was already an accepted member of this group, despite them all being dangerous individuals with connections to the Golden Lily. Her own presence would likely have already been heavily questioned if not for the fact she had physically arrived with Velamyr Ryse.

“Ah, shit. Infiltration, really? I thought we were in enemy territory,” the Destroyer said.

“You’re free to sit this one out. But if you’re joining, I expect you to have a somewhat low profile. We want to prevent another ritual from taking place,” Velamyr said.

The Destroyer huffed. “Bunch of soldiers and slaves. We could probably lure them out with an attack or just inform them so they attack each other, and we then swoop in to finish off whoever’s left.”

“Too much risk,” a member of the Dawn Company said, receiving a glare in return.

Felicia hadn’t been terribly joyous about the prospect of working with the Dawn Company. But she had to give it to them, they were brave. She didn’t know if she had the guts to challenge the Destroyer so directly. There was something unstable about him that unsettled her. Ilea didn’t seem to care, but she was one of the few here who could face him in battle.

She was glad that Ilea was here, though she wished she could have a moment with her alone. There were so many things she wanted to talk to her about, but more so, she just wanted to catch up. Everything that had happened up to them finding Arthur. She had done so much for them, and Felicia finally felt some agency in her life again.

It felt like her brother had lost his purpose when their father was finally dead, but her? It felt like her world had opened up. She had taken over House Redleaf, and with it, the wealth and power it still retained, as much as it had deteriorated over the decades.

She had a name, power, and connections to even more powerful people. Although with Ilea, it felt different. She was Lilith now, known and feared throughout the lands. Even the Lily had gotten her involved. But to her, she was so much more than that.

Even in the grueling dark of the Taleen dungeon, she had laughed and smiled, joyous curiosity about her abilities and magic overshadowing any difficulty in her path. It was inspiring. It felt like something she would have liked to have herself.

She felt free. Ilea had shown Felicia what freedom looked like. Without the expectations and shackles of high society, the fear of being hunted. And Felicia wanted to thank her for that, even though a part of her feared that Ilea wouldn’t understand the significance of it all.

I’m overthinking this.

Felicia smiled to herself, feeling the winds calm her down. Yeah, Ilea was different.

She focused again when an eagle landed on a nearby branch. One of the Dawn Company mages had a way to control the bird, to use it for

surveillance. As ruthless and dangerous as they were heralded to be, Felicia could at least appreciate their professionalism.

“They burned down all the surrounding forests and have tight security at the gates. Very little cover remains, and the guards are vigilant. They’ve been preparing for an imperial assault for a long time, it seems,” the hooded mage said.

The town wasn’t the largest or most defensible settlement in Baralia. It did, however, house one of the largest populations in the country.

“There were fires recently,” the hooded man added.

“Perhaps news has spread from the east and south,” Velamyr suggested.

“There would be chaos if the general populace knew the true extent of the Order’s rituals.”

“Don’t underestimate the power of fear and centuries-old oppression,” Felicia said. That earned her a glance from the Destroyer. She met his eyes for a moment and held the stare until he smiled.

“The Order of Truth is well-regarded – they’re often the only healers who can take care of ailments in these lands,” Velamyr said. “A revolt wouldn’t necessarily help us. We need to get in and find out if there’s a ritual site.”

“Our information suggests several large Order temples, each heavily guarded with extensive underground structures. I couldn’t detect anything that heavily diverged from the norm,” the mage said.

“I have a suggestion, if nobody else has an easy way for us to get in,” Michael said.

“Oh, great,” the Destroyer said.

Michael summoned a large golden sphere.

He’s not a gold creator, is he?

Felicia dismissed the thought. Any known gold, silver, and copper mages were closely watched by humanity’s various guilds and governments. It was well-known that metal creation wasn’t as easily achieved as, say, wood or fire.

Michael got a few glances from the others, but nobody made a comment, although the Destroyer groaned. She had assumed the Destroyer was at least as influential as Velamyr or Ilea, based on the people she’d met near those ruins, but this just confirmed it.

The general had informed her that although he was still below level three hundred, she should be wary of the man nonetheless. Except for the

Dawn Company and Felicia, each of them was at least as powerful as he was.

Felicia watched as the sphere fanned out, bubbling with life as an intricate tool formed. She knew that gold wasn't the strongest metal, but in the hands of a manipulator, it could surely reach new heights.

"We're drilling a hole?" Ilea asked. "Nice."

She watched as the complex form started spinning, digging instantly into the earth below. All the excess came out of the drill's back.

The one earth mage in the Dawn Company got to work too, levitating the excess earth and rock before he compressed and stored it.

Velamyr was right. This is going to be easy, Felicia thought with a smile, jumping down onto the golden platform to join the mages on top. *He's not just digging a hole to crawl through. This will be big enough for us to stand and walk.*

* * *

Her time estimate had been off. They reached the city after a few hours of digging – and went far deeper than she would have thought possible.

The group was now walking through a tunnel, a few specks of fire illuminating their surroundings as the golden drill worked through the hard stone with ease.

"Stop," the earth mage said.

"The enchantments are still a few meters ahead," the gold mage said, ignoring the warning.

Then a ripple went through the drill as it flattened and compressed, soon retaking its spherical form before it vanished.

"Clean away the stone," he said to the earth mage.

The man nodded and did as ordered.

"They placed an enchanted stone base so far below the city just to prevent entry?" Velamyr asked.

"It's a common approach among some of the northern tribes. They locate vaults and important buildings via tunneling underground before robbing them. Yinnahall has been hit before," a Dawn Company woman said and snickered.

"And you decided to share that information now?" Velamyr said.

She looked at him. "It was still the most promising way. There's a reason they still do it despite everyone knowing their tactics. Enchantments are never perfect."

Velamyr just grunted and joined Michael, who stood below the freed section of the stone.

"Can you do it?" the general asked.

"Yes," Michael said as a spike of gold appeared.

The thing was no larger than Felicia's thumb but looked intricate in design.

It flew upward and slowly pierced the stone.

With her magic perception active, Felicia watched as the glowing spike entered the mundane stone. There was a flash of light as one enchantment was broken.

She hoped they knew what they were doing. As far as she knew, this could have already informed the guards.

"Halt," Velamyr said. "That one's dangerous."

The gold mage didn't react, pushing the small spike in another direction entirely.

How does he know?

The display continued for the better part of ten minutes until the spike finally came back out.

"Dig out the rest," Michael said to the earth mage.

Felicia moved to Velamyr's side and glanced up. "I didn't know you're an expert enchanter too."

"I'm not," he said, smirking a little.

She didn't give him the satisfaction of further inquiry.

"I'm a time mage," he said nonetheless.

And what does that have to do with anything?

"Some things are more certain than others," he said, guessing at her questioning look.

Could he predict which enchantments would activate?

She couldn't see another way for his comments to be relevant. Her perception confirmed that the gold mage had a way of pushing mana into the existing net of enchantments, but while a powerful mana intrusion spell could certainly overwhelm them, it would have to be much better if countermeasures needed to be avoided.

Ilea had glanced over at them.

“I would have preferred your approach,” the Destroyer said.

The wall opened up, and they all teleported into the city’s extensive sewer system.

No guards or soldiers came to intercept them.

One of the Dawn Company mages summoned a variety of sets of armor and cloaks. Neutral colors and Baralia colors. Another masked warrior checked the gear quickly, pushing away a few with brief comments on why they could be identified as unusual in the area.

A few of them had already fanned out through the underground, returning shortly after to inform the group about potential cellars and hideouts they could use to enter or regroup.

Everyone changed into the provided gear and moved into one of the hideouts, where a map was quickly affixed to one of the walls.

They needed information first and foremost. Everything they knew about Yinnahall came from before the war had started. The Order of Truth still operated in this city, though – that much they could already confirm.

“Ritual sites, high-level priests, central temples, and hideouts. That’s the main thing we should focus on for now,” Velamyr said. “We meet back here in five hours. Get familiar with the city. They’re expecting a frontal assault of Empire troops, but don’t take too many risks. Small teams.”

The Destroyer started leaving, glancing back at Ilea. “You heard the man. Come on, we might even find some treasure.” He didn’t wait for her.

Ilea glanced at Felicia.

“If you can, keep an eye on him. We don’t want to be discovered,” General Ryse said.

“No promises,” Ilea said and disappeared.

The Dawn Company split up into teams, leaving Felicia, Michael, and Velamyr alone.

Infiltrating an enemy city.

She thought back to her long journey with Edwin and Aliana. It felt different now. For once, she felt ready, in control.

Felicia allowed herself a little smile, focusing as she followed the two high-level mages.

FIFTY-FIVE

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Infiltration

Ilea followed Hector out through a sewer grate, the two of them stepping out into a dark alley. She saw a few rats scurry away at the noise. A man lay passed out at the end of the dank passageway. The air was hot and stuffy.

“Still happy we found a city that hasn’t been destroyed yet?” Hector asked as he made his way toward the busier street the alley opened onto.

She didn’t comment as she followed him out onto a busy road. Immediately, she could feel the tension in the air. There were a lot of people moving around looking agitated, glancing at each other with suspicion and fear. Shouts came from farther down the road, distant guards watching everything from the thirty-meter-high walls surrounding the city.

Most everyone avoided their eyes.

It smelled of sweat and misery.

“Absolutely lovely. Come on, let’s find something to drink,” Hector said.

Ilea followed silently, watching the stream of people through her sphere. *There’s not enough food in this city.*

Hector found a bar a few minutes later, most of the chairs already occupied by people smoking or drinking, talking amongst each other, or quietly people-watching.

“Is there a problem, sir?” asked the barkeep, a burly bald man in his forties.

“Just here for a drink, relax,” Hector said and pointed at a bottle.

“You got coin?”

Hector laughed and then summoned a few.

“Is it always this busy?” Ilea asked. “Some ale for me.” She summoned a few copper coins and set them down on the bar.

The barkeep gave her a look over. “You two new in the city?”

“Yeah. Just arrived this morning,” Ilea said.

“It’s busy. Always been busy, but with the Empire’s invasion, things have gotten worse. Plenty looking for a safe place to hide. And now we have too many people. Already had too many people.”

“I heard the Empire took a few cities already, slaughtered everyone inside,” another man said, joining the conversation uninvited. “Savages, I tell you.”

Ilea turned his way. He stank of alcohol, even from a few meters away. “Some of my officers say that we attacked them first.”

He sneered. “I’d be surprised if they did something that sensible. Trust me, girl, the Empire of Lys doesn’t need a reason to invade a country. Bunch of leeches and thieves.”

Ilea cocked her head. “There was a year-long siege of Virilya.”

He waved her off. “You shouldn’t trust everyone so easily.”

Hector laughed. “I tell her the same all the time. Women just don’t listen, you know how it is.”

Ilea ground her teeth. She tried to breathe slowly, healing flowing through her mind as a few of the men in the bar cackled or grinned. He was trying to provoke her. And it was working.

“Careful, Hector.”

He narrowed his eyes, smiling at her with devious joy. “What? You’re going to fight me? You know you can’t kill me. But sure, feel free. How many would die, though? The streets seemed pretty packed. And every guard and soldier would suddenly be aware of us. Let’s just drink a bit and see what else we can find in this city, deal?”

Ilea stood up and left. There was really no reason why she had to listen to him for another minute.

Instead, she walked down the street and looked around. She had no real skill at infiltration or information gathering, but she could hear and see a lot better than most. And she could see through walls as well.

“Come on, don’t be like that. I was just joking around. You’re such a lightweight for how strong you are.”

Ilea turned around, standing amidst a throng of people as she looked at Hector in his officer disguise. “I don’t hear you saying sorry. I hear that

you've been an asshole and it's my fault. Is that right?"

"You're expecting an apology? What are you, four years old? Grow the f—"

Ilea vanished, using both of her teleportation spells to move through the city. She had no doubt he could probably track her down eventually, but she wouldn't make it easy for him.

She took a deep breath when she reached a dark cellar after dozens of teleports.

"What an absolute shit bag."

And here the Lily almost had me believing they were doing something good.

Healing circled through her mind. "I guess the others are. And he did help clear the other cities."

Still, he's just so insufferable. And I bet everyone else is scared of him because of his personal power.

Who would even push back? And he's probably interested in me because I'm his match in terms of power. No wonder Ryse wanted me to babysit him.

Ilea wondered why Hector was even here. Was he just bored? It didn't really feel like he really cared about the gold, nor about the people or the rituals.

Well, it is what it is. Let's try and find out something about this ritual.

She continued teleporting through cellars, checking the vicinity through her sphere. Most houses looked pretty packed, with people sleeping, cooking, playing games, or working. Now that she was off the streets, it didn't feel so different from Ravenhall or Riverwatch, just very packed, poorer, and with the threat of war looming over their heads.

Most people seemed frustrated and desperate, but she saw a lot of care and tenderness as well, a lot of working hard to take care of each other even though the situation was difficult.

Appearing at the edge of a large square, she saw a bunch of merchants selling their wares and a few selling people. Ilea couldn't help but cast an eye over the slaves on display. Some looked ashamed, some entirely dejected, and others glared around with anger in their eyes.

Ilea felt her temperature rise. It was impossible to accept in her mind. The fact that people were sold like goods. The fact that it seemed normal here. People were being sold next to oranges and exotic rugs.

There had always been inequality in her life. Back on Earth, almost everything depended on where you were born, who your parents were, what kind of environment you grew up in. Sure, there was always wiggle room, and if you worked hard and made the right decisions, maybe things could change, but it was obvious that things weren't equal.

But here? In a world where literally everyone could wield magic, could work to increase the power of their Class, it just felt so bleak to see something so obviously evil as slavery. To take even the last shred of agency from someone.

She switched into more casual clothes from her necklace and then teleported. She sat down next to a few people who were watching the square. Their clothing looked worn, and they had blisters on their hands and feet.

It was strange to be here. Exploring Riverwatch or any of the other cities she'd been to had always been exciting. Seeing the different shops, the adventurers coming and going, people talking and enjoying themselves. This was the first place that she'd visited in Elos that just sucked.

In any other circumstance, she would have simply left again, but she was here with a team of high-level people trying to stop a blood magic ritual that would wipe out everyone in this entire city.

That was why it felt strange. Because of the power she wielded. She could go up to the slave traders and simply kill them all. But then, she would traumatize everyone else here. The slaves would be killed if the soldiers found out. She would have to transport them out of the country.

At least I would give them a chance.

Maybe she would have done something. But if the Order of Truth found out they were here, they might accelerate their plans.

"You seem troubled," an older man sitting close to her said. He was clad in rags that might once have been common work clothes and had leathery, liver-spotted skin. His eyes were kind, though.

She smiled at him. "Only just arrived in the city. It's a lot to take in."

He returned the smile and nodded. "Lots of people are scared. Dangerous rumors going around. The war is coming closer, and people feel stuck. Things will change, probably, and nobody really knows in what way. You're a healer, a great boon. You should visit again once things have calmed down. It can be quite charming, if you can believe it."

"You grew up here?"

“Yes. Lived here my entire life. I used to work at a bakery down the street, but the owner left when things started to become more tense. Lots of break-ins, and flour became more and more expensive. Can’t exactly blame him. He was just looking out for himself and his people.”

“You don’t have a baker Class,” Ilea noted. Identify showed him as a level twenty fighter.

He gave her a long look. “You’re not from around here, are you?” He raised a hand as if to placate her. “Don’t worry. I won’t make trouble for you. Just think it’s interesting.”

She wondered if she should vanish, but he seemed genuine enough. He was from around here, one of the people the Order would sacrifice for their ritual. She was interested in what he had to say.

“I’m not from around here,” she admitted. “Where I’m from, people can choose their Classes and level them freely. Is that not the case here?”

“Sort of. I suppose it depends on what you’re willing to do, what part of the city you were born in, who your family is. And how much coin you have. If you take a Class or level too much, others might take notice.

“Sure, if you’re not a slave, you can go out there into the wilderness or join the army, but a lot of risk comes with that. If you want the safety of the walls, you have to integrate. I’m happy for you, that you got to choose your path.”

“I’m Ilea. It’s nice to meet you.” She offered her hand.

He grabbed it. “I’m Iven. Good to meet you, Ilea. So, if I may ask, what brings you to our city?”

“Are there any rumors about Odiah or Nara?”

“A few.” His tone had become tense, and he was talking more quietly.

“A few? Anything about blood rituals?”

“Rumors at best.”

“We don’t have to talk about it if it’s uncomfortable.”

“Oh, it’s not uncomfortable, it’s dangerous. And I don’t know if I can trust you, no offense. Everyone is a little tense, and some people don’t like it when authority is questioned.” He looked around nervously.

“I’d like to continue this conversation.” She grabbed his hand again and summoned her Shadow badge. “Do you know what this is? You can answer quietly, I can hear you.”

His surprised grunt was turned into a fake cough. “You’ve come a long way,” he whispered, almost inaudibly.

“I have. And I’m here to stop something bad from happening.”

They were quiet for a moment. Merchants were shouting, and a few guards were pushing through the crowd with angry glares. They passed a few moments later. She watched Iven looking at his hand before he finally glanced at her.

“The rumors?” she asked.

He nodded slowly. “I’ve heard a lot in my time. And I know when things are made up. I assumed they lost the cities to the Empire, but they’re too proud to admit that we’re losing the war. Whatever stories they tell, I don’t believe the Empire would kill entire cities.”

“What’s your opinion of the Order of Truth?”

“They’re the only healers we have. I’ve sometimes wished they were less expensive, but some of them are good people. Something I can’t say about the guard – or many of those who own others.”

“That’s everything you have? You must have heard rumors over the years and decades. What are the worst things you’ve heard?”

He talked even more quietly. “Sacrifices. Blood magic. Healers promising aid, luring unsuspecting victims. They’re just rumors, though, and there are rumors about everyone and everything.”

“You said there were good people there. You don’t think they would do something like that? Blood rituals, sacrifices, and the like?”

He nodded. “Yeah. Nicholas. He’s a priest, and it’s well known in the streets that he will heal those without means. Can’t be too obvious, of course, or he’d be removed. One time, something bad got in my eye. Nearly lost it. I was desperate, and I joined the desperate.

“He healed me and dozens of others. He only told us to be quiet about it. Some weren’t, of course, but he’s still around. I don’t know if the higher-ups know about him. They probably do and simply don’t care, as long as they keep their power.”

“He couldn’t have fooled you? Secretly had other intentions?”

“That was eight years ago, Ilea. Not heard a bad word about him. Lots of fucked-up people in this city. But there are good ones too. And I tell you, that’s not easy.”

“Where could I meet him?”

Getting in touch with someone from the Order itself would be a big risk, but she simply didn’t believe that every member was willing to sacrifice

entire cities for their personal benefit or whatever goal they had. Worst case scenario, she would take him out herself.

Iven looked at her in a strange way then. “You said you came here to stop something bad from happening. You wield power? Proper power, I mean. You could fight monsters and men?”

She gave him a slight nod.

“I feel that I can trust you, but I’ve been fooled before.”

“I can pay for the information, if that’s what you want.”

He scoffed, looking offended. “I don’t want your coin, healer.”

“No offense meant, Iven. That’s just how it usually goes. What can I do to earn your trust?”

He looked at her for a while, his eyes taking on a dangerous glint. “I’ve lived in Yinnahall for a long time. I have seen a lot, heard a lot. I’ve felt anger. I’ve felt powerless, felt hurt, felt ashamed. If you came here to do good, prove it. There are people here who are feared, who do... unspeakable things to those they see as beneath them.”

“You want me to kill people?”

He seemed surprised to hear it said so bluntly. But then he seemed to steel himself and nodded.

“You came to stop something bad from happening in the future. There are bad things happening right now. Things you could stop.”

“I’m here. Show me the way, and I’ll see for myself. I won’t kill someone just because of your word. And I’m trying not to be discovered. The entire city is at stake.”

“Oh, you don’t need to worry about discovery. If anything, more of us would be willing to help.”

“Who is ‘us’, exactly?”

His mouth changed into a thin smile. “The poor. The unfortunate. The weak and the powerless.”

Ilea stood up and looked around. “Lead the way then, Iven. I’ll be following.”

With that, she vanished.

* * *

Iven couldn’t quite believe what was happening.

Ilea, if that really was her name, was a Shadow. An actual Shadow, here on some important mission. She hadn't just talked to him either – now she was willing to *do* something for him.

Walking through the streets he had known his whole life, he felt a tension and excitement that he had never felt before.

Was this really happening?

Was he doing the right thing? It was stupid, wasn't it? If anyone found out, he would be dead. And it wouldn't be an easy death either.

And yet, he kept on walking, as if there was no other way, no other choice. He didn't believe in fate. There were way too many horrible and unfair things happening all over. It made him believe in nothing but chaos, and it made him appreciate the good days.

But now, fate, or perhaps chaos, was knocking. And he could tell that it wouldn't come knocking again. This was his opportunity to finally send something back to the people who had remained untouchable and outside any supervision for far too long.

He wouldn't miss this chance. There were too many people he owed it to. Too many people murdered, degraded, abused, and thrown aside.

He tried to remain hidden among the crowds. All the refugees and people seeking a safe haven during the war made it easier for him to get into the higher-class districts. He was already risking a beating, but he remembered that badge, the way she had looked at him when he'd asked if she had power. He felt safe.

The thought was amusing. Maybe it was the first time in his life he'd actually felt safe.

There was a strange feeling in his stomach. He hadn't expected such a reaction, and he pushed down the grief and the anger that now rose up.

Iven stopped in front of the Blue Mansion, the seat of Lady Riva. It was suicide just to stand here, given the lack of wealth and influence he had. He gulped and turned around.

Ilea was there, standing right behind him, her eyes on the black door.

"Is this the place?"

He gave her a weak nod.

"I'll see what I find. You should leave. Wait for me where I found you."

Iven turned and felt a shiver go down his back. That was it? No other questions?

He looked back, but she was already gone.

* * *

There were enchantments protecting the house from intrusion, but it didn't matter much when people opened the windows to let in fresh air. Ilea supposed whoever owned this place felt confident that nobody would even try to intrude.

She entered with Displacement, her sphere and range enough to allow her to use an empty office of the adjacent building as a starting point.

It seemed housing wasn't much of a problem in this part of town. The interior of the room she entered looked fancy, with a large double bed and nice furniture. All the walls were painted blue. There was something strange in the air that she wouldn't have noticed without all the recent exposure.

Blood magic.

The two floors above ground were empty other than for a few cooks in the kitchen. She didn't miss the literal chains that kept them in the room.

Perhaps if she had been below level one hundred, she would have missed the underground. Some effort had been put into hiding it all away.

And there was a lot to hide away.

Broad stone stairs led down into what looked like an amphitheater. Ilea could hear the noise as soon as she appeared below. And the smells. Smoke, blood, and sex.

Not much of a surprise to her. Nor was the single guard that protected the entrance. He hadn't reacted yet, which meant he had no way to detect her, or perhaps she was simply out of range.

Further below, she could see iron cages populated by both monsters and people. She saw rooms full of torturing devices, a few bodies left to rot. Perhaps to show whoever was put in there what was waiting for them, or maybe it was simply due to negligence.

Ilea didn't much care. Her choice was made with that sight alone.

She teleported down to the cages. A large stone room housed them. The smell was a lot to take in.

The growling monsters that had been caged next to the cringing slaves quieted, their hunger and anticipation snuffed out. Soft whimpers echoed as they felt her presence. Most of the humans didn't even notice her, and she could see that the guard hadn't either, still smoking at his post.

First, she entered the cage with the slaves, or perhaps simply captives, and spread out her ash, healing everyone without looking too closely at

their injuries. Iven had been right. Here, she could let off some steam.

She heard the shouts and cheers from outside, where a single man was fighting off two lion-like creatures with a plank of wood. She could hear the laughter, the bets, the disdain.

Ilea breathed in deep, pushing down the anger that she felt.

“Who... who are you?” one of the prisoners asked.

She smiled at the girl. A teenager still, her fate sealed at such a young age. “I’m Lilith,” she said, appearing within the monster cage. It was a quick and quiet affair, the highest-level beast barely at two hundred.

If they’d had anything more dangerous down here, whoever was in charge might actually have had to put in some effort to contain them. Or bear some risk of an injury, or even death. It all reeked of weakness and entitlement.

Ilea changed back into her disguise and blinked up into the stands, summoning a bottle of ale as she watched the people around her and the fight continuing below. Howls of bloodlust and sighs of boredom surrounded her. She wasn’t sure which was worse, given the man with the wooden plank was already broken and bleeding.

There were a few people who were more gaudy and prominent than others, but most everyone here was well-dressed. And on drugs. Dilated pupils, frothing mouths, glazed or rabid expressions – so many here were under some sort of chemical effect.

She was more concerned about those who weren’t, whose eyes shone without the need for enhancement, who were breathing hard or bellowing with the excitement or joy they were deriving from the impromptu execution.

So much wealth, so much power, to choose their own paths, to create something. And yet, they were here. Ilea breathed slowly now, her jaw clenched.

The man below wouldn’t last much longer.

* * *

Diam felt his arms weaken. He was already bleeding from a number of places, and he was pretty sure his ribs were broken too. Things weren’t looking promising. He knew that even if he won this fight, it wouldn’t

change a thing. But he had made his peace and promised himself that Lady Riva wouldn't see him cower.

He had become a rogue, worked on his Class and skills without permission, and been discovered. That was that. One girl he shouldn't have trusted and it was over. If she really had been the one to rat him out. He'd never know for sure. It didn't matter now.

He could feel his rage, and he knew his end was near. But in the end, he had chosen to stand. Better to die like this than to live in fear and servitude for the rest of his life.

"Slave," Lady Riva's voice rang out, and the beasts stilled, prowling now.

The woman sat on her stone throne, looking down at him with disinterest. Her flowing silk gown was worth more than most in this city would make in a lifetime. Though few earned anything but pain from their service.

Her lip curled languidly as she spoke. "If you kneel and beg for your life, we might reconsider your punishment."

Diam was about to retort when two of her guards brought out a young woman.

They couldn't have known about her. How would they know? I told nobody.

It dawned on him then. They had known about him for a while, had followed and watched him. Throughout all his efforts. It had likely been amusing to them, a game.

He felt the blood drain from his life. He had made his decision... but with her here?

Don't believe them. Don't hope. They will kill both of you either way.

He spat on the floor and glared at Lady Riva. And then he looked at Neya. Her head was down, her black hair spilling toward the floor like water. She didn't look conscious. He wouldn't even get to see her bright green eyes one last time or hear her ridiculous laugh.

Still, she would have told him to fight. So he met the Lady's gaze even as every fiber of his being warned him not to. He would not give her what she wanted.

Lady Riva stood up from her throne and walked over to Neya, a dagger appearing in her hand. Her eyes flashed with hunger as Diam flinched

involuntarily. She slowly circled a prominent neck vein with the blade.
“You might want to—”

“Quiet.”

Someone else had spoken, and the entire amphitheater went silent, frozen entirely. The words had been curt – cold, even.

You have heard the challenge of a powerful healer. You are paralyzed for three seconds.

Diam watched as someone appeared next to Lady Riva, grabbed her dagger, and rammed it through her head three times before she stabbed her neck as well.

“Let’s see how all of you hold up in a fight.”

Shouts and screams started to fill the air, and Diam dove to the floor as magic was cast from all directions.

Looking up, he saw only a blur of gray and black, spells and noises snuffed out as he focused on the two monsters facing him. Only now did he see that two black spears had already nailed their bodies to the ground.

When he looked up again to try and spot Neya, the last sounds of battle had already come to a stop.

Someone appeared to his left, and he turned slowly, coming face to face with a reaper of ash and death. One of the tendrils on her back reached out slowly and touched his chest. He waited for it to pierce his heart. He didn’t dare move.

And then he felt it. Healing magic flowed through him, removing all his injuries and bruises in mere seconds.

“I commend your bravery. What is your name, warrior?”

He swallowed the fear and answered.

* * *

Iven finally made it back to his usual spot. He did a double take and nearly froze when he saw her standing there. She looked the same as she had before.

No, not exactly the same. Before, she had looked conflicted, tense. Now, there was something else about her. A strange calm. He couldn’t quite

place it, but he felt uncertain if he should approach her. She felt dangerous.

Ilea saw him and smiled, though it didn't reach her eyes.

She walked up to him. "Walk with me for a moment."

He didn't question her as he followed, not even when they entered a dark side alley. Before he could reconsider his position, something appeared in her hand.

It was a blue glass dagger.

Iven froze. She was going to kill him.

Then he realized what it meant. He had heard the rumors. He knew who the dagger belonged to.

"I also took her head if you want to see it."

His breath caught in his throat, but after a moment, he managed to speak again. "No. No, that won't be necessary."

What has she done?

What have I done?

"Do you want to have it? The dagger, I mean."

He shook his head. And then he watched her close her fist, the weapon shattering into hundreds of pieces.

Just like that, decades of fear and oppression by one awful woman were finally brought to an end by another woman he had met by chance on the street.

Iven couldn't help but chuckle, and then laugh, at the absurdity of it all. How easy this had seemed for her. How easy it had been for Lady Riva too. To get away with it all.

Until now.

At some point, his laughter had turned into sobs. "It doesn't make any sense. It just doesn't make any sense."

"May I?" Ilea asked, standing close to him now with a hand hovering next to his.

He didn't know what she meant but nodded anyway. And then he felt it, not just the warmth of her hand holding his, but the warmth that spread through his chest and his mind.

He felt himself calm, not quite as overwhelmed as before. He blinked his eyes and looked at her. Just another girl, another woman, another healer.

"Do you think you can tell me where I can find this Nicholas you mentioned?"

Iven nodded.

“Good. Once we’re done here, I might be able to take an hour or two off. If I find you at your spot, I could help out with a few more... rumors... while I’m around.”

Her eyes were cold, hard. He almost flinched, but he knew what she had done.

And he found that he trusted her.

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Healer

The spot that Iven showed her didn't stand out much. It wasn't a massive temple or church-like building but just another house among many. Two stories of rough-hewn stone and a much-repaired clay tile roof. The cramped nearby streets and litter-strewn squares made her assume this wasn't the best part of town either. A humble abode.

Maybe that's why nobody's bothered by him actually helping people.

Ilea skipped the queue of injured beggars lined up outside awaiting treatment. This garnered her a few glares before she extended her ash and healed all of them. She still wore her disguise, so she wasn't too worried. For all they knew, Nicholas, or one of his associates, had just healed them.

There were a few mutters of surprise, but people in their situation knew not to look a gift horse in the mouth. So they dispersed rather quickly, a few softly calling their thanks.

The rickety wooden door of the house opened, and a young woman dressed in a simple brown robe with white hair and deep red eyes glanced out. "You're next?"

[Healer – lvl 32]

She froze as she caught sight of Ilea before she slammed the door shut.
Not fast enough.

Ilea had already blinked inside, amused by the enchantments flashing to life behind her.

“I was told this is where a certain Acolyte Nicholas resides. Can you show me the way?”

The woman staggered back a few steps, nearly falling before she caught herself. “Who are you? Are you with the Order? There is a line of people waiting to receive treatment outside. Acolyte Nicholas is busy.”

“I healed them already, and no, I’m not with the Order of Truth.”

Ilea checked the building with her sphere, finding a middle-aged man sitting at a desk in an office upstairs. She raised her eyebrows when she saw a few armored people sitting in a room adjacent to him. They weren’t in army gear – at least, it didn’t look like that to her.

Protection?

It looked like he was writing a letter. The additional people added some difficulty to what she wanted to accomplish here.

She didn’t want things to escalate based on what she’d heard about him, but the stakes were simply too high not to risk it, and this was the only lead she had. She wasn’t about to infiltrate Order temples or facilities, but she could talk to people and see if someone was willing to help.

Because while there were power-hungry lunatics setting up a fucked-up ritual, she had no doubt in her mind that there were also people around with at least some shreds of empathy.

The white-haired woman blocked her path. “Listen, you can’t just come in here, even if you really did heal them.”

Ilea sighed, rolling her eyes. “No, you listen. If I wanted help, I would have waited in line. If I wanted to do harm, we wouldn’t be talking right now. I’m here to have a chat. And time is of the essence. Will you bring me to Nicholas? I’m pretty sure what I have to say will be of interest to him.”

Ilea waited, switching out her disguise for some casual clothes before her ashen armor started forming slowly.

The young healer stumbled backward, nearly knocking over a small vase of flowers some thankful patron must have left behind. She was obviously overwhelmed.

“Why don’t you lead the way? I’m sure those armored fighters upstairs will be able to help out if needed.”

The healer nodded weakly at the mention of the fighters, glancing at her before she started moving upstairs. Ilea followed.

The assistant healer, which was what Ilea assumed the white-haired woman was, stopped at the doorway leading to the warriors. One of them

slowly stood up, hand on the pommel of his sword. The others noticed and prepared for a fight.

“I’m not here for a fight,” Ilea said, loud enough for the others to hear. She could see that Nicholas perked up as well.

“There... there is a healer here,” the assistant said. “She wants to speak to Nicholas.”

Ilea dropped her armor and walked into the open, her hands visible.

[Warrior – lvl 103]

[Warrior – lvl 111]

[Warrior – lvl 83]

The warriors were clad in somewhat high-quality armor. Simple steel but well-made. The mace, hammer, and falchion they wielded were held with casual ease, their muscles were tense, and their heart rates were calm.

Nicholas stood up and crossed the room to open the door. “Come inside. I hope you don’t mind the guards, I don’t know you, after all.”

[Healer – lvl 120]

The man looked tired, an uncertain tilt to his lips as he assessed Ilea. His eyes were a dark brown, his head flawlessly shaved. A broad jaw and thick black brows were the major defining features of his face, his clothes no more than simple robes like those of his assistant.

Ilea gave him a slight nod. “You must be Nicholas of the Order of Truth. I’ve heard good things about you.”

He blinked a few times and then went back to his desk to sit down.

“I didn’t expect a visitor today. And what kind of things have you heard exactly? It’s rare to be visited by such a high-ranking member of another order.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t set up an appointment. It was urgent.”

Ilea went into the room and stood facing the table, the three warriors following her, their hands close to their weapons. They took up positions behind her and next to Nicholas. One of them closed the door.

“I don’t mind the guards, but I’d like to have the girl in here too. I would prefer it if nobody heard about this meeting.”

Nicholas gave her a look. "You understand I don't trust you?"

"Your city and your people are in immediate danger. One of the people you treated in the past sent me your way. I told him I was here to help, and he didn't trust me either, so to prove that I *am* here to help, he led me to the Blue Mansion."

The warriors tensed up at that, one of them gritting her teeth, another one cursing in a language Ilea didn't speak.

Nicholas's eyes were hard. "Go on."

Ilea wasn't sure what else to do, so she summoned the head she had taken and held it out for them to see.

Two of the guards drew their weapons, and the third froze as a gasp stuck in his throat.

Nicholas stayed entirely calm.

"Lady Riva, I believe," Ilea said.

"Yes, I can see that. You'd better put that away before her blood gets on my carpet. Tevian, go and get Rida."

The young healer joined them a moment later, by which time the head was already back in Ilea's storage item.

Nicholas breathed in deep. "Who are you? And why are you here?"

* * *

Tevian watched the intruder carefully. This woman wasn't from here, not one of their allies, but she had yet to reveal if she was their enemy. It was unsettling how calm she seemed, dressed so casually. If she hadn't seen Riva's head a moment earlier, she wouldn't have believed it.

She was confident in her combat abilities, in her ability to protect Nicholas, but something about this woman told her it would be a difficult fight.

Of course it would be, she killed that monster Riva.

"My name is Lilith. One of the founders of the Medic Sentinel Corps."

Tevian glanced at Oro and Vianar. The name was familiar, but she wasn't sure where she'd heard it before.

"The Shadow that supposedly fought off Lord Harken and his army?" Oro asked, awe in his voice.

“You really think a ridiculous rumor like that is true?” Vianar asked, derision in his.

“I’ve heard few things about your Order, but I’ve talked to people who were there in Riverwatch,” Nicholas said. “And I believe their word.”

He gestured at Tevian and the others, signaling that they should not attack under any circumstances.

Tevian relaxed somewhat. An ally, then, or at least so powerful as to make things moot.

“I defended Riverwatch because Lord Harken came to attack it,” Lilith said. “I’m not here because of him or because of the war necessarily.”

Nicholas frowned at that. “Then why have you come?”

Tevian leaned in to listen. Bodyguard duty was rarely this interesting.

* * *

Ilea led the group down through the sewers. All of them had wanted to join. Of the five, she wasn’t surprised that Nicholas had been the easiest to convince. She supposed he had some idea about the corruption in his order, though he hadn’t taken the news very well and wanted to see more evidence.

It seemed that Lady Riva had been quite infamous, so her demise made Ileā a lot more trustworthy. Or perhaps it was the rumors that surrounded Lilith. Probably a bit of both, mixed with Nicholas’s knowledge of what some of his colleagues and superiors were capable of.

“I will protect you all if I can, but I’m not the leader of this operation,” Ileā said when they rounded another corner, getting closer to the meeting point.

A member of the Dawn Company intercepted them shortly after, giving them a long look before she nodded at Ileā.

A few minutes later, they were with the others. Hector wasn’t there. Nor was Velamyr’s group, which resulted in a few minutes of tense waiting before the latter group showed up.

General Ryse looked at Ileā’s group and then at her.

“I looked around the city, talked to some people, and got a tip,” Ileā said. “This here is Nicholas, acolyte of the Order of Truth. He has a long-standing reputation for healing those in need without payment. The warriors

are his bodyguards, and the woman is a healer working under him. I've been with them since I introduced myself to him. He may be willing to cooperate and share what he knows."

"An acolyte won't know a whole lot, but it may be useful. Well done," Velamyr said.

"I've been around for a long time, and while I'm not included in the inner circles, I know about a lot of things going on in this city," Nicholas said. The others were quiet, taking in the high-level group. "Lilith claims that our Order is responsible for blood rituals sacrificing much of the populace of Odiah, Mophis, and Nara. I wish to see proof. If you have any. If what you claim is true, I will share everything I know."

"Very well. Either way, you will remain here until we have secured and destroyed the ritual site. Let us see where we stand." Velamyr summoned a large table, various maps and documents appearing on it. He grabbed a few of them and held them out to Nicholas. "Correspondence, reports, and rune and site documentation. Let me know if this is enough to convince you."

Nicholas took everything and moved a few meters away to read them with his group.

One of the Dawn Company mages stepped forward. "We have checked various high-profile Order locations and are tailing a few high-ranking members. No definite locations so far, but we've narrowed things down." He added a few marks to the main map of the city on the wall of the hideout. "The few infiltrations we have managed have yielded no definite results, but I'm still waiting for three members to return.

"We have found evidence that some of the higher nobility left the city somewhat recently. A few letters suggest they were warned and, in turn, warned a few others of some coming calamity, though details remain sparse.

"I suggest we start apprehending some of the targets soon for interrogation. And if we don't get results in a few hours, we should become more aggressive with infiltrations."

Nicholas made a strange sound. He wiped at his eyes, lowering the letter in his hand. "It fits. All of it. The recent and secret arrival of Elder Aywos. Additional guards allocated to temples. All the earth mages they hired and bought."

"The evidence convinced you?" Ilea asked.

“The letters are genuine. I’m no blood mage, and while I know quite a bit about runes, all of this is far beyond me. Some of the itemization lists you have recovered, however, are genuine, and the preparations they allude to match some recent developments in Yinnahall. I hope you’re wrong, but something big is being prepared here. Something similar to whatever the Order prepared in those fallen cities.”

He breathed out and closed his eyes for a moment before he opened them again with focus. “The Order is far more split in Yinnahall than in some of the other cities. Connections with the high nobility are far less extensive. The location will be underground, hidden, and newly built. I can give you a few names. They will know things.”

“You’re just an acolyte. Why would you know all this?” General Ryse asked.

“Because for those without connections, wealth, and power, it’s good to know what kind of important people walk the streets. It’s good to know if a sudden high-paying job for earth mages of any level is safe to take. And there’s always interest in knowing where someone dear to you got sold to.

“I’ve been wondering why the presence of guards in the streets hasn’t increased despite the influx of refugees. It’s not the usual approach for local nobility to protect only their property. Our work has met suspiciously little resistance lately, but if the city is doomed either way, why would it matter?”

Felicia glanced at Ilea with raised eyebrows. “I didn’t expect him to be that impressive,” she said.

“I know this city. And I know the Order of Truth. Let me start with locations. We need to find the builders,” Nicholas said and stepped up to the map. “May the gods have mercy on us all.”

* * *

Ilea’s skill set didn’t add a whole lot to what followed. She was mainly adding protection in case it was needed. But at least she wasn’t alone. She looked out the window of an empty shop, Felicia leaning on the opposite wall. Velamyr and a few of the Dawn Company were having a chat with a middleman for construction work, all still visible within her sphere in the room across the street.

“So, you’re already a major?”

Felicia glanced at her, her yellow eyes taking her in. “You’re one to talk. Lilith. Didn’t expect to meet you in all this.”

“How are the others?”

“So-so. Aliana is well. It wasn’t easy for her during the siege, but now that things have begun to stabilize in the capital, she’s moved into our mansion. She’s taking care of some minor damage, and she’s shown interest in taking over some of the Redleaf business. She’s asked about Kyrian a few times.”

Ilea leaned her head against the wall behind her. “No news, I’m afraid. We know he’s alive, and we’re working on getting to him, but I don’t know how long it will take. I’ll let him know someone is waiting for him once I do meet him.”

“Thank you. I feel some measure of guilt. Edwin took her in, but I know it was mostly due to her usefulness. And you three were there because of Trian’s mission. But it’s good to know he’s still alive. Trian doing okay as well?”

“He’s busying himself, I suppose. Haven’t talked much about his family since everything happened. He’s doing a lot of good work, though. We founded a healing organization together.”

Felicia’s eyes bulged. “That really was you!”

Ilea grinned. “Yours truly. We recently unlocked the first healing Classes too.”

“I’ll keep that to myself. But that is awesome! I’m so happy for you – and that Trian got so involved with it.”

Ilea blinked her eyes. Hearing Felicia talk like this reminded her of her time in the Taleen dungeon. She had seemed so carefree. *A bit distant too, I guess.* She seemed a lot more mature now.

“Have you been okay? After everything that happened. I can tell you got deep into the nobility and Lys politics stuff.”

Felicia looked at her and then laughed. “Politics stuff? Now I remember why I enjoyed our time together so much. You’re literally on a mission with likely one of the most powerful secret organizations to stop a blood ritual from wiping out this city deep in enemy territory. And you call what I do ‘politics stuff’!”

Ilea didn’t reply. She didn’t feel like she had to explain herself. They knew each other.

Felicia thought for a moment. "I'll be okay... I think I've pushed things aside, looked for the next thing to focus on. I feel like I had to. Once the war is over and things hopefully calm down a little bit, we'll see. But for now, I'm happy to delve deep into all that 'politics stuff'."

Ilea nodded slowly. "I went on an adventure in the north after everything in Virilya. Different interests, I suppose."

"Gross oversimplification. Didn't expect anything else from someone who specializes in punching."

Ilea narrowed her eyes. "I remember you being nicer."

Felicia sighed, her eyes distant. "Maybe I was. Didn't want to set off Edwin. Didn't want to be a burden. And yet I feel far more me now than I've ever felt before."

Ilea smiled. "Well, in that case, I welcome the new you."

They were silent for a little while before Ilea spoke up again. "How has he been? And Maria?"

Felicia was quiet for a moment. "As if his strings have been cut. Killing Arthur... or dying attempting to do so. I think those were his two options. It was everything that drove him. There was a lot of anger and hate. While he seems... calmer now, he's also currently drinking a lot and being generally useless and annoying."

"Edwin without a purpose seems like a difficult combination. I can see it."

Felicia puffed out a long breath. "Yeah, pretty much. I know he needs time, but I'm telling you, if that man wasn't my brother and hadn't dragged me out of that shithole we'd been put in as kids, I would have already thrown him onto the streets. I just hope he doesn't drink away our remaining funds."

"Well, let me know when you feel like hiring some help. Could take him out into the wilderness for a while or something."

"I already feel bad about how much you've helped us."

"We're friends, not business associates."

"It's not just that. I've relied on other people for so long, and I finally feel like I can do things with my own two hands. I think I'd like to try that for a while, but I know where to find you, Lilith."

"You using that name is weird."

"Why? Where does it even come from?"

“It’s from old stories. I first used it to introduce myself to an expedition heading to the Taleen dungeon near Dawntree. Then it kind of stuck.”

“It’s a good name, I think. Ilea doesn’t have that legendary ring to it. But then again, I suppose that’s how stories go. Oh, speaking of stories, you asked about Maria. She’s doing infiltration jobs for the Empire. And she’s good at it. Though that wasn’t a surprise.”

“I don’t know what to think of that.”

“Most of her targets are bad people. But yeah, it’s not pretty. Change the subject?”

“Seems like the others are wrapping up anyways. Let’s see if we’re closer to a location.”

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FIFTY-SEVEN

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Target

The man Ilea had found was right. The Order had dug deep into the large hill on which Yinnahall was built. And while they had kept the workers there, they still needed supplies and materials from throughout the city.

And people talked, especially because the Order wasn't exactly universally liked amongst the lower rungs of society. They didn't even have to be specific; just mentioning that they were planning something sinister made it much easier to get information.

A hired mover whose ill mother had once been refused treatment was more than happy to point them to a location in the city where he had taken expensive furniture for some Order higher-up, wrapped up nicely in a way he knew would protect it from debris.

The location was a nondescript house near the city walls. A few people were inside, and now that they knew it was the access point, it was clear they were guards.

Felicia watched and listened to the winds as General Ryse gave the signal.

She appeared within the house, the thrumming wind blade around her arm stabbing deep into her target's neck. When she looked up to find another target, it was already over. She did a double take while looking at Ilea, clad in her ashen armor. It was so surreal to see her like this. She shook her head and focused.

"Found the access point. Heavily enchanted," one of the Dawn Company mages said.

Michael joined him and got to work.

It was fascinating to see him methodically break through one layer after another. Just two minutes later, he was done, not a single word spoken by anyone.

And then they were in, rushing along the corridor leading below the city. Michael and some of the others occasionally signaled for them to stop, detecting and disabling traps and alarms.

Nobody knew they were coming until they reached the entrance to the underground temple. The two guards were immediately taken out.

The temple itself lacked heavy enchantments, either because the Order was confident or because they simply hadn't yet had the time or mages to set them up.

"Now," Velamyr said, sparks forming around him.

Everyone vanished.

Felicia activated her auras, infusing her magic with power as her health dwindled. Her speed and strength multiplied as her defenses rose, her vision narrowing. She kept her mind focused on the winds, the whispers keeping her from losing control, even here, deep below the earth.

She appeared in the hall, a storm of wind blades slashing through the robed healers and mages of the Order of Truth. She didn't wait to watch them fall apart and die, vanishing again as a few quickly thrown spells brushed against her wind armor and deflected into the nearby walls.

She could see the large circles of runes still being carved into the stone floors. Even in her enraged state, Felicia saw hundreds of lights with her magic perception. The complicated runes formed a beautiful painting weaved by magic, the construct not yet completed but already trembling with power.

And she saw her allies appearing amongst the surprised crowd, cutting through defenses with ash, blood, and lightning.

She ignored the shouts, spells flashing in a cavalcade of color as Michael and Velamyr flew center stage, their spells of blood and lightning slamming into the mages and healers with incredible speed.

Felicia aimed, looking at the largest cluster of people, shields and spells already forming around them. A shield made of solid gold formed in front of her, deflecting a few blasts and projectiles hurled her way.

The sphere she formed stabilized and blasted forward. A gust of wind brushed against her hair as if the spell she had created brought with it a light summer breeze.

The sphere reached the enemy shields after a few twirls sent bodies flying. Golden spikes slammed into the magic constructs and began to eat up the energy that supported the defenses. A single near-straight bolt of lightning spread into the shield, collapsing the thing before the tiny sphere of magic cracked and burst.

Felicia stood with enraged glee, her razor-sharp winds washing over her as if she was one with the storm, shredding her enemies apart as her spell expanded, a flurry of a thousand invisible blades. Screams barely left throats before being silenced.

She vanished, reappearing close to one of the survivors, a healer regenerating a lost arm. She wouldn't give him the time he needed. Two blades of air formed as extensions of her arms, aiming for the man's throat.

He stopped one blade with a raised arm, the wind cutting deep into his bone. Then Ilea appeared behind him, a spear of ash slamming through the healer's skull. Felicia rammed her second blade into the man's heart, recognizing a faint noise in her mind as she moved on to the next target.

The hall had turned into complete chaos. Ilea moved through the survivors with experienced and decisive motions while Velamyr teleported methodically, taking out single targets with bursts of condensed lightning, the blue light in his eyes and around his body creating a blur.

All the while, the Dawn Company moved in and out, backing each other up as they picked off the stragglers and pelted defensive positions with magic. They were outnumbered three to one, but it simply didn't matter.

Felicia focused on three enemies standing amidst the carnage, one man clad in white armor, a woman in robes, her face covered, and a bald man wearing similar robes, his eyes closed as he focused on his magic. She sent a few blades of wind at the group, watching tiny golden shields deflect each of her spells.

Lightning surged and slammed into another such defense, the stream of energy deflected into the nearby walls. The man in white full plate armor raised one arm, moving it horizontally. There was no weapon in his hand.

Felicia felt the familiar magic and ducked, the sound of air vanishing due to void magic audible for a split second.

A beam of lightning struck the armored void mage near-instantly, no shield intercepting the spell. A scorching hole remained, but the wound within healed quickly. The woman next to him had a hand extended toward

him. Magic rippled out from the bald man, but Felicia couldn't quite place it.

Velamyr vanished and reappeared in front of them, lightning arcing outward in all directions as he slammed against a golden barrier.

Ilea appeared above them, black wings moving with perfect calm. Her hand was outstretched toward the trio before a blinding flash of flame roared outward. Nothing but scorched stone and bits of bones remained when the light was gone. She had already moved on as both Felicia and Velamyr stared at the remains, moving on as well a moment later.

But there were no more targets. The fight was over.

Felicia's hands twitched before she went to one knee. The fight was over. She needed to focus.

Her eyes closed, and she listened to the whispers of the wind. A few seconds passed before she opened them again.

She found her allies looking around, checking for survivors and evidence. Michael was already studying the runes.

Velamyr reached down into the ashes of the trio they had faced last and pulled something out. "This must have been one of the Elders. I need help categorizing everything in here."

Ilea appeared nearby and looked around. "I assume this will take a few hours?"

"Likely, yes. If you're leaving, could you bring Nicholas and his people to this location?"

"Sure, I'll join you guys in a few hours, then. After I bring them here, that is." And with that, she vanished.

Felicia could hear the general's slightly restrained growl.

"That's why there's supposed to be a hierarchy," Velamyr grunted. "If only they weren't so damn effective. And that damned pirate didn't even show up. Probably looting the city as we speak."

He was rubbing his shoulder, and Felicia noticed a missing piece of flesh and armor slowly stitching itself back together. It didn't look like healing magic, but she had long had her suspicions about his second Class.

Looks like the void mage Elder managed to get in a hit.

She assumed that was why Velamyr seemed irritated. She stepped up to him and waited as he summoned a table, placing it amidst the carnage, before he spread out what was in the storage ring he had recovered.

“Anything suggesting additional sites, goals, local associates and allies, and their next target is the priority.”

Felicia grabbed a random document and got to work with the few Dawn Company people who had joined them. She had gotten more familiar with them now, although none of them had yet shared their names or talked about anything unrelated to their mission.

Nicholas and his group arrived soon after. He stopped dead at the entrance. “You were right.”

“Told you. But I’m also sorry,” Ilea said. She touched his shoulder and then left.

“They were willing... to do all this?” Nicholas joined their group at the table and looked at some of the letters in disbelief. “Why?”

“Maybe we can find an answer to that question here,” Velamyr said. “I would like to have your insight, if you are willing.”

“This is... Elder Aywos. He was here. And you... you killed him.”

“We did.”

Nicholas wiped an eye but then straightened. “Good.” He sighed. “I will help.”

FIFTY-EIGHT

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Island

Ilea had found Iven, and she spent the next few hours clearing out a few places he pointed out. After the ritual site, it felt like just a bit more of the same. Like a deep clean. She found that it felt good to remove at least a little bit of the filth that had nestled into this place.

In a few days, weeks, or perhaps months, Empire troops would arrive here. She wasn't sure exactly what they would do, but from what she had seen from Virilya and all the imperial people she had worked with, she'd be surprised if it was worse than what the previous government had been up to.

Back at the ritual site, she stretched her shoulders. Someone had found Hector and brought him there as well.

"There you are. Oof, you smell of death. Did my comments really piss you off that much?" he said as he sauntered over to her.

"Do you really think everything has something to do with you?"

"You're still pissed. Should have seen the vaults I looted. You'd be pretty rich if you'd stayed," he said and walked off again.

She ignored him, but it wasn't easy.

"Any insight from your space magic?" Michael asked as he walked up to her.

"Nothing special, no. The ritual didn't take place. That's all I know. Do you know him well?"

He followed her gaze. "The Destroyer? Why do you ask?"

"Because he's very irritating. And because I don't understand why he's here."

Michael looked at his back and then at her. "Because you're dangerous and Helena doesn't have a lot of disposable people she can force on a mission to make sure you don't murder everyone else. I'm quite sure it won't happen again after your performance."

Ilea raised her eyebrows. "Really? He listens to her?"

But yes, that makes a lot of sense. His annoyed focus on me. His disinterest in the mission itself – because that's not why he's here at all.

"He's entirely absorbed with himself and his wants and thus deathly afraid of losing it all. Helena simply knows where to apply pressure. She knows how to get people to do what she wants."

Ilea nodded to herself. She was here on Helena's behalf as well, after all. "You're surprisingly transparent."

"Misleading people leads to misunderstandings and complications."

"Why are you here, then? Velamyr seems to care about the atrocities, but you..." She didn't know how to say it. "You seem cold."

"The loss of so much life is wasteful." He said it as if to calm her. "I was intrigued as to these rituals, their purpose, and execution. But more and more, I'm growing frustrated with their lack of skill and waste of resources. Even here, they have barely improved."

Ilea nodded. Here they were, several cities wiped out, and he was most concerned about the ritual's execution. She didn't know what she'd expected when meeting members of the Golden Lily, but this wasn't it.

At least he considers deaths on this scale to be wasteful. But what if it fulfills some greater purpose that he thinks is worth it? He would do it in a heartbeat, wouldn't he?

Her thoughts were interrupted when Velamyr called for them. He was looking at a map of the country.

"The Elder had updated information on Baralia," the general began. "There are reports of an uprising in Valstadt. Wynehold has declared its independence and is supposedly in talks with both Nipha and Lys. Borena was attacked by northern tribes. They seek aid from the more southern cities.

"To the south, Mothine has reportedly been taken by the Empire. Refugees and soldiers who managed to get out before the siege reached the slums just this morning. We deem it unlikely that the city will hold out for long.

“According to the troops who arrived a few days ago, Landort is under a siege led by both Nipha and troops in Baralia colors. It’s unclear who the latter are, but we assume Wynehold origins. With no direction or recent orders from the king, it seems the country is truly splitting up. Nicholas?”

“Elder Zion, a known blood mage, and his associate space magic expert were in the process of setting up a ritual to make contact with the so-called realm of life,” Nicholas said. “They managed to establish contact with some kind of external entity, including a way to bridge our realms. There are mentions of riches and power, but it’s unclear if there’s any truth to it.”

“We have to assume this entity is using the Order of Truth to establish this bridge and invade our realm,” Velamyr added. “There were mentions of other planned rituals as well. They thought they would wait until this one was concluded and findings could be documented and shared.”

“So they were just testing?” Ilea asked.

“Their progress is laughable,” Michael said, shaking his head.

“Do we know where they’re preparing the next one?” Felicia asked.

Velamyr looked at the map, tapping first at Yinnahall before he moved his finger westward. He indicated a small lake and a name.

“Gyffold. It’s not a very large city, but its defenses are well-known throughout both Baralia and beyond. Their relations with the high king weren’t favorable. It’s one of the few remaining uncontested cities in the kingdom.

“If we wipe out the rest of the people involved there, they will have too few resources to try again. Even if the high king is involved, as some of the letters suggest, he wouldn’t be brazen enough to try an incomplete ritual in the capital.”

Nicholas scoffed.

“Either way, we have our next target – and hopefully our last one. The capital is a matter for the Empire,” the general said with finality.

It seemed even the Golden Lily wouldn’t reach that far.

* * *

They left through the same tunnel they had dug to enter the city, then took off. The flight took them past the elongated lake connected to Yinnahall, the forest beyond, and finally back to open plains.

Ilea barely noted the various beasts in the wilderness, some running through the high grass below them without a care in the world. It was fun to see so well, her enhanced eyes letting her spot even flowers in the grass far below.

It really was a world yet unclaimed by humanity, even in their self-proclaimed territory.

She displaced a few birds, trying to intercept them before they could slow her flight. It was a rather enjoyable flight if she didn't think about what awaited them at their destination.

They found the lone lake with the city built at its center less than two hours later. By then, it was getting dark, storm clouds moving in from the north.

"It looks like a rock at the center of a lake," Ilea said, noting the high-reaching walls and guard towers. It was comparatively small, which would make it difficult to sneak in unseen.

The walls were made of dark stone that seamlessly flowed into the rock below before it all vanished into the lake itself. Two thin, perfectly straight, elevated stone roads led from the shores to the city island, most certainly magically built.

"Attackers would have to come from the air or by boat. Any force coming by road would sacrifice any advantage their numbers would have provided," General Ryse commented. He seemed happy.

Ilea thought about the potential of ice mages simply freezing the water for an army to cross. *Would be a very specific tactic, and it would take a hell of a lot of mana.*

The roads were closed already.

"How do we get in?" Hector asked. "Another tunnel?"

"You're the water mage. Got any ideas?" Ilea asked.

He grumbled something to himself before he lowered his altitude. "I can get us close, but not inside."

"That should be enough," Michael said.

They dove into the water, a sphere forming around Hector, but it wasn't one of water for once. Instead, he pushed the water away and let them walk on the floor of the lake. Treading across the wet ground was strange, what with so much water above and around them.

When they reached the rock, Michael formed his drill again, and they got to work. The enchantments in the way were apparently far more potent,

but if anything, he seemed a tiny bit more excited to break through them as a result.

They soon arrived in a random cellar. Ilea blinked up onto the roof of the building they had arrived in and quickly assessed Gyffold, joined moments later by the others. Its size rivaled Stormbreach, though it didn't come close to Ravenhall or Riverwatch.

The walls reached high above them on all sides, wild and sturdy defenses that looked almost natural at their base, growing into high structures obviously shaped by man. The streets were perfectly carved, with a slight incline leading toward the city center and likely the wealthier districts.

The streets were busy despite the late evening hour, and the same tension Ilea had felt in Yinnahall permeated the hushed voices and briskly moving citizens.

"This cellar seems like a good enough spot to meet again. Same as in Yinnahall. Two hours this time," Velamyr said and jumped off.

Ilea stretched. It was good to know that they weren't in quite as much of a rush this time around. With what they had learned in Yinnahall, they were finally one step ahead.

Hector joined her at her side. "I don't suppose you've eaten dinner?"

Now that she assumed his main task in all this was to essentially make sure she was reasonably trustworthy, she didn't mind his attention as much.

"I haven't, actually. Have you been here before? Any clue what the local cuisine is like?"

"Why would I ever have come to this wet rock? They probably serve fish, though I'd be surprised if they managed to impress me."

"They've probably had a few hundred years to figure it out. Let's find out."

FIFTY-NINE

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Blood Magic

They found a nice spot to have dinner, and Ilea tried the same approach she had used in Yinnahall right after. Hector didn't complain too much about the food, which she took as a sign that it was really good. She certainly enjoyed it, even though she wasn't the biggest fan of fish.

It quickly turned out that the Order had much less influence here. People in general seemed to be getting better treatment, and while the tension of the war was certainly felt, there appeared to be far less desperation. The nobility here were somewhat trusted, and Ilea quickly realized that people here would be far more suspicious of an outsider than in Yinnahall.

They returned when the time was up, Ilea hoping the others had been more successful. A few oil lamps bathed the gathered individuals in warm light.

"Anything?" Velamyr asked.

Ilea shook her head.

"I found several blood mages and ritual halls, but not the one we're looking for," Michael said.

"We could inform some low-level members of the Order. Maybe we can find someone like Nicholas," Ilea said.

"It's too much of a risk," Velamyr said. "We have time on our side for now, so we'll focus on less obvious methods."

Michael closed the book he was scribbling into. "I think I now understand most of the ritual, but I would need the help of a space mage to

test a few things. If I understand correctly, we won't even have to find the ritual site this time."

"What do you mean?"

"It draws life energy from the entire city, and technically beyond. Which means I can set up disruptors with just as much distribution."

"You would need to know the entire ritual. In detail."

"Exactly. But for the space aspects, I require the help of Lilith."

"I'm not familiar with space magic runes," she said.

"I need your awareness, not runic knowledge."

"How confident are you that these countermeasures will work?" Velamyr asked.

"They won't just work – they will reveal the ritual site as well. Perhaps even before it is fully activated. If we get enough disruptors prepared beforehand."

General Ryse looked at him for a long moment and then nodded. "Everyone else will continue as before. Lilith, if you will?"

"Sure," she said and looked at Michael.

"Follow me, then," Michael said.

They teleported deep into the island town until Michael stopped in a dark alley. A thin man with a rusty knife stood up nearby, murmuring something about intruders.

"Leave," Ilea said.

His eyes cleared a little before he murmured a curse and ran.

Michael was already working, a large amount of blood rushing out of his arms, splashing to the ground and forming runes she neither knew nor understood.

"You can perceive space?"

Ilea nodded. "Before I help, you told me you're interested in these rituals. And now you say that you understood all of it."

"If you're asking about my capability of sacrificing an entire city's population to turn them into monsters, then yes, I could manufacture such a thing, though the knowledge I gained throughout our mission had no impact on that."

Ilea raised an eyebrow.

"However, it's never wise to sacrifice so much potential for uncertain gains. Most humans never reach meaningful levels of power, but it would be disastrous if such pointless rituals killed even just one or two who

could've achieved things far beyond their status. I understand their ritual, but what they seek to achieve with it remains in the realm of belief. I give you my word that I won't sacrifice the people of this city."

"But you could wipe out entire cities if you wanted to?"

"Rituals require power, and blood magic is quite liberal when it comes to the sources provided. Using higher-level monsters is both easier and safer if you have the time and power to catch them. As you are an up-and-coming name of importance within the Plains, I implore you not to think of blood magic itself as the enemy. The Order of Truth deliberately chose to sacrifice these people, either because of ill-informed mages, time constraints, or simple disregard for human life and potential."

"We're having an entirely different conversation now. Why do you care about my opinion on blood magic?"

"Because it correlates with your trust in me. I want you to understand that blood magic is merely a tool rather than dangerous in itself. We can prevent anyone from dying due to this ritual if you're willing to help me."

"I'm not sure I fully trust you. But if we do this and the ritual wipes out the city, I'll make you personally responsible."

"That's perfectly fine. Now, tell me if this is stable," Michael said as power rushed into the runes.

Something changed. A short ripple traveled through space.

"Came and went," Ilea said.

Michael adjusted the runes without talking.

They spent twenty minutes on trial and error until Michael stopped. "That's good enough."

"What exactly does this do?" Ilea asked, looking around at the complicated layout.

"The ritual seeks out life energy to consume as fuel. It's not a continued effect but a one-time surge. The runes placed here are fueled by a tiny amount of my life. There are sections in their ritual that prioritize higher-quality energy. I can fool it into taking only what I have provided here," Michael explained.

And your word is all I have, Ilea thought.

"We have a lot of ground to cover," he continued. "Make sure to check if the runes act stably each time. I'm not versed in space magic. It's volatile, and without the associated sight, only testing will bring results."

All the other runes he created were perfect instantly. They were done with the district in less than half an hour.

Michael chose the academy district as the next target, continuing his work with focus. They mostly remained silent.

“What does the ritual do, exactly? I know you said you can’t perceive space, but you understand the runes well enough to create them,” Ilea said after Michael had finished with the academy district.

They continued with one of the poorer areas.

Michael looked at her as he worked. “The blood magic part is rather simple. Just a way to collect life energy and force it into the space-related runes. Don’t misunderstand me, there are perhaps three blood mages I know who would be capable of creating something like this. And even they would need time to work out the spell and actually execute it. The space aspect creates a forced tear in space itself, though we only have half of the puzzle.”

“But you understand this half?”

“I understand what it’s supposed to do. But it’s specific. Fine-tuned to an extent beyond my capabilities. Whoever shared this ritual with the Order of Truth is a master beyond compare. I will have to study it for years or even decades to truly understand its intricacies, though I fear it may be impossible without a space-related Class to help me along.”

“You sound excited at the prospect.”

“Who wouldn’t be?”

He finished up the current runes when Ilea saw a ripple in space.

“Did you just test it again?”

Michael shook his head. “No, the runes are stable.”

“I just felt something,” Ilea said, trying to make out the epicenter. “A ripple in space.”

He frowned and used a few spells. “I can’t detect anything. The runes here haven’t been affected either.”

“I’ll check it out.”

“Are you sure?” he asked immediately. “We shouldn’t waste time on a random phenomenon.”

“This isn’t random. Something strange just happened, and I want to know what it was.”

She blinked a few times, focusing on her Space Awareness to make out the ripple’s source.

Maybe just a long-range teleport? she wondered, but she found no trace of the person who would have used it.

The wisps were disturbed, she noted, following the signs until she reached a dead end. She retraced her steps and found another set of wisps.

She finally reached an alley deep within the city and close to the lake beyond. Nothing showed up within her sphere, but the wisps were more disturbed here.

Michael found her a moment later, appearing next to her.

He followed me?

Something about him felt strange, but she couldn't put a finger on it.

"Behind that wall?" he asked.

Ilea nodded.

He extended his hands before a glob of gold materialized, forming small fragments that he launched into the wall itself, digging into it as if they had fallen into water.

"You're right," he said. "There are powerful enchantments here."

"Can you notify the others?" Ilea asked.

He glanced at her, deep in thought for a moment. "Yes," he said, his gold armor cutting into his arms before a pool of blood formed in front of him.

He murmured an incantation before the blood formed loose runes in the air.

"Blood magic is fucking ominous," Ilea said.

"The more you understand," Michael said as the runes started glowing, "the less you fear."

A pulse of mana rushed out, only noticeable within her sphere because she saw him use the spell. The pulse quickly lessened in intensity, becoming nearly imperceptible when it reached the other side of her sphere.

She kept her focus on the wisps of space, which were still slightly bent in a weird way.

"I was only commenting on its looks. I know magic is just a tool," she said. "We should go. Maybe this is the first step of the ritual."

He looked at her. "There are anti-teleportation runes in place."

"Anti-space magic?"

"I don't see any."

"Ready for a fight?"

"I am, but we should wait for the others," Michael said.

“Not if the ritual is starting,” she said and charged Heart of Cinder.

“Wait—”

She didn’t and displaced herself behind the wall.

She appeared in a spacious hall, finding about a dozen bodies strewn about. All were clad in the same Order robes, glowing runes covering the ground in large circles.

Michael stood at the center of it all, golden shields appearing where she tried to destroy the runes with ash.

He appeared behind her. But he was also in front of her. The one in front raised his eyebrows, and the one behind her raised his arms.

“Lilith, listen to me! Nobody will die! If you interrupt the ritual now, hundreds will perish!”

She was about to release Heart of Cinder.

“Look around you! Look at the space!”

She did and saw it. Everything flowed perfectly. There was no disruption, no forceful tear.

And then, before she could take another step, something appeared at the center of the ritual site.

A fissure in space itself. Perfectly stable, unlike any of the previous ritual sites she had seen before.

The two Michaels seemed to relax. “It is done,” the one behind her said.

She whirled around toward him. “You lied to me! Was this all you? How many—”

“Nobody died. Not a single soul was sacrificed, as I promised. I made it safe and stable, thanks to you.”

“That was your goal. Throughout it all.”

As he started toward the fissure, the Michael standing near it dissolved into blood and gold, flowing back into the other one.

“I told you I was interested in the ritual. And I didn’t lie today either. Not to you. I understood it well enough to improve it, to make it work without wasting an entire city’s population. Utter fools,” he spat. “I realized in Yinnahall that I could make it work, with a bit of help. I apologize for deceiving you, but you wouldn’t have trusted me otherwise.”

Ilea shook her head. Even if what he said was true, even though she could tell that the ritual was safe – nobody had died, at least not in the vicinity – she still felt used, misled. “You could have told me what you were after.”

“You didn’t trust my abilities. It was the only way. Without your addition to this group, this miracle could have never come to pass. A stable, self-sufficient gate to another world. And to whoever created this ritual.”

“You didn’t give me the chance to trust you.”

Ilea felt pissed but conflicted. He had acted selfishly, and she really wanted to punch his head in, but at the same time, they had prevented more deaths. That much was true. And she couldn’t help but feel intrigued about the fissure.

She stepped toward the thing, a round shape without a discernible edge that showed a snow-covered stone palace on the other side.

The view wasn’t perfectly clear, not even to her enhanced perception. Her sphere couldn’t pierce through to the other side either. It almost looked like viewing something through water.

‘ding’ Space Awareness reaches 2nd lvl 3

Going to another realm wasn’t exactly novel for her anymore, but with her Space Awareness, she could grasp the sheer complexity and, frankly, impossibility of what she was seeing.

“It’s stable.”

He nodded. “That it is.”

“How?”

Michael stepped a little closer, walking around the fissure.

“Do you not feel the mana?” he asked.

Ilea shook her head slightly. “What do you mean?”

“The density... it’s rapidly increasing,” he whispered.

She deactivated her Arcane Magic Resistance and immediately felt the change.

“It’s overflowing from the other side, but most is being taken by the gate itself,” he said.

The others arrived then. Velamyr, Felicia, and Hector.

The pirate laughed. “Oh, this is perfect. Who wants to go through first?”

Velamyr narrowed his eyes at Michael. “Destroy it.”

Michael met his gaze. “It’s impossible. The gate is perfect.”

“It was you.” A burst of lightning spread into the ground as Velamyr touched his brow. “You brought this headache upon me. An active fissure to who knows where. You will pay for this, Michael Elyse.”

Michael didn't retort. He had what he wanted.

"Something is coming," Ilea said.

They all watched as a Pearl Mantis Sire stepped out from the other side.

[Warrior – lvl 248]

The creature arrived and started shaking. Stepping back, its limbs started trembling, its eyes bulging out. Before anybody engaged it, the being vanished back into the fissure.

"It left?" Ilea asked, her eyes going wide. "Are they Awakened?"

Michael glanced at her.

"We have to close this portal or risk an invasion by hostile monsters," Velamyr said.

"Didn't look very hostile to me," Ilea said.

"They're the same things we fought before, what are you talking about?" Hector asked.

"Did you not identify it?" she asked. "It was a warrior. Likely a sapient being. An Awakened."

"That's even worse," Velamyr said.

"Even if they wanted to invade, it seems like the mana here is insufficient to supply its needs," Michael said. "Your worries are unfounded, General."

"Excess mana is leaking into the surroundings. Sooner or later, they will be able to pass."

As he spoke, Ilea noticed a blade of grass sprouting from the stone floor, seemingly out of nowhere.

"Then I suggest we find out what's waiting on the other side," Michael said.

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Warriors

“Maybe don’t attack immediately,” Ilea said.

Velamyr glanced her way. “These are creatures from another realm.”

“Intelligent creatures.”

“How stable is this, exactly?” Felicia asked.

“We cannot collapse it. It’s simply impossible. With the knowledge and power at my disposal,” Michael said.

Felicia glanced at the group before she clenched her fists and joined them. “I won’t stay back,” she whispered.

“I agree with Lilith. A diplomatic approach will lead to more gain,” Michael said.

“For you and your research. They’re not human. Treat them like you would treat Elves,” Velamyr said.

As I intend to do, Ilea thought with a smile behind her ashen armor. She didn’t mind the jab at Michael either.

Ilea walked close to the gate and stretched out her hand. “Let’s see what’s waiting for us in the realm of life.”

When her hand touched the fissure, it created ripples on the surface, but she didn’t feel anything. It felt no different to the air. Her hand pushed further, and she noticed something peculiar.

Ilea pulled her arm out and pushed it in again.

“What is it?” Michael asked.

“Yeah, get on with it,” Hector said, jumping through without waiting for any feedback.

Ilea didn’t let it disturb her.

“My hand was gone,” she said.

She realized it then. She felt excited. This was an entirely different realm. She breathed in deep and checked through the few messages she’d received since they had arrived in Yinnahall.

‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 157 – One stat point awarded

...

‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 160 – One stat point awarded

‘ding’ Space Shift reaches 2nd lvl 9

‘ding’ Force reaches 2nd lvl 17

‘ding’ Displacement reaches 2nd lvl 18

Ilea took one last look at her gains, taking the time to apply any unspent stat points to her secondary attributes. The last few fights had felt good. Her third Class increasingly felt like a true part of her.

Name: Ilea Spears

Unspent stat points: 0

Unspent Core Skill points: 24

Unspent 3rd-tier General Skill points [1744 total skill levels]: 1

Class 1: The Azarinth Sentinel – lvl 364

- Active: Absolute Destruction – 3rd lvl 28***
- Active: Sentinel Reconstruction – 3rd lvl 30***
- Active: Azarinth Awakening – 3rd lvl 30***
- Active: Blink – 3rd lvl 28***
- Active: Sentinel Sphere – 3rd lvl 28***
- Passive: Sentinel Core – 3rd lvl 30***
- Passive: Azarinth Fighting – 3rd lvl 30***
- Passive: Sentinel Huntress – 3rd lvl 8***
- Passive: Azarinth Perception – 3rd lvl 27***
- Passive: Azarinth Reversal – 3rd lvl 21***

Class 2: Kin of Ash – lvl 364

- Active: Armor of Ash – 3rd lvl 30***

- **Active: Aspect of Ash – 3rd lvl 30**
- **Active: True Ash Creation – 3rd lvl 30**
- **Active: Heart of Cinder – 3rd lvl 27**
- **Active: Storm of Cinders – 3rd lvl 23**
- **Passive: Ash and Ember Unity – 3rd lvl 28**
- **Passive: Ashen Wings – 3rd lvl 26**
- **Passive: Eyes of Ash – 3rd lvl 19**
- **Passive: Avatar of Ash – 3rd lvl 30**
- **Passive: Keeper of Ash – 3rd lvl 29**

Class 3: The Faen Valkyrie – lvl 160

- **Active: Force – 2nd lvl 17**
- **Active: Flare of Creation – 2nd lvl 17**
- **Active: Displacement – 2nd lvl 18**
- **Passive: Space Shift – 2nd lvl 8**
- **Passive: Body of the Valkyrie – 2nd lvl 3**
- **Passive: Space Awareness – 2nd lvl 2**

General Skills:

- **Dancing – lvl 3**
- **Deviant of Humanity – lvl 11**
- **Elos Standard language – lvl 6**
- **English Language – lvl 15**
- **Gourmet – lvl 2**
- **Harmony of the Drowned – lvl 9**
- **Heavy Archery – lvl 11**
- **Identify – lvl 15**
- **Meditation – 3rd lvl 9**
- **Monster Hunter – 3rd lvl 4**
- **Oxygen Repository – lvl 14**
- **Sage of Torment – lvl 18**
- **Soul Perception – lvl 5**
- **Teaching – lvl 3**
- **Veteran – 3rd lvl 6**
- **Warhammer Mastery – lvl 9**
- **Arcane Magic Resistance – 3rd lvl 17**
- **Ash Magic Resistance – lvl 1**

- ***Astral Magic Resistance – lvl 1***
- ***Blast Resistance – 3rd lvl 1***
- ***Blight Resistance – 2nd lvl 1***
- ***Blood Magic Resistance – 3rd lvl 8***
- ***Blood Manipulation Resistance – 2nd lvl 20***
- ***Bone Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 6***
- ***Corrosion Resistance – 2nd lvl 20***
- ***Crystal Resistance – 2nd lvl 14***
- ***Curse Resistance – 2nd lvl 20***
- ***Dark Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 6***
- ***Death Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 8***
- ***Diamond Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 3***
- ***Divination Magic Resistance – lvl 6***
- ***Dust Magic Resistance – lvl 6***
- ***Earth Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 20***
- ***Emerald Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 1***
- ***Fear Resistance – lvl 11***
- ***Flesh Magic Resistance – lvl 8***
- ***Gravity Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 20***
- ***Health Drain Resistance – 2nd lvl 20***
- ***Heat Resistance – 3rd lvl 7***
- ***Ice Resistance – 2nd lvl 20***
- ***Lava Magic Resistance – 3rd lvl 1***
- ***Light Magic Resistance – 3rd lvl 1***
- ***Lightning Resistance – 3rd lvl 5***
- ***Mana Drain Resistance – 2nd lvl 20***
- ***Mental Resistance – 3rd lvl 5***
- ***Mist Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 20***
- ***Obsidian Magic Resistance – lvl 3***
- ***Pain Tolerance – 3rd lvl 3***
- ***Poison Resistance – 3rd lvl 2***
- ***Rot Resistance – 2nd lvl 5***
- ***Ruby Magic Resistance – lvl 14***
- ***Sand Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 20***
- ***Sapphire Magic Resistance – lvl 13***
- ***Silver Magic Resistance – lvl 1***
- ***Smoke Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 3***

- *Soul Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 3*
- *Sound Magic Resistance – lvl 18*
- *Space Magic Resistance – 3rd lvl 2*
- *Stamina Drain Resistance – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Time Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Topaz Magic Resistance – lvl 18*
- *Vine Magic Resistance – lvl 14*
- *Void Magic Resistance – 3rd lvl 2*
- *Water Resistance – 3rd lvl 1*
- *Wind Resistance – 3rd lvl 2*
- *Wood Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 3*

Status:

Vitality: 1000

Endurance: 383

Strength:364

Dexterity:375

Intelligence:1000

Wisdom:1000

Health: 14770/14770

Stamina: 3798/3830

Mana: 18482/20000

She focused.

And stepped through the fissure.

* * *

Ilea was hit by freezing air. At least it was air that she could breathe and not something else entirely.

Like water, she thought, reminded of the Great Salt.

The mana around her was substantially denser than back on Elos. It compared to some of the deeper dungeons she had visited but didn't come close to her experience at the bottom of the Descent.

It was dark, leaving the impression that she was underground, but Ilea quickly realized that wasn't the case.

Ice crystals formed on top of her armor but quickly dissolved again, unable to cope with her resistance. Her breath formed a mist in the air.

Hector stood close by, his face scrunched into a displeased grimace.

"Alright there, waterboy?" she asked.

He looked at her, the ice forming on his body crunching with the movement. "Fuck this place."

She couldn't help but laugh. It wasn't just excitement, she realized.

They had stopped the ritual. Or at least, they had prevented another city from being wiped out. And as far as they understood, the Order lacked the resources to create another one. She felt relief at that.

And with everything that had happened between her, Michael, and Hector, she was nowhere near as worried about the Golden Lily either. They were all dangerous individuals, but they were individuals, not some sinister force hellbent on destroying everything she held dear. The thought surprised her as she stood there in the freezing air.

But it made sense. Of course it did. Eve had been hunting them. And someone, maybe even one of the people she was working with, had killed her. They had felt like an unknown specter, but now? Now, they were just people. Powerful people she had to respect, but no one she had to fear. Not with her power.

She shivered, feeling the figurative weight fall off her shoulders. And then, she focused on the now, a slight grin coming to her face.

They were in a spacious courtyard, a pyramid-like temple towering over them. Around them were rudimentary stone structures, pillars, and walls. All of it was covered in a layer of snow and ice.

Ilea looked up and saw the obvious culprit for both the cold and the dim light. A solar eclipse was currently in progress.

There were various beings present, hiding behind nearby pillars or in the doorways leading into the pyramid beyond. They were of the same species as the monsters they had fought back in Nara, but their levels were significantly lower. All were still above two hundred, though.

Their behavior, however, was very different. Their many eyes, focused on the newcomers and the fissure behind them, shone with intelligence, unlike the mindless creatures they had faced before.

Ilea felt distress from some of them with her Sentinel Huntress skill.

Peace? she sent to the nearest creatures, trying to establish contact with her third-tier Mental Resistance.

A few of them reeled back, others outright ran away.

She got no answer.

“What did you do?” Hector asked.

“Just tried to talk,” she said, spreading her arms wide.

Do you speak our language? she asked the beings as Michael came out of the gate.

He used a few spells on himself to ward off the cold and arcane power as he looked around. Ilea could see the freezing air around him warm up through her sphere.

Velamyr and Felicia followed, the latter immediately buckling. Ilea was by her side an instant later, pushing healing mana into her.

“What is this?” Felicia asked, wind armor springing up around her.

“You’ll be fine. It’s pretty dense mana. And freezing air,” Ilea said, keeping up her healing. “Do you want to go back?”

Felicia raised her head and stared at Ilea, the look in her eyes changing suddenly. She shook her head slowly.

Ilea felt the woman’s body heat up slightly. The damage done to her by the cold was now healing without her interference.

Berserker stuff.

“They’re not hostile,” she said.

Velamyr looked around, lightning sparking off his armor, his movements not visibly slowed by the surrounding energy. Ilea could tell that the mana was bothering him, though, if only a little.

Only Hector and herself seemed to be entirely unaffected. His water, of course, proved problematic, but other than a comedic frozen look, it didn’t seem to inhibit him.

“Same conclusion on the gate, Michael?” Velamyr asked.

The gold mage only nodded, staring at the fissure behind them.

“Do they speak a language?” the general asked.

Michael loudly uttered a few words in different languages. He tried to form something with his gold and finally used blood magic to directly connect to some of the creatures.

All it did was make more of the beings run off.

They’re scared.

“None of them are three marks,” Velamyr said.

“Perhaps, if their mana gets out of control, whether by having too much or too little, their minds are destroyed and their power is pushed to the highest possible ability,” Michael said. “It is a phenomenon observed elsewhere.”

Ilea knew the Knights of Rhyvor had been taken by the dungeon somehow. Maybe this was similar?

Would this have happened to Elfie if he'd succumbed to the mana?

“A lack of mana does the same as too much of it?” she asked.

“Likely,” the gold mage said, giving her a long look.

“So they can't go to our realm without turning into monsters. Let's see what we can loot, then,” Hector said.

“Leave one of you to protect the fissure. We don't want any of them to get through,” Velamyr said to Michael. “If we can find any answers or beings that can communicate with us here, then we go in there.”

He pointed to the temple in front of them and the two large stone gates standing wide open, a stairwell leading up right behind.

Ilea watched Michael split apart, blood and gold shifting before there were two of them. Only Felicia watched with some measure of surprise.

“Let's go,” Ilea said and walked toward the temple entrance, trying to seem as non-threatening as possible.

Hector did the opposite, clapping his hands toward one of the ants hiding behind a nearby pillar. He cackled as the thing rushed away.

The rest followed, all of them with magic thrumming around them.

Ilea immediately felt the cold subside when she stepped over the temple threshold.

Something else, however, took its place. A presence, something that pushed against her mind with a curious interest.

To anybody else, it might have seemed like a mental attack, but to her, it was obviously just someone making contact.

She could tell that the being was located deep within the temple, its mind magic capabilities rudimentary at best. Enough to make conversation, perhaps, but nothing compared even to Weavy.

Nobody else reacted in any way as they ascended the broad and high stairs.

She sent something back to the being.

Hello.

Ilea also sent a mental wave of her hand and peaceful thoughts. She wasn't exactly far beyond the powers of this thing when it came to mind magic.

Clicking noises could be heard from the top of the stairwell, a bunch of mantis creatures looking their way before they ran off.

They reached a large open space containing dozens of mantis beings. Some were armed and armored, perhaps a guard patrol, while others seemed more akin to civilians in more casual attire. A central mantis creature glared at them and raised the blade of a spear toward the newcomers.

The mantis creature looked similar to those she had faced before. It was a pale pinkish color, and two large bulges held two small beady eyes. The being was naturally armored, covered from its head to its thin legs in a pink carapace. Flowers of various colors and sizes decorated the being's armor and head, fastened to it with simple frayed string. It looked a little smaller than the many other mantises in the room, almost delicate.

It held the bone spear with the natural grace of an experienced hunter, moving it into a defensive position as it watched them.

[Warrior – lvl ??]

Ilea's Veteran skill informed her that the creature wasn't far beyond her Identify range but probably still beyond four hundred.

Many of the creatures moved through the hall on hearing the clicking of the central one, likely their leader. She noted how some were in distress while others didn't seem to mind the tension.

Six mantises stood close to the spear-wielder, unfazed. They had weapons too. One wielded what looked like a massive tooth, another a pair of thin daggers, and yet another held a rope made of a black material that constantly shifted and flowed as if it was alive itself.

"We come in peace," Ilea said.

The being simply continued its clicks, causing all of the creatures present to fan out into what looked like a defensive formation.

"I don't think they're peaceful," Hector said with a grin, his sphere of water forming around him.

As they all prepared to fight, Michael said a few words in various languages. Ilea tried to make a connection with the beings, specifically the

spear-wielder, but all her tricks did was make the creature focus on her.

The highest-level mantises were all between two-ninety and three-fifty, warriors without exception.

The central mantis snapped something. It looked as if it was focused on the ground.

Same direction as I feel the presence.

It stilled, shifting its stance, as if it had come to a decision.

Michael tried to communicate with shapes of floating gold.

The creature tensed and made a clicking sound.

And then, all hell broke loose.

A dozen creatures sent their spells at the group of humans, many of whom didn't attack back, still stuck in indecision.

The seven main mantis creatures didn't hesitate, rushing at them with claws and weapons. A few vanished instantly.

Ilea used Monster Hunter, whistling, before she saw a spear coming at her. *That was no teleport*, she realized, dodging the quick attack thanks to her precognition. She felt the attack shift as she rolled to the side, grazing her ashen armor and ripping a chunk of it out.

What?

She vanished, focusing entirely on the battle as she sacrificed five hundred points of health to activate her third-tier aura. Displacement redirected a dozen projectiles back at the creatures, her wings carrying her above most of them as spears of ash formed.

Ilea used Force to try and trip up the warriors assaulting her group. Shields made of blood appeared around them, flashes of lightning crashing into the creatures as a storm of air exploded through the hall.

The Michael that had been left behind at the gate joined the battle near the stairs, blood and gold shifting as he split again. She saw Hector on top of a wave somewhere to her left, water flooding over the paralyzed beings as if a dam had broken.

Ilea displaced some of the creatures into the coming flood, subjecting them to the heavy pressure and near-guaranteed instant death Hector's magic would provide.

The spear-wielder watched Ilea for a second before moving, its thin legs pressing against the air as if it were the most solid of ground. It closed the distance fast.

Fuck that thing's—

Another stab nearly reached her, but Ilea blinked away, deflecting a claw attack from one of the high-leveled mantis warriors before her limbs slashed into it, ashen spears speeding out at the various creatures close by.

Her punch landed on one of the creatures, slightly chipping its carapace before lightning boomed, a bright and condensed beam slamming into its right eye, leaving only scorched flesh.

Ilea broke away before she joined Felicia and two Michaels, his shields and armor deflecting projectiles and claws. Blades of wind and small spikes of gold flew around them, trying to injure the creatures.

The warriors dodged with their teleportation and resumed their assault, clashing with Ilea and her ash. One of them managed to dig its sharp claws into her shoulder, using a combination of auras and some kind of condensed energy around its natural weapons.

Ilea had seen the damage coming and chose to trade receiving its blow for a chance to pin it down. Force barely slowed the higher-leveled creatures, but when their bodies were connected, it hardly mattered.

She deflected its other hand with hers, reversed healing coupled with Flare of Creation, Storm of Cinders, and Destruction crashing into the thing as she tried to cover it fully in white flames.

Her ashen limbs slashed into the open maw that tried to bite into her head, and Ilea held its left arm tight under her armpit to keep it close. It didn't weaken in the few seconds of their engagement, its attacks remaining coordinated and focused.

She had it pinned down, however.

Ilea only let go when the rope-wielder tried to trap her. She let go of the arm and moved her ash, blinking away so as to not get trapped by the unknown weapon.

She caught a glimpse of Hector engaging with the tooth-wielder who teleported around endlessly, slamming its heavy weapon into his water sphere with surprising efficiency. The beams of condensed water were simply deflected by the carapace covering its arms.

Ilea had to blink again, avoiding the spear aimed at her heart. Her precognition had told her where to dodge, but the mantis adjusted yet again, delivering a glancing blow.

It has something similar, she noted.

The being didn't stop this time, hunting her with a teleport of its own. She deflected the next blow, knowing the spear would cut into her arm.

Ilea ignored the damage. She felt both blood magic and arcane power from the attack. There was even a health drain, but unlike the channeled versions she had previously encountered, it was instant.

Her ash billowed out in response, her fists stopped by quick movements of the creature's spear. The mantis slashed its weapon in a wide arc, cutting through most of her limbs as if they were made of mere flesh and bone.

Ilea released Heart of Cinder, her sphere of fire and energy exploding into the nearby wall and the simple stone throne below. The attack blasted a near-perfect circular hole that revealed the frozen landscape outside.

Her enemy had vanished to dodge but now appeared again, Ilea's fists already flying at the creature that had barely finished materializing. They were entangled for a moment, a few of her hits connecting, both her ash and fists, but the same was true for the enemy's spear.

It ripped out chunks of ash and cleaved through her skin, leaving behind a spell that ate into her flesh much like acid.

Ilea flew out through the now-broken wall behind the throne area, feeling herself pass through a barrier that kept out the cold air.

The mantis followed, its unwavering assault biting into Ilea's defenses as it tried to keep the ash at bay, mostly successfully. With every stab of its bladed weapon, the being winced in a barely noticeable fashion.

Ilea only noticed it thanks to her sphere. At least her third-tier Blood Magic Resistance was working, not that this mantis cared much.

The mantis stopped for a second, standing in the air with its spear aimed toward her. Its mandibles clicked, and its weapon moved in a way that suggested a challenge.

Ilea breathed out, the air once again a mist in the freezing temperatures. Her wings flapped unimpeded. Outside the temple, she could see a sprawling city of stone, frozen rivers peeking through the mostly pyramid-shaped buildings.

A natural defense of rocky terrain protected this place. Beyond, she saw an endless waste of snow, ice, and mountains. The air was still, near-frozen, as the two warriors stared at each other.

"We don't have to do this!" she shouted, trying to send a thought with the respective emotions.

The creature narrowed its eyes, an explosion of power blasting out from the mantis. Its spear glowed with a deep red, as did its body, and its eyes focused on her with a promise of death.

I guess the answer is no. Well. Ilea cracked her neck. *Been a while since I've faced a good challenge.*

Ilea's precognition recognized the attack would land on her right as she flew backward, Force and ash forming a defense in front of her. The mantis turned left instead, past her defenses, its spear slashing into her side.

Her armor partially deflected it, the blade leaving a nasty gash that quickly reformed. No blood was drawn, but its spell – which now extended in an aura around the warrior – still affected her.

Ilea felt the same mix of blood and arcane wash over her entire body, more intensely where the blade had recently struck. Her healing nullified the impact, her form resisting the oppressive spell slowly eating her alive.

She sacrificed a chunk of health to overcharge her own aura, gaining an advantage for a split second before the mantis's speed increased. It dodged a dozen ashen limbs, moving through the air and ignoring gravity. Its spear struck out, its range now extended to slightly less than that of Ilea's limbs.

The spear sliced through both ash and armor as Ilea was pushed onto the defensive. Force helped slightly with deflecting the blows, but most of the work was done by her fighting skills and her powerful armor.

A few consecutive strikes opened her up and she was forced to blink, but the mantis appeared next to her at the same time and continued its attacks. Three strikes cut away her ash before a fourth stabbed through her arm, the blade sliding against her bone as the magic spread through her from the wound.

Ilea healed the damage and continued the fight, blinking down and into one of the pyramid-like stone houses as she tried to catch her breath. It had been a long while since a foe had put her on the back foot like this.

The inside of the small building was totally foreign. Strangely curved furniture and what could have been kitchen implements, toys, or even weapons, for all Ilea knew, were scattered about.

But she didn't have time to properly inspect the space before her foe was on her heels once more.

Heart of Cinder activated again as the mantis appeared, but too little time had passed to make it powerful enough. The mantis bore the attack, its carapace simply slightly blackening as it used the moment to whip its blade through Ilea's left leg.

The wound was already healing when another strike separated the muscle, even biting into the bone below. Ilea couldn't help but grin as she

felt the danger, and her pulse, increase. She could no longer predict the blows without precognition.

Ilea deflected dozens of blows, now using her ash purely defensively as she spread more of the inky substance through the small frozen home they had entered. She had no time to think and was acting purely on instinct, each strike now a fight for survival.

Then, as quickly as it had increased, the mantis's speed suddenly slowed considerably. Back to a manageable pace.

Finally run out of steam on that speed boost?

There was a lull for a split second. The two of them stared at each other, and Ilea knew she had a broad grin on her face.

Come on, then. What else have you got?

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Wasteland

Ilea's ash had spread as she fought, and it was touching the mantis as she activated Flare of Creation. The pale white fire spread through the whole room as the being slashed at it with its spear.

The fire didn't stick to the weapon but remained on parts of its body. Ilea noted that it had been in a state of increased speed for close to ten seconds. She pushed back now with her own offensive arsenal, hoping the skill had a long cooldown.

She took more risks, keeping her Flare up as she used Absolute Destruction with each strike, all sixteen limbs fanning out and moving as chaotically as possible to strike the mantis in ways that would be difficult to predict.

The mantis pushed against Ilea's fire with its own aura of blood magic, occasionally sliding its blade over its own carapace to scrape off the pale flames.

Ilea was forced to dodge two blows with Displacement and Blink before the spear sliced toward her neck. She felt the damage coming and knew her armor was too thin, chipped away from the last dozen strikes.

Force pushed her back just a little, and the spear's razor-thin blade sliced through her throat instead of taking her head.

She felt the magic spread into her before a third-tier heal reformed her neck. Ilea's ash had never ceased its attacks, but the mantis countered with broad swipes of its weapon. Her ashen limbs fell to the ground as if disconnected from her very essence.

Suddenly, Ilea felt the effects of her enemy's aura lessen, accompanied by a message in her mind and a new resistance to call her own.

There was no time to check it, though. Even the slight thought she spared for the sound of the notification meant three more strikes slashed into her.

Whatever it was, it was good news. It meant that she would grow more resilient as the fight progressed. Already, she resisted the blood magic aspect partially, and each strike she tanked damaged the enemy in turn.

The problem was the health drain. Ilea could see the small gashes and dents on the mantis's slim body heal slightly with each successful hit it dealt.

The creature vanished up onto a sloped, snow-covered roof of a slightly larger residence. Perhaps an inn or some other business. Ilea wondered briefly why none of these buildings were occupied but shook the thought away. The mantis moved into an offensive stance as a pulse of energy washed outward.

Ilea appeared one roof over, catching her breath as she let her mana recover, the slight cuts and wounds on her body healing.

The speed aura again—

Ilea couldn't finish the thought, her mind once again completely occupied by the hundred thrusts and swipes coming her way.

Her ashen limbs were severed before they could really form, each deflected strike followed by five more. The magic hit harder this time too. The mantis was using more resources or an additional spell to increase its destructive blows. It was clear that it wanted to finish the fight.

Whole sections of Ilea's armor were removed with each successful hit. An explosion of blood and acidic energy ate her flesh to the bone whenever the spear cut deep enough. Yet she healed again and again, slowly but surely starting to see patterns in the enemy strikes, managing to dodge here and there or even deflect a blow.

The mantis was both faster and stronger than her. But not overwhelmingly so.

Ilea smiled and breathed out as she teleported through the frozen stone city with the murderous being at her heels. Something about how it fought made her feel calm. The Ascended had been calculating, slowly figuring her out and pinning her down, never lowering its guard despite its obvious overwhelming power.

The mantis instead felt arrogant. Its movements were well trained, and it was obvious that fighting was second nature to it, but she could already feel it growing impatient, annoyed with its elusive prey. Angry.

If it had been calm and calculating, taking her seriously despite its advantages, she knew she may have slowly been whittled down. But now, with how the creature was fighting, she could see a chance.

She had fought stronger foes than herself more than a few times, after all.

And by now, she was in her groove.

* * *

Felicia was entirely absorbed by the battle, her blades of wind barely cutting into the powerful carapace of the enemy warriors.

Ilea and the pirate had vanished outside at some point, taking three of the beings with them.

The lower-leveled creatures had quickly fallen to their spells, many of them choosing to flee in the frenzy of battle. Four mantis warriors remained, each far above Felicia's level. She had only survived so far thanks to the shields Michael had created for her time and time again.

Two of his copies had followed the pirate out through the large hole blasted through the wall by one spell or another, while three more remained. She had no idea who the original was. If there even was an original. She wondered about the spell, as she had never seen anything like it, but now wasn't the time to analyze such things.

Velamyr was engaged with one of the creatures, a lithe mantis wielding twin daggers. They were teleporting through the hall too fast for her to follow, their movements in sync as his spells clashed with the monster's daggers.

Her wind was faster than Michael's gold, allowing her to support the man against the three warriors focused on them. One had a carapace covered in rock, another was the living rope user she had spotted earlier, and finally, there was a stocky mantis with blades of bone growing out of its arms.

Michael now held two blood swords in each hand, flat spheres of blood forming wherever the creatures struck, while his golden spikes followed the

fast-moving foes with each step they took.

Felicia sent four more blades at the creature using bone blades, then simply pushed a mass of air toward it when it ignored the thinner air-blade attacks. She didn't watch as it was blown back toward the nearest wall.

A storm formed between her hands before she released it upward, the spell expanding as it flew toward the rope mantis crawling along the wall, its weapon blown aside as it tried to entangle one of Michael's copies.

The blood mage had formed dozens of runes on the ground, his domain slowly expanding as his blood splashed to the ground. His gold followed the same principle, appearing in globs before it splashed to the ground and formed intricate runes that all connected together.

Felicia stayed within the area he focused on, avoiding the runes whenever she moved. She felt his magic was significantly more powerful within his domain, his shields forming far quicker and stopping more blows before they dissolved.

Velamyr appeared on the ground next to her, his legs gone as he crawled forward with gritted teeth. She did a double take at the sight but focused, unable to do anything but trust his abilities.

Instead, her gaze switched to the closest mantis warrior, the rock-covered earth magic-using creature, as her blades lanced out. It deflected the first six and was cut by the last one.

She pressed her attack, not letting any of the others out of her sight as she fought. Her ears were focused on the winds as she ducked.

She could feel the talon move through where her head had just been, the dagger-using creature slamming into a shield of blood before it vanished, the expanding red spikes not fast enough to injure it.

"Can you survive?" one of the Michaels asked the general, his copy pierced through by a long claw at that very moment. It dissolved into blood and gold, both flowing over the creature, which seemed unable to teleport away.

Velamyr didn't reply, parts of his legs appearing once more. It didn't look like healing magic.

Felicia formed another storm. She crouched and sent it toward the general as he used his abilities to restore his legs, pushing back the dagger- and earth magic-using creatures as they tried to intervene.

She watched as gold seeped into the earth magic-using mantis's orifices as it twitched and clawed against the fluids sticking to it. It died a moment

later.

The lithe dagger warrior didn't stop, but Velamyr was sending out spells again, his lightning hitting the targets nearly instantly, leaving scorch marks and molten flesh.

Felicia breathed out as the three warriors regrouped and circled them slowly, clicking and screeching at the death of their ally. Michael's domain kept expanding, but his numbers had been reduced from three to two.

"What are our chances?" Velamyr asked.

"Our isolated fight here? Not good if we continue like this. The three strongest remain. Use what you can to overwhelm them," Michael said. "Girl, you're bleeding out."

Felicia looked down at herself and saw the deep gash on her leg hadn't healed yet. Her sight grew a little blurry, but she focused on the gash, pushing her mana toward it and watching the wound close.

"Stay defens—" Michael started to say when a rope looped around his neck and the living rope-wielder appeared close to him, crashing against his blood shield before the two other mantis fighters materialized on either side.

His body dissolved into a bloody silhouette of a man as the three struck together, his gold armor denting inward as the blood within escaped into the air. The other Michael raised both hands, making the destroyed armor split into shrapnel that cut into the three creatures surrounding him.

At the same time, Velamyr stood up, his movements unnaturally fast. His eyes glowed a bright blue as his hands extended. A wild torrent of lightning expanded outward, slamming into the creatures and the palace beyond. The bright arcs burned deep into the stone and through the mantises. The bone magic one wasn't fast enough to dodge.

Velamyr screamed as his lightning arc continued. A shield of gold formed where the general stood, deflecting the daggers of the lithe mantis.

Michael's main body had reformed, once again clad in golden armor. His copy was already working on replacing the domain runes lost to Velamyr's spell, the arcs only now subsiding.

The man collapsed to one knee when his spell ceased, his lightning armor reduced to just a few sparks, but his movements soon quickened again, dodging another assault from one of the warriors.

Nothing remained of the bone-bladed mantis but smoke and ash.

Two left.

Felicia could feel the rope mantis appear behind her. This time, she didn't try to dodge but instead trusted her defenses. This one was inferior to the mantis that had targeted Velamyr.

She turned and flew upward, the creature's claw cutting past her wind and steel armor, finding flesh and muscle as she charged her spell.

Her storm was localized and heavily focused, enough to even injure herself. It roared against the mantis, its claw still digging deeper, now cracking bone with its strength. A shield of blood appeared before her to deflect the creature's snake-like rope.

The mantis ripped out its claws and vanished, leaving Felicia floating in the air before she fell. She found her health at below ten percent. The bleeding wasn't stopping.

One of Michael's shields pushed against her side and sealed off the wound.

She faintly noted that Velamyr was standing again. He had a deep cut on his chest, and one arm was missing.

Only two remain, she thought. She tried to move, but despite the effort, she found herself still lying on the ground.

"Focus on recovering."

Michael's voice reached her muddled mind from somewhere close to her, forced on the defensive by the dagger-wielder.

Felicia fought to stay awake, but she had simply lost too much blood. Some mana lingered within her, though, and she tried to send wind blades at the remaining two creatures.

The lithe one was busy with Michael and Velamyr, but the rope user decided to finish her off.

She watched as it came, hesitating when Michael's last remaining copy stepped in its way and formed a few shields of blood.

His blades failed to cut the creature, but he succeeded in deflecting one of its blows. Michael staggered back a step a moment later as his chest was pierced by the monster's talons. The rope was wrapped around his arms, restricting his skills.

"Go for the neck," Michael said and coughed, his body slowly dissolving as gold and blood alike flowed onto the creature.

It flailed, cutting away at the substances as its auras intensified.

Felicia's mana condensed into a single blade.

There was no finesse in her attack, just brute force. The creatures could see attacks coming, but she released her blade nonetheless.

The thin line of air shot out, brimming with enough power to rend stone.

She watched as the gold became rigid, the creature straining against the liquid prison before the near-invisible spell rolled past its neck.

A ding resounded in her mind as she turned her eyes to the other two. Several more dings followed, informing her of levels to her Classes and skills.

Michael was missing an arm, and several cuts were showing in his armor. No blood seeped out.

Velamyr wasn't in much better shape, his armor mere shreds of steel.

He released a powerful surge of lightning against the last remaining enemy.

The dagger-wielder stood defiant, its left arm scorched beyond recognition.

And still it stood, still it fought.

Felicia was fighting monsters beyond anything she had faced before. But her allies were monsters too.

The creature paused for a split second and then charged Velamyr.

It simply ran through the lightning and ignored the spikes of gold it had so delicately avoided during their battle. The mantis reached Velamyr and teleported at the same time as the man, both reappearing in the same spot.

Its talons darted out and slashed into the man, both of them coming down in a crash of dust and lightning. Large spikes of gold and blood slammed into it, but the creature didn't stop. It was in a frenzy, using its last breaths to take its enemy with it.

Felicia heard another ding and saw something red flow out from Velamyr onto the cold earth. Her vision was blurring.

Michael stepped over to her and knelt down before he vanished.

"Is... dead?" she got out, coughing a few times. Her magic was fading, and the winds were calling for her to sleep. Pain crashed into her like the tide.

"It's fortunate the mantis chose Velamyr as its final target," Michael said, lifting her up with both arms.

"Vel..." she gasped. She couldn't feel his magic anymore.

"I've heard about that ability before, but I've never seen it. He is alive. His body reached a critical condition, and his spell activated. Luckily, this

place had no enchantments against teleportation or time magic,” he said as he moved her down the stairs.

“L... eaving?” she asked.

Ilea.

“The remaining monsters are beyond us. It’s not our hand that will decide their fate,” Michael said. “Now, let us find a healer.”

He carried her out into the freezing courtyard, past the quietly watching non-combatant creatures, and through the gate.

* * *

Ilea dodged and got in a punch, teleporting to avoid the next strike. The mantis was focused solely on her chest and head now, trying to either pin her down or impede her senses.

Ilea had punched enough destructive mana into the creature to kill a Specter, but it remained focused and continued its attack unimpeded.

Any pretense was gone, both of the fighters taking constant hits.

Their continuous battle was interrupted when another mantis slammed into and through a nearby house, the heavy tooth once used as its weapon embedding itself into the stone pyramid one street over.

Hector followed, waves of water coming with him.

Ilea and the spear mantis watched the man approach. A third mantis, with no weapon but its claws, charged down from above and landed near the destroyed house as the first one came out, blood and cracks showing on its carapace.

She could tell the spear mantis was breathing more heavily, the increasing damage not entirely shrugged off. Any harm was mostly equalized by its health steal, and possibly another skill Ilea didn’t know about, but it was still tiring.

The spear mantis teleported to its allies, its eyes once more focused on Ilea. She frowned when the one without weapons touched the spear mantis, the scratches and dents on its body healing visibly.

“Yeah, that one can heal,” Hector said in an annoyed tone, his water moving closer.

“The spear one uses something called devour magic, a mix of blood and arcane mag—” Ilea began.

“I’ve encountered it before,” Hector interrupted. “The big one with the tooth is just fucking durable. Great warrior, but the healer is the problem.”

“Mine has some kind of ten-second boost it can use every twenty to thirty seconds. Nearly enough to dismantle me.”

Hector glanced at the beings with a smile on his face. “Guess I had the weak ones, then. Well, now that we’re together, let’s kill the healer first.”

[Warrior – lvl ??]

[Warrior – lvl 365]

[Warrior – lvl 312]

The last one was the healer and likely the easiest target. The short stalemate was over.

They fanned out to attack.

Ilea teleported to the healer and focused on the head, her ash and Flare of Creation surging to injure the being. She dodged as the tooth mantis moved past above her, displacing herself two meters to the left. She heard the flowing waves behind her.

Four beams of pressurized water slashed into the ground next to the mantis healer, one clipping a leg. Ilea pushed through, ignoring the creature’s attacks as she went fully on the offensive. She’d seen a glimpse of the spear mantis moving up to meet Hector. A welcome distraction.

Her reversed healing flowed into the creature as her ashen limbs cracked against the hard carapace. Her ash spread out over the mantis and behind herself, flaring up in white flame to stop the approaching hulking mantis warrior.

The tooth-wielder teleported to get to her, but Ilea simply maneuvered herself below the healer. It cut into her ash with its talons, but its attacks lacked the penetrative power of the spear. The larger creature wasn’t willing to risk striking its ally to get to her, instead reaching out to grab her.

Ilea’s wings moved her out from below the healer mantis as she blinked and displaced herself between the two of them, all her attacks and mana focused on the healer alone. It only took a few seconds and dozens of attacks to daze the smaller being, cuts and dents appearing on most of its body.

The higher-leveled warrior made a clicking noise at the spear mantis.

Ilea wouldn’t give them the time to talk.

She activated Heart of Cinder, empowering it with a healthy dose of sacrificed health. The flames consumed the two creatures as Ilea hammered her fist into the healer's head. Its eyes caved in, followed by its skull, but she didn't stop.

Even when the heavy tooth mantis pummeled her back with enough strength to crack her spine, she continued. Then a flood of water slammed into them, washing the trio away instantly.

Ilea kept her grip, her ashen limbs pushing deep into the twitching healer mantis from all sides as her fists slowed down under the heavy pressure.

She charged Absolute Destruction, pumping all the mana she could into her enemy. Flare of Creation lit up underwater, further slowing down the creature's recovery.

The other warrior pushed through the water nearly uninhibited, its heavy tooth-like weapon rising before it came down on her. The thing moved as quickly as a fencer could strike with a rapier, slamming into the water, ash, and her, mulching her insides and bones despite all the resilience and shock absorption she possessed.

But it was too late. Ilea's fist connected, and Absolute Destruction rushed through the healer mantis, its body lighting up with spreading flames both fiery red and white in color. The former were quickly subdued by the water around them, but the latter burned on undeterred.

A ding filled her mind as Ilea displaced herself and used her third-tier healing to take care of her near-broken back and heavy internal injuries. Her wings spread as she flew toward Hector, his dome of water reduced to a puddle by the quick slashes of the devouring spear.

The creature dodged his jets of water before they even reached it. Hector's dome reformed time and time again as the mantis slashed away at it, removing large swaths of water, its spear only slowing down marginally under the heavy pressure.

Hector's right arm and shoulder had been eaten through, nearly entirely dissolved by acid, but his face only held a wicked smile. She reached Hector as he lost his legs, a final swipe of the spear both severing the limbs and ending the mantis's boosted state.

Ilea blinked between them, seeing broad wings spreading on the heavyweight she had left below.

A pained squeal that spoke of anger and promised death rang out from the now-flying creature, giving no pause to the spear mantis's assault.

Ilea instantly deflected the spear blows, her ash spreading toward Hector as she started to heal the man. Her help was fleeting as her outstretched ash limbs were severed by the spear warrior, who quickly realized what was happening.

"Just keep her busy," Hector growled as the dome of water reformed around him. "That one is mine," he said and intercepted the massive warrior bearing down on Ilea.

Ilea nodded, her power slowly peaking as she struggled against the powerful spear mantis, the wounds its blade and magic inflicted lessening slightly with each passing minute.

The creature activated its powerful aura once again, but instead of going for her, it barrelled after Hector.

Ilea blinked toward the man, using her two teleportation skills to keep up with the ridiculously fast-moving mantis. She arrived only to be met with an explosion of devouring blood. The two mantises had teleported away just before, appearing again a split second later to resume their assault.

"Go up!" she managed to scream as she deflected several blows, forced to displace herself when she misread a feint from the heavier warrior.

Her ashen armor had already reformed, and she was glad to see Hector's sphere had withstood the explosion of blood magic.

"Stay at range, just focus on attacking and ignore me," Ilea said as she charged the two.

Their coordination was good, but their bodies were larger than hers. Using that against them wouldn't be as easy as it had been with the healer, but it might still prove effective.

Hector followed suit, his jets and water flowing in immediately to aid her maneuvers.

The spear mantis was either too proud or too angry to ignore Ilea's presence and continue after Hector, using the remaining time on its buff to deliver several blows as the four combatants moved through the frozen city.

Ilea grinned when the last two blows were slightly deflected by shields made of pure blood. She counted down and attacked the moment she felt the magical pressure of the spear-wielder's speed aura fade.

Michael didn't show himself just yet, supporting her from somewhere unseen within the many stone buildings below.

Ilea fought defensively against the two mantis warriors, blinking and displacing herself between them or behind houses and other alien structures. Occasionally, a blow would be deflected by a shield of blood, or a jet of water would slash or push at the creatures to hinder them at a key moment, allowing her to escape or get a hit in.

She was sure that the larger warrior had some form of precognition too as it deflected entirely too many of her attacks with his ridiculously large weapon and body. He was quick for his size but nowhere near the speed of Ilea or the spear-wielder.

Hector's water jets and waves came in constantly, pushing her and the mantises aside or forcing them to disengage.

Ilea noticed that the spear-wielder wasn't as effective right after using its boost. It still used its abilities but acted more conservatively.

She abused that as much as she could, engaging the heavy mantis with everything she could dish out in the span of half a second before she focused on defense again.

Hector and Michael understood immediately, focusing their attacks on the spear-wielder to distract it for a mere moment while its abilities were reduced.

The distress in her enemy was slowly building, but not in both. The spear-wielder remained focused, entirely confident despite its mounting injuries.

Ilea watched the spear-wielder disappear the exact moment after its aura had activated. Moments later, the blood shields stopped.

Ilea ignored it and focused entirely on the heavy warrior, her ash now overwhelming it as she set it ablaze. She blinked to avoid its weapon and spread her ash as far as she could, hoping its rising distress would lead it to make a mistake.

Unlike its compatriot, this one simply ignored the white flames burning on its carapace, perhaps thinking the damage inconsequential or simply having no way to get them off.

Hector used that moment to play his remaining card. A massive eel slithered out from a wave to Ilea's right, its jaws closing around the tooth-wielding warrior's body with a sickening crunch of breaking bone and tearing flesh. Most of it was the eel's.

Ilea didn't waste the moment and hit the large mantis creature's still-visible face with a burst of her offensive skills, and as she blinked around its restricted body, it tried to slap her away.

She watched as it broke free of the eel and tried to teleport, her smile broadening as she stopped its spell with hers. Ilea closed the distance at the same time, the momentary confusion enough to allow her to latch a limb onto it.

She poured reversed healing mana into the creature, which slammed its tooth backward before a bright blast of fire and energy surged outward with Ilea at its center. The stone houses below them blew apart, brutally scorched or completely turned to ash by the powerful spell.

Ilea let go of the huge creature and healed the damage to her back, the mantis having delivered a powerful blow despite the awkward position it had been in.

The creature stumbled, several jets of water pummeling its body. It simply blocked what it could with the tooth and endured.

Ilea turned left to find the spear mantis rejoining the fray. The creature stopped and noticed the state of its ally before it charged with fury and hatred in its eyes.

The spear mantis returning meant Michael was gone. Ilea knew it. She hoped it hadn't been his real body.

The heavy warrior glanced at the spear-wielder and dropped its weapon. It looked toward the temple reverently, then dropped dead.

Visible strands of blood and energy flowed toward the remaining mantis, infusing its carapace before a spear of blood slashed through the air, taking a chunk of the power before it splattered against a nearby wall.

The mantis screeched and looked for the culprit – only to find Michael. It seemed confused for a moment before it prepared its spear again. The absorbed energy had healed it, but now it stood alone.

Michael smiled and watched it rush toward him. Ilea deflected its spear, her limbs slashing at the creature with renewed vigor.

"I'm just a copy," Michael said.

"And just as useful as the original," Ilea said as she deflected four thrusts, the fifth one punching into her chest. It didn't dig far, and the devouring power of her blood didn't sap much of her health away. Not anymore.

She knew she had gotten to the second tier somewhere along the way.

Ilea kept her spells up, as did Hector and Michael. The two mages stayed at a distance, the mantis risking opening itself up to Ilea's attacks whenever it targeted one of them. And yet it still did.

It boosted itself again and went for Michael.

Ilea kept pace, teleporting close to the creature and delivering more blows as Michael chained his teleportation and shields to survive.

The creature screeched again when its buff came to an end. Blood was now dripping from its body, its features strained, anger obvious in its eyes. It held up a hand toward the palace.

But nothing happened.

It seemed confused for a moment, then gripped its spear and charged again. There was another burst of power, and this time, Michael couldn't get away. His body dissolved, but his magic was still active, flowing around the mantis as both Ilea and Hector attacked.

She knew the creature was running out of time, and once free of the gold and blood again, it teleported and charged at her.

Perhaps the mantis could have killed Ilea or Hector. One lucky blow might have been enough, but its experience in battle was matched by its opponents. Where they had each struggled on their own, now they fought together. And they were pushing the mantis back, slowly, out of the city and into the frozen desert.

Ilea finally came to a stop, Heart of Cinder eating away at her health as it reached enough heat to damage her.

Hector charged an attack as the beast screeched, the deafening sound rolling through the alien terrain for kilometers as it readied its spear and turned toward them.

The eclipse remained as a constant in the sky above, the air still and freezing as it settled around them.

Ilea felt an image reach her mind. A barren wasteland with nothing but skeletons poking out of the frozen sand. It had come from the being below the temple. And she could understand the emotions better now. Whoever sent them was warning them, both her and the mantis before her.

"The spear insect was calling for monsters. This place is fucking desolate. Whatever can survive here will be tough," Hector said, water flowing out around him, some of it freezing instantly.

"Let them come," Ilea said, floating down to the ground.

In the distance, there was movement. Creatures called by the loud screech of the mantis warrior.

Ilea thought they wouldn't arrive for a few minutes, but she was wrong.

A powerful aura exploded from below as all three fighters moved away.

Ilea found her blink didn't work and instead displaced both herself and Hector away as far as she could.

The ground shook and split, ice cracking before frozen chunks of sand exploded upward and an armored black worm, at least ten meters in diameter, broke through the surface.

[Spirit of Death – lvl ???]

Close to eight hundred.

She could feel it with Veteran.

It opened its massive four-part maw before a spray of purple flames rushed upward, enveloping the entire vicinity as they rained down again. The flames spread out and followed all three living targets, but the mantis still came for Ilea amidst the carnage.

Ilea didn't try to dodge, instead facing the energy head-on as soon as she felt the mana and confirmed the damage with her precognition, continuing to weave through the mantis's attacks as she absorbed some mana from the death magic fire that enveloped them both.

The spell decayed parts of Ilea's armor and skin, but she was healing fast against it. She and the mantis were focused solely on each other.

Hector rode his wave away from the fires, creating water that slowly neutralized the incoming barrage.

Ilea dodged another blow, ashen limbs cutting into the mantis, much of its carapace now missing. They fought on as a powerful surge of death magic expanded out from the worm. The energy slammed into all three of them.

The mantis tried to dig its spear into the ground and held on, the steel scraping against the frozen sand as it was pushed away. Ilea dug deeper with her ashen limbs, her armor withstanding the powerful area attack.

She held up a hand against an incoming beam of purple energy, somewhat slowed by Force. Four more projectiles followed in quick succession, her precognition letting her know their power. The mantis was targeted too, deflecting two of the blasts.

Ilea now saw the deformed vultures flying toward them from some distance away. Dozens of them, all brimming with power and shooting their death projectiles from kilometers away. That was where the beams had come from.

She saw hundreds of creatures moving on the ground too, some of them jumping in and out of the frozen ground as if it was made of water, others running or slithering.

Everything would soon be upon them.

She could feel the heat within her, could feel it burning up her lungs. She had to do it now.

The mantis charged, its spear punching through Ilea's right shoulder as her wings moved her forward, runes glowing bright as she sacrificed a chunk of health.

As her left hand caught and wrapped around the thin neck of the injured creature, hundreds of monsters were rushing toward them.

And then the world went white, bright flames and energy spreading out from her at the center, scorching the frozen ground and burning away the mantis.

It was still alive, but a weak thrust of its spear was deflected to the side before Ilea grabbed the creature's head. She pulled and ripped it off.

It's done.

The world around her was chaos, death magic spells and flames erupting throughout the frozen sands, but she felt a calm wash over her. Their battle was over. And she had survived.

'ding' Your group has defeated [Zaiked – The Warrior Queen of Erendar – lvl 418 / The Devourer of Fear – lvl 382]

She didn't understand why the mantis had acted the way it had.

They had tried to negotiate, but it hadn't accepted. They had fought and overwhelmed its allies, but it hadn't given up, had never even tried to run.

And now it was dead.

"Don't just stand there!" Hector shouted as his water flowed through the air, pressurized jets cutting into the approaching vultures.

Ilea looked up and saw hundreds of creatures rapidly approaching.

She spread her wings and flew toward them.

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SIXTY-TWO

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Onslaught

With her ashen limbs formed, wings spread, and heat charging up again, Ilea flew into the fray. She wasn't sure if the mantis had wanted to overwhelm them in the chaos or if it wanted to take them down with it, but it had brought a horde of high-level monsters upon them, and Ilea couldn't think of a better parting gift.

She landed amongst the horde with her limbs lashing out around her. There were scorpion-like creatures, mantises, ants, and even squid-like beings, all spirits of death.

Some were as low as level two hundred, many at five hundred or even beyond. They all sprinted at her in the same mindless manner. Whatever had taken these creatures had made their bodies decay and rot, leaving only husks of what they were before.

All color and individuality was gone from the dark sea of monstrosities. Their screeches and roars came without a sense of tone or purpose, their eyes remaining lifeless and cold.

Ilea ascended into the air again and watched the dozens of monsters below, many of them burning with her pale fire.

Corrupted, cursed, Death Spirits... it all seems to lead to the same all-devouring instinct, she thought as she cut into the chaos with her ashen limbs. Many of the creatures were killed instantly, but the others fought to climb the corpses of their brethren for a chance to face the living one among them.

Ilea was interrupted when another Death Spirit worm broke out from below. The worm spewed out its purple flames and turned toward her, its

ten-meter-wide mouth opening up to show thousands of serrated teeth and a stench that would warrant a resistance on its own.

Ilea watched the glow of its building death magic and charged. She pushed on through the flames and flew into the beast's maw, her sphere providing vision as the worm's large mouth closed behind her.

Ilea held her breath and sacrificed three thousand points of health, flames of death burning around her.

A smile blossomed on her face as Heart of Cinder activated, erupting with brilliant light and fire deep within the creature's body.

Its vulnerable flesh and organs were burned away by the powerful energy. Splatters of rotted blood and flesh were flung outward, dim light and cold air filtering in through numerous holes.

Ilea charged her wings and formed an ashen drill in front of her. She pushed her control and density to the limit as the worm reeled to the side.

Let's see if I can copy Michael's trick.

A deafening roar battered the air as more flames formed and the first creatures clawed their way into the massive beast's throat from the many holes that led inside.

She gave them a glance and pushed on.

The drill dug deep, cutting through the blackened flesh with all the momentum Ilea could build. She had aimed for the brain and kept pushing. As her progress slowed down due to the sheer mass of the worm, the drill started spinning faster, and her reversed healing and a few limbs behind her cut through everything in their way.

She screamed and finally punched through on the other side, her momentum sending her flying a few hundred meters before she slowed down and pivoted in the air.

The first beams and flames were already hitting her, and she formed ashen shields to slow the projectiles as she watched the worm slowly fall to the side, crushing a few critters in the process.

'ding' You have defeated [Spirit of Death – lvl 782]

Ilea was only a little annoyed about how easy it had been to kill this one compared to her last solo seven-fifty kill.

She displaced a few projectiles and beams, spotting Hector's water sphere hovering in the distance. A horde of creatures followed him, the

corpses left behind creating a line of rotten flesh in his wake.

And then she looked up at a single floating being that was approaching the spirits of death.

Its body, pale blue and smooth, looked more humanoid than nearly all the other creatures. Six limbs without hands extended from its back as it floated in the air.

Ilea couldn't see any discernible features on its head or body. It had two legs but no feet.

Another major difference was the fact that the Death Spirits attacked this being too.

Those who could attack at range shot their death magic at the creature, but all their projectiles hit a multicolored shield.

Astral.

Ilea recognized the element immediately.

Beams formed at the tips of its six limbs, the energy hitting various approaching creatures, disintegrating them near-instantly.

Ilea couldn't help but be intrigued.

Her ash slashed through a few flying Death Spirits before one of them managed to claw into her ash, taking her down into the waiting horde. Force pushed at the creatures before a sphere of fire burned some of them. Ashen limbs punched through heads and bodies alike.

She refrained from using Absolute Destruction for now, even reserving Storm of Cinders for the creatures that survived her ashen constructs.

A blink brought her up, her ash slashing through four vultures before she displaced herself. The pale blue being was her goal. She didn't have to think about communicating first – the creature was happy to attack her as soon as she was in range.

Ilea's Astral Resistance was at level one, so she didn't even try to dodge.

The energy washed over her as her speed was reduced but not stopped. She saw the creature's silhouette move more of its limbs toward her as the power intensified.

Ilea felt her ash burn away, then her skin and muscle.

Then the power subsided, and her body reformed.

Not even enough to force a blink! she thought with a broad grin.

The being was already charging its attacks again, but the short lull was enough for Ilea to fully recover her health and armor.

She blinked closer and identified the floating creature.

Its body was perfectly smooth and pale blue. Its six limbs seamlessly flowed out of its back. They were the only part of its body that actually turned toward her.

[Astral Spirit – lvl ???]

It was close to seven hundred, according to her Veteran-based intuition.

More spirits. What's going on with this place?

The spirit's astral power coalesced as a defense and crashed into her armor.

Ilea was already close enough to touch it with her limbs, pushing reversed healing into it. She teleported around, avoiding the many beams shot at her as she attacked with her mana intrusion.

Another push brought her directly next to the creature, her fist darting out before it was intercepted by one of the creature's astral limbs. Instead of a beam, the creature used a manifested blade of astral energy.

Ilea blinked away and noted another set of powers.

A powerful mana drain.

It was stronger than what a few Miststalkers had managed together but nowhere near the combined efforts of dozens of the creatures. Ilea watched in fascination as the few blemishes she had managed to inflict vanished, its skin returning to its original smooth, pale blue form.

She wanted to engage again but noticed that dozens of Astral Spirits were floating around now, purple and astral beams clashing together in the frozen desert.

Ilea disengaged, trying to find Hector. He might not be able to let the spells fuel him in the same way that she could, nor were they really here to fight a monster horde. They had defeated the mantis, and now that she had a clear moment to think, she worried about the others back in the temple.

If they got overwhelmed, they would have escaped through the portal.

She hoped she was right.

Numerous attacks slashed into her side as a flock of vultures swarmed around her, and Ilea was momentarily forced to deal with them before she could find Hector.

A few dozen blinks were enough to reach him afterward, her ash mowing into the hordes hounding the pirate. His water jets froze the

creatures together and to the ground, but many of them remained alive. He wasn't using quite as many spells as he had against the mantis.

"How are you doing?" Ilea shouted, forming several ashen shredders around the largest creatures as her fists and limbs crashed into the relentless monsters.

Her ash dug in deep, scattering rotten bits of flesh and bone. A large creature tackled her and broke its teeth on her armor, Ilea's destructive mana pouring into it before it died. She displaced its corpse before blinking up.

"Trying to recover some mana. Can you spare a heal?" the man asked, a dozen death magic spells crashing into his sphere of water.

She obliged, her ashen spears taking down some of the vultures circling them.

"Thanks."

"We should go check on the others!"

"These monsters will follow us."

"I'll distract them. You go! Make sure the others survived. I'll come to the temple once I can disengage," she said as the first astral beams burned into her.

A large chunk of the spirits of death rushed toward the oncoming Astral Spirits.

Hector looked around. "I should get a healer class," he said and laughed.

"Go check on the others!" Ilea shouted, her armor reforming after the astral beams subsided.

Hector nodded and turned back toward the distant mountain range, surfing through the flames of death on a wave of freezing water.

Ilea started to get seriously busy, more and more creatures appearing out of seemingly nowhere. Only about ten minutes had passed since they'd reached the desert, but she'd already had to cut through hundreds of monsters.

The Astral Spirits were too numerous for her to face them now, their combined mana drain and attacks simply overwhelming. Many of the spirits below had a way to stop her blink somehow too. More large creatures had appeared as well, some close in size to the worms they had fought initially.

The only reason Ilea could fight for so long in this chaos was Sentinel Core. Her spells and healing were being directly recharged by the magic

that continuously crashed into her. If she faced too many at the same time, however, even she would be taken down.

Some of the larger monsters could even revive the dead lumps of flesh left behind by the other creatures, creating a moving flesh mass that searched for living creatures to devour. Much of it was low-level, too slow, or simply bound to the ground, but the death magic it breathed even managed to devour some of the astral beings.

Sheer mass and numbers overtook many of the powerful spirits, though most of them remained alive.

A sea of bones and death, as the thought implied.

Ilea wanted to find out who had sent it, who was waiting in the temple.

She teleported up, realizing that the chaos around her was no longer focused on her. Hector was gone, so she charged her wings and aimed for the frozen city.

She took a deep breath before she landed in the sheltered temple, only to find that the battle there was already over.

SIXTY-THREE

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Diverging Possibilities

Ilea found no human bodies in the hall. Only blood and mantis corpses.

What did the Order of Truth try to achieve here? she wondered.

She sent a few peaceful thoughts and emotions to the mind lurking below, not ready to find out who or what it was quite yet.

A few blinks brought her out of the temple and back to the gate, its flawless form still a part of this reality, a gateway to another world. Had she arrived in Elos through magic like this?

Ilea stepped through the fissure and found the same ritual hall on the other side, spells thrumming to life as the people of the Dawn Company reacted to her arrival. They relaxed when they realized it was her.

A terrified healer was taking care of Felicia. Ilea immediately took over, also extending her ash to Michael, who was sitting at a desk and writing in a large book, a bit of blood still marring his face. He didn't seem disturbed or particularly bothered by anything that had happened.

God, I'm glad she's alive. Looks like it was close too.

"We defeated the enemies," Ilea said. "A large horde of Death and Astral Spirits were called in the wake of the battle, but I don't think anything is coming this way."

Michael gave her a brief look and nodded before returning to his work.

"What happened in the temple? And where's Velamyr?" she asked.

"We fought and defeated the creatures," Michael replied. "General Ryse was struck in the end, some kind of contingency magic activating in the process. I assume he's safe wherever his spell took him. Well done with the fight, Lilith."

Ilea could see the healer looking at her with terrified eyes. The young woman, likely a member of the Order of Truth, was trying to make herself invisible. She had dark hair and even darker eyes. Her robe was simple and looked well-worn.

The people of the Dawn Company were watching. Hector was lounging nearby.

"I don't like you, pirate, but that was well-fought," she said.

He grunted at her. "You're not bad yourself," he admitted.

"Michael, you got her out?" she asked, nodding to Felicia's prone form.

Michael stopped his work. "Yes. She was mortally wounded. Her survival was uncertain, as was mine."

Ilea glanced at him. "Thank you."

"We're all alive because we worked together," he said, a simple statement more than anything else. "Powerful barriers kept out the cold in the palace. Not a single spirit attacked despite the extensive battle. Perhaps the defenses are there for more than just the weather," he murmured.

Ilea sat down next to Felicia and watched the glowing tear in space, taking a few moments to recover.

She hadn't forgotten that Michael had been the one to open the gate. But she supposed that, in the end, things had gone reasonably well.

"The gate has to be closed," one of the mages said.

"Under no circumstances," Michael said. "It's a gate to a new realm... potentially new magic, ancient knowledge from sapient creatures living in that city. The ritual alone, if we can somehow find the knowledge. It would let us research long-range space magic gates with an actual possibility of success."

Ilea perked up.

"Besides, I cannot even conceive of a way to close that portal. Why don't you all settle down for the time being? The general will surely support your argument once he's back."

Ilea understood the danger that the gate posed, but she couldn't help but agree with Michael. All of those high-level creatures. She was already itching to go back and fight more of them. They made the north look like a holiday destination. And she wanted to meet whatever being had sent her those thoughts.

But right now, Ilea needed four baths and a restaurant's worth of food.

The ritual had been stopped, everyone had survived, and they had another world to explore.

She summoned a meal and started eating, closing her eyes as she finally read through her many notifications.

‘ding’ Your group has defeated [Akina – Warden of the Sanctuary – lvl 220]

...

‘ding’ Your group has defeated [Uryina – Bloodhealer Priest – lvl 312]

‘ding’ Your group has defeated [Pyine – The Toothbreaker of Sephilon – lvl 365 / Queensguard of Erendar – lvl 363]

...

‘ding’ You have defeated [Spirit of Death – lvl 428]

‘ding’ You have defeated [Spirit of Death – lvl 520]

...

‘ding’ You have defeated [Spirit of Death – lvl 232]

She had slain hundreds of spirits, briefly scrolling through some of the messages before she forced them away, only looking at the level-up notifications.

‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 365 – Five stat points awarded

...

‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 367 – Five stat points awarded

‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 365 – Five stat points awarded

...

‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 367 – Five stat points awarded

‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 161 – One stat point awarded

...

‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 190 – One stat point awarded

Shit. I really do want to go back into that chaos.

‘ding’ Absolute Destruction reaches 3rd lvl 29

‘ding’ Blink reaches 3rd lvl 29

‘ding’ Sentinel Sphere reaches 3rd lvl 29

‘ding’ Azarinth Perception reaches 3rd lvl 28

‘ding’ Azarinth Reversal reaches 3rd lvl 22

‘ding’ Heart of Cinder reaches 3rd lvl 28

‘ding’ Ashen Wings reaches 3rd lvl 27

‘ding’ Eyes of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 20

‘ding’ Keeper of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 30

Five skills at thirty for Kin of Ash... before Sentinel?

The fact that nothing had gotten to thirty-one after all that suggested that it really was the current highest possible level.

She wondered if another tier would show up eventually.

‘ding’ Force reaches 2nd lvl 18

...

‘ding’ Force reaches 2nd lvl 20

‘ding’ Flare of Creation reaches 2nd lvl 18

...

‘ding’ Flare of Creation reaches 2nd lvl 20

‘ding’ Displacement reaches 2nd lvl 19

‘ding’ Displacement reaches 2nd lvl 20

‘ding’ Space Shift reaches 2nd lvl 10

...

‘ding’ Space Shift reaches 2nd lvl 15

‘ding’ Body of the Valkyrie reaches 2nd lvl 4

...

‘ding’ Body of the Valkyrie reaches 2nd lvl 14

‘ding’ Space Awareness reaches 2nd lvl 4

...

‘ding’ Space Awareness reaches 2nd lvl 8

Ilea shoveled food into her mouth and smiled. Her third Class’s skills were coming along nicely. All three of its active skills could be leveled to

the third tier. Each would cost one Core Skill point.

I have so many at this point.

She thought about the three skills: Force, Displacement, and Flare of Creation.

The latter two had proven to be simply incredible.

Flare of Creation had added a new dimension to her damage, slowing enemy regeneration while damaging magical constructs, health, and mana. The immunities and resilience bonus were just the icing on the cake.

Displacement was simple enough, but already it had allowed her to bypass anti-teleportation abilities. She thought herself lucky not to have encountered the same kinds of spirits of death before her current power level.

The offensive utility it provided created so much chaos amidst enemy lines, let alone the fact that she could even teleport allies.

Force had been useful, yes. It had saved her in a few close situations, but she could've likely blinked or displaced herself just as well. The stopping effect was minuscule and did essentially the same as Displacement when it came to the impact of enemy spells on her.

She'd rather throw projectiles back at enemies than just stop them. Maybe if she were a heavier fighter with a focus on armor and shields, but the reality was that Ilea constantly moved. Most projectiles were either dodged or hit her on purpose to activate Sentinel Core. It wasn't bad, but compared to the other skills, it just kind of fell behind.

Skills available for third-tier advancement in [The Faen Valkyrie]:

- ***Force***
- ***Flare of Creation***
- ***Displacement***

Ilea decided to give the other available active skills a shot before making a decision on Force. She wanted to level up the right skills before hitting an evolution with her third Class, if and when that actually happened.

She advanced the other two skills with one Core Skill point each.

'ding' Flare of Creation reaches 3rd lvl 1

Active – Flare of Creation – 3rd lvl 1

Let the fires erupt, burning away your health in exchange for devastating power. Attacks with your body are infused with the Flame of Creation, dealing lingering damage to health, mana, and magical constructs. You are immune to stunning, fear, and shout abilities. Your resilience is increased by 45.5% [364%].

2nd stage: The pale flame settles within your core. Flare of Creation now affects enemy health regeneration. This effect is higher for areas directly touched by the Flame of Creation.

3rd stage: Your experience with Flare of Creation allows you to infuse your magical constructs with its effects. For each level in the third tier, the skill's upkeep is reduced by a static 10 [10] points of health per second, and you may sacrifice an additional static 100 [100] points of health per second to enhance the skill's effects.

Category: Aura – Body Enhancement

Ilea read through the new part twice before she smiled.

No way. Could I?

She stopped herself from testing the new power right next to Michael but was very interested in doing so.

A hundred points for each level... meaning I could sacrifice three thousand points of health per second at level thirty? That's nuts... I don't think this skill should exist with someone having Sentinel Reconstruction in the third tier.

Ilea couldn't help but giggle to herself, trying to hide the noise by stuffing more food into her mouth.

She focused again and checked Displacement's third tier.

'ding' Displacement reaches 3rd lvl 1

Active – Displacement – 3rd lvl 1

Shift space to your will, making an object or person appear somewhere else.

2nd stage: Your familiarity with teleportation and space magic allows you to move one additional object for each level in the 2nd and 3rd tier.

Magical constructs are now affected by Displacement.

3rd stage: You may choose two flat areas and connect them through space. At the time of marking an area, it has to be within the range of Displacement. Areas have to be connected within one minute of activating the spell and cannot be farther apart than 250m [875m]. This ability can only be used every 1200 seconds [255 seconds]. Additionally, you may change the orientation of the objects you displace.
Category: Space Magic

Ilea decided to test this one instead of trying to understand what any of it meant. *Being able to change the orientation of things is pretty nice already.*

Michael glanced her way for a moment but didn't comment. He then summoned some food himself, as if he'd been reminded of the human need to eat by the bowl in her hand.

Ilea checked the rest of her messages.

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SIXTY-FOUR

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Progression

‘ding’ Deviant of Humanity reaches lvl 12

‘ding’ Deviant of Humanity reaches lvl 13

‘ding’ Identify reaches lvl 16

‘ding’ Veteran reaches 3rd lvl 7

‘ding’ You have learned the General Skill: Devour Resistance – lvl 1

Devour Resistance – lvl 1

A specialty school of magic combining the perfect control of one’s body, blood, and mana to create a unique blend of highly destructive spells. Both are used to damage the enemy’s defenses and body with the benefit of partial health absorption. This school of magic can only be used by those with extensive knowledge and experience in each of the composite schools of magic. Your survival either means a lack of willingness to kill your enemy or an incredible defensive repertoire that rivals your opponent’s magical prowess. Coupled with Blood Magic, Arcane Magic, and Health Drain Resistances, this new skill combines elements of these resistances to counter this specialized school of magic.

‘ding’ Devour Resistance reaches lvl 2

...

‘ding’ Devour Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 1

2nd stage: Really? Why? Your body refuses to be eaten by devour magic. You should work on your diplomatic skills.

‘ding’ Devour Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 2

...

‘ding’ Devour Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 6

‘ding’ Blood Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 9

‘ding’ Death Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 9

...

‘ding’ Death Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 11

‘ding’ Astral Magic Resistance reaches lvl 2

...

‘ding’ Astral Magic Resistance reaches lvl 17

‘ding’ You have found a new realm. Again. And you have faced some of its more powerful residents in battle – One Core Skill point awarded

‘ding’ You have met and fought an Astral Spirit – One Core Skill point awarded

New resistance, let’s go!

She checked if any of the magic she faced had made new third-tier resistances available.

To her surprise, there were two new contenders.

- Health Drain Resistance

You have faced an enemy using devour magic and prevailed. While it isn’t limited to its health drain aspect, the effects themselves are hardly comparable to conventional health drain abilities. A third tier in this skill should help mitigate such damage.

- Mana Drain Resistance

Astral Spirits are rare and powerful entities, close in essence and body to the very mana they wield. Anyone who decides to face such a creature must be able to strongly resist their powerful drain attacks to gain even a slight chance of ever defeating one. You may advance this skill to the third tier.

Damn, I want both!

She checked her status and found only one third-tier General Skill point available. It was her emergency point. She might have chosen to advance her Health Drain Resistance had Queen Zaiked still been alive, but as it was, she regretfully leveled neither.

She put her outstanding points into her secondary stats and checked her new status.

Name: Ilea Spears

Unspent stat points: 0

Unspent Core Skill points: 24

Unspent 3rd-tier General Skill points [1795 total skill levels]: 1

Class 1: The Azarinth Sentinel – lvl 367

- ***Active: Absolute Destruction – 3rd lvl 29***
- ***Active: Sentinel Reconstruction – 3rd lvl 30***
- ***Active: Azarinth Awakening – 3rd lvl 30***
- ***Active: Blink – 3rd lvl 29***
- ***Active: Sentinel Sphere – 3rd lvl 29***
- ***Passive: Sentinel Core – 3rd lvl 30***
- ***Passive: Azarinth Fighting – 3rd lvl 30***
- ***Passive: Sentinel Huntress – 3rd lvl 8***
- ***Passive: Azarinth Perception – 3rd lvl 28***
- ***Passive: Azarinth Reversal – 3rd lvl 22***

Class 2: Kin of Ash – lvl 367

- ***Active: Armor of Ash – 3rd lvl 30***
- ***Active: Aspect of Ash – 3rd lvl 30***
- ***Active: True Ash Creation – 3rd lvl 30***
- ***Active: Heart of Cinder – 3rd lvl 28***
- ***Active: Storm of Cinders – 3rd lvl 23***
- ***Passive: Ash and Ember Unity – 3rd lvl 28***
- ***Passive: Ashen Wings – 3rd lvl 27***
- ***Passive: Eyes of Ash – 3rd lvl 20***
- ***Passive: Avatar of Ash – 3rd lvl 30***
- ***Passive: Keeper of Ash – 3rd lvl 30***

Class 3: The Faen Valkyrie – lvl 190

- Active: Force – 2nd lvl 20***
- Active: Flare of Creation – 3rd lvl 1***
- Active: Displacement – 3rd lvl 1***
- Passive: Space Shift – 2nd lvl 15***
- Passive: Body of the Valkyrie – 2nd lvl 14***
- Passive: Space Awareness – 2nd lvl 8***

General Skills: Hidden

Status:

Vitality: 1000

Endurance: 403

Strength: 384

Dexterity: 395

Intelligence: 1000

Wisdom: 1000

Health: 15398/15398

Stamina: 3998/4030

Mana: 19982/20000

It felt like the base was good, as if her body and mind were ready again for more mana, more power in her spells.

Yeah, can probably go for magical stats again now. It feels good.

Though maybe I should clean up a little bit to round some numbers. 384 and 395 seem like a bit of a mess.

Now done with her food, Ilea smiled to herself and looked at Michael.

She was downright appalled by his lack of interest in his own dish, swallowing most of it without even chewing. The smell and look didn't speak well for his vile nourishment either.

Hector had left for the city at some point, and the Dawn Company people were having a meeting at the other end of the hall. Various spells obscured them, not a sound coming from them even though they were clearly talking.

“Are you already searching the city with your other clones?” she asked Michael.

“No,” he said. “I’m happy to wait until everyone here is ready.”

Ilea wondered if he was lying or if he simply hadn’t been able to recreate them yet.

Or none of them are actually really him.

Felicia finally woke up then, blinking a few times.

“Lilith,” she said with a broad smile. She got up and hugged her. “You survived!”

Ilea nodded, noting that she had still used her made-up name, and hugged her back. “As did you.”

Felicia registered Michael at that moment and let go a little awkwardly.

“Apologies,” she whispered.

“Don’t worry about it,” Ilea replied.

“Thank you for the help in there,” Felicia said, bowing lightly toward Michael.

He waved her off, already absorbed in his work again.

Ilea glanced at the healer girl in the well-worn robes. She was now sitting a little farther away. She wasn’t bound but still seemed anxious. “What’s the plan with her?”

Michael glanced at her, seeming confused for a second. “I don’t care, as long as she remains here for now and doesn’t alert the guards and soldiers of Gyffold. I’m sure Velamyr will have something to say once he’s back. Though I do wonder how he’s going to get back into the city.” The thought seemed to amuse him.

Ilea walked over to the girl and summoned a meal and something to drink. “I’m Lilith. Have you eaten anything?”

The young woman shook her head. She looked almost frozen as she stared at Ilea with her black eyes.

Ilea set down the food and drink next to her. “Care to tell me your name?”

“Eria,” she replied in a whisper, looking at the food.

“Thank you for the help, Eria. We’re still figuring out what exactly is going on here, but it seems like the immediate danger of the ritual is over. I’m afraid you’ll have to stay here for a while because we don’t want the guard to be alerted of our presence.

“I’ll let you know when I know more, and if anyone tries to do anything to you or threatens you, tell them that you’re under the protection of Lilith.”

Eria looked at her for a moment and nodded slowly.

Ilea gave her a smile and returned to the others. “I want to go test something quickly, and then I’ll go back in through the portal,” Ilea said.

“Once the Destroyer is back, I shall join you,” Michael said.

“I’ll be back shortly,” Ilea said and vanished. Felicia followed her and glanced over her shoulder when they reappeared in a nearby alley.

“What happened?” Felicia said. “Tell me everything!”

Ilea blinked again, this time into an empty hall.

“In a minute. I just want to try something out,” Ilea said, forming a sphere of ash. It floated above her hand, without a direct connection to her body, and then ignited with a pale white flame.

It’s that easy, she thought with a smile. She moved it around and kept the flames alive. She quickly told Felicia about the fight and the hordes they had faced.

“Spirits and a queen?” Felicia asked after Ilea was done. She grinned. “You love that, don’t you?”

Ilea smiled back. “There were thousands, Felicia. And they were all super high level.”

“I really don’t understand people like you. Fighting an entire horde of dangerous monsters doesn’t exactly sound fun, even if I take my magic into consideration. But I’m happy for you. And also, was it you who healed me? I was pretty messed up.”

“Eria started. I finished,” Ilea said.

“Thank you. Now... explain that thing to me.” She pointed at the blazing ball of ash. “Could you not do that before?”

“No... not exactly,” Ilea said, adding one hundred more health to the spell and seeing it flare up slightly. She formed a mist of ash before her and made it swirl around.

Felicia smiled. “You’re not g—”

The whole thing suddenly flared up in white fire.

Nice!

It costs more health because it’s larger? Or because it’s not connected to me?

It turned out it was both. The difference in cost wasn’t huge, but it was noticeable. Before, the spell affected her body and ash connected to her

directly, like her limbs. Now, it affected all of her magical constructs.

Ilea made the flames die down and tried out her other new ability. "Don't resist."

Felicia raised her eyebrows but didn't say anything.

Then she vanished, reappearing a few meters away, upside down. Felicia remained floating in the air, her smile looking like a frown from that angle.

"That won't be super useful against trained warriors," she said.

"Not all of them can fly."

"True," Felicia said, floating closer and slowly turning back upright as the air flowed around her.

"You said your second Class helps with the berserker stuff, right?" Ilea asked.

"Helps me get out of it, yeah."

"I remembered something when I checked my resistances earlier. Do you have Soul Magic Resistance?"

"No. I don't think I've ever knowingly met a soul mage."

"Maybe you should. There's a section in the second tier that says *A serene calm now sways through your very essence, changed and evolved, grounded and calm*. Maybe that could help."

"I appreciate the thought," Felicia said. "I'll see if I can find a trainer somewhere in the Empire, but I've got it mostly under control."

"Good. I guess I was a little worried earlier."

Felicia narrowed her eyes. "I took down a few of them, you know?"

"Meaning you don't need my protection. I get it, but I'm still allowed to be worried."

"I wasn't worried about you," Felicia said with a slight grin.

"I don't know if I should feel flattered or hurt."

Next, Ilea tried to use the main new part of Displacement. She focused on the closest spot her ability could reach and marked the area. At the same time, she marked an area on the other side of the hall.

She watched the phenomena form thanks to Space Awareness. A slight distortion in the air was visible to the naked eye, but the sight her awareness provided proved much more confusing.

"What did you do?" Felicia asked, looking at the changed air.

Ilea felt the spell drain her mana quite quickly, a conscious effort necessary to keep the magic active.

That's quite costly. I can only keep it active for less than a minute with all my mana.

She made an ashen sphere and shot it into one of the five-by-five-meter areas.

They watched with fascination as the sphere vanished and flew through the other area.

Its momentum hadn't been used up, and the thing simply continued ricocheting between the two areas another three times before it finally fell to the floor.

Ilea let go of the spell. Her mind was going through different scenarios where she could use it. Compared to her other space magic, this addition felt like it could have far broader and more creative applications.

"It's like an actual gate..." Felicia said. "Can I step through it?"

"I would imagine that would work, yes," Ilea said. "It's a space connection between two areas, nothing more, nothing less."

"Limited range?"

"Yep. Eight hundred meters right now."

"Hmm... still usable in a siege or to break in somewhere without detection."

"Or to send the combined efforts of ten explosion mages deep into an enemy line," Ilea said with a thoughtful expression.

"That works too. Can you move them?"

"No," Ilea said. She had tried, but she'd have to remake new gates if she wanted to change where they existed.

Over four minutes before I can use it again.

"Done testing?" Felicia asked.

"One more thing..." Ilea said, aiming her hand toward the open space before her.

She formed a mist of non-condensed ash that simply flowed forward. Flare of Creation activated, the flames spreading through the simple ash like wildfire.

The particles farthest away fell to the ground, beyond her manipulation's influence but still burning. She didn't let up, creating more ash as she moved the flaming spray around.

Costs nearly nothing... other than health.

"Flamethrower unlocked," she said to herself, moving her arm back as if it were a loaded weapon.

The flames subsided and left behind a thin carpet of ash. The nature of the spell even allowed her to keep the ash burning as long as she had resources to spend.

More condensed constructs would have a much higher range, but this way, she could cover large beings with Flare of Creation in mere moments without having to get particularly close.

“Flamethrower?” Felicia asked. “I guess that makes sense. I’m happy you’ve got some new toys.”

[Mage – lvl 252]

“You got a few levels too. No evolution?” Ilea asked.

She shook her head. “Sadly not. Two new spell options but nothing that seems more suited than what I already have.”

“Fair enough.” Ilea paused. “I’ve been thinking about you getting injured so badly. I have a spell that lets me put a mark on people. I’d be able to find you, and you can call for help. But only if you’re interested in having it. And only for emergency use, of course.”

Felicia gave her a strange look and tilted her head slightly to the side. “Lilith at my beck and call? Why would you even ask? Do it.”

“Emergencies only,” Ilea repeated.

Felicia made her glove vanish and looked at the forming runes. “Of course, Lady Lilith.”

Ilea rolled her eyes. “Shall we, then?”

“The portal? What’s the plan? Just explore?”

“That too,” Ilea said as she switched into her Baralia armor and blinked out into an empty alley. “A being communicated with me through mind magic in there. I really want to find out what it was.”

“You can talk to things with mind magic?”

“I think most mind mages can initiate contact. I’m not sure why it only communicated with me... Well, I guess the others might not have mentioned it.”

“It may be dangerous.”

“I’m not getting that impression. Not from the thoughts and emotions it sent.”

“Well, I’m happy to accompany you, if you’ll have me.”

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Species

Hector hadn't returned yet, and Michael glanced up but didn't make a move to follow Ilea as she approached the portal. She stepped through the gate and came out on the other side.

Felicia followed and immediately started breathing more quickly.

"The mana or the cold?" Ilea asked, healing mana flowing into her.

"Both," Felicia said and activated her magic.

"Can you still talk with that active?"

Felicia calmed, heat and energy exuding from her. She looked at Ilea and growled.

"Oh no," Ilea sighed. "Come on, then, I'll lead you," she said, grabbing Felicia's hand.

Felicia started giggling. "I'm kidding... I'm kidding."

Ilea didn't let go, dragging the wind mage behind her and into the temple. She ignored the various creatures staring at them from behind pillars and half-closed stone doors.

"I'll keep you safe, Felicia, don't worry," she said, now clad again in her bone and ash armor.

"I'm being abducted," Felicia said in a whisper.

Ilea finally let her go. "But seriously, we're in another realm. Probably shouldn't be joking around like this."

"Oh? Seems like I was wrong and you became a lot more boring since that Taleen dungeon," she teased, but her eyes were focused now, glancing at every movement she could perceive. "Where to?"

A few ant creatures approached from one of the nearby stairwells. One of them made a few clicking sounds at them.

Ilea shook her head, not understanding anything.

The central ant gestured to one of the nearby bodies.

Ilea raised one of the mantis corpses with a few ashen limbs.

The ant took a few steps back, obviously in distress. It seemed to calm down when Ilea carefully moved the corpse closer. She put the body onto the ground and stepped away, choosing a nearby stairwell that led down.

The stairwell was long and dark, but in the cramped space, Ilea could almost pretend they were back on Elos. Simple stone stairs were, it seemed, a constant between realms.

They descended for a minute or so and finally arrived at the bottom, where there was a destroyed stone gateway and a long corridor lying beyond. Solid rock walls pressed in from all sides.

Everything here looked a little cleaner than upstairs. Statues of various creatures lined the corridor's walls. A few torches lit the passage, flickering from time to time.

Five massive stone arches framed the length of the passage, evenly spaced out. They would have to pass under each arch to reach the other side. A sealed stone gate lay at the end of the ominous hallway.

"The presence is beyond that gate," Ilea said.

"It looks ceremonial," Felicia said.

Ilea tried to establish a connection. And the being allowed it.

Hello, she sent.

Hello, the thought came back, but distorted, imitated, and not spoken with an understanding of the word itself.

She sent a calm thought to the creature, stepping out into the hall and toward the large round gate at the end of it.

Felicia followed in silence.

A thought came back.

Ilea saw a bustling city of stone, thousands of creatures communicating in sounds she couldn't comprehend. She saw the distant mountains, the desert, and the sun burning down from above.

The thought was accompanied by feelings. Some she couldn't grasp, but others felt like pride and love.

"I think it's showing me what this place was," Ilea said.

"Are you talking to it?" Felicia asked.

“No... I don’t think it speaks our language.”

Her companion slowed down. “The air is...”

“What’s wrong?” Ilea asked, reaching out with her ash.

The mana, she thought.

“You might want to stay back.”

Felicia nodded, halting her progress beneath the first archway. “Be careful, right?”

Ilea gave her a smile and watched her teleport back toward the stairs. Then Ilea turned back around and passed under the remaining arches, the mana density increasing with every step.

Finally, she touched the gate.

She felt power within but couldn’t perceive any enchantments.

Can I enter? she sent.

The being didn’t reply.

Instead of entering, she spread her ash and formed a replica of the gate and herself, making the gate open before she walked inside.

The being sent a wave of emotions that amounted to *danger*.

To me or it?

She didn’t know, but she really wanted to meet the creature. She had an inkling that it was the one who had helped with the gate. And now they had established a connection.

She wanted to find out why, to learn about the gate and the space magic it required. And while she could probably fight the spirits, she wasn’t keen on having them find and enter the gate themselves.

Instead of opening the stone gate, she blinked inside. Or tried to.

The spell didn’t work, and she reappeared in front of the rock.

She tried Displacement, and that worked, moving her into a short, dim hallway that led deeper into the structure. It appeared similar in construction to the previous corridor but without the long length, torches, or archways. Less ceremonial, more... practical.

Now that she was here, Ilea understood the warning.

The mana here was damn near physical, if such a thing was possible.

She could feel it around her.

And she could feel the presence ahead. Clearer now.

Lilith.

The thought came to her.

A question? A thought?

She pointed at herself. “Lilith,” she said out loud, sending the thought at the same time.

Ilea pointed forward.

The being didn’t send anything back.

Another gate blocked the way a few meters ahead, and Ilea again displaced herself through.

Beyond it, the mana grew denser still. She could see space itself distorting here, more wisps visible than normal. Her resistance to arcane magic was far into the third tier, yet this place still felt uncomfortable.

It was hard to perceive the details of the latest hallway, though it appeared similar to the last. Darker, but somewhat decorated. A rug with detailed symbols sewn into it lay on the ground.

She pointed at it.

A thought reached her. The image of a mantis. Not just any but the one she had faced in battle. The queen.

Zaiked, Ilea sent.

The being sent a set of emotions. They were hard to discern. There was anger, fear, uncertainty, and pride. This pride felt different than the pride she had felt communicated by the creature before.

Another sealed stone gate lay before her. Ilea breathed in slowly and teleported through.

Once she was through, she breathed out and steadied herself, feeling the full extent of the being’s power.

It was... manageable.

Is it the result of the being? Or is this simply the required density of mana for it to survive?

The rounded series of tunnel-like hallways now opened up into a large space. A meadow of pitch-black grass spread before her, broken up by a thin creek with clear flowing water. Golden fireflies lent warm light to the surroundings, and a gentle breeze brushed through the grass and past her ash.

Atop a small hill about fifty meters in stood a large tree made entirely of crystal. Everything shimmered in a pale blue light, from its trunk to the many leaves hanging from its branches.

Hello, the creature sent, clearer yet again. Its voice sounded similar to her own – an imitation, perhaps.

Hello, Ilea sent back. *Who are you?*

Unsure.

Ilea stepped closer to the tree, watching the grass part below her ash-covered boots. The fireflies were within her sphere's range, but she couldn't see them. Not with the spell.

She stopped before crossing the creek, holding her hand out to one of the flying creatures. It landed on her outstretched fingers and fluttered its wings, but she neither felt nor perceived it.

An illusion?

The wisps suggested something else entirely, something she could not comprehend.

Maybe I just stepped into the world-devouring equivalent of a carnivorous plant.

Her instincts told her she was safe, but who was to say the creature didn't have a way to influence her toward that decision?

No. Fear, the creature said. Safe.

"That's exactly what a flesh-eating plant would say," Ilea said.

Unsure.

"No, I'm pretty sure about that," she said and smiled.

She tried to identify the little firefly. She was pretty sure the tree was the creature that was speaking to her, though the high mana density made it difficult to pinpoint its location.

[n OH u M-OH e-lvl ????]

Of course, she thought and squinted at the firefly.

Veteran had a hard time grasping this creature's true power, but she knew it was above level two thousand.

Ilea wasn't particularly scared. She respected its power, but she'd felt no animosity so far. If it really was just a murder plant, it would have eaten her minutes ago. Or tried to.

I wonder who's stronger? A Fae or this thing? That would be an interesting fight.


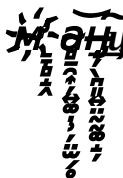
"Are you learning my language?" Ilea asked. "I don't know if I can have a conversation with images and emotions alone."

As she sat down on the grass to summon another meal, the grass moved away.

Hmm.

She tried to pluck a blade off the ground and found herself unable to accomplish the task.

Ilea squinted and identified the ground.

[n  u  e - lvl ????]

Oh.

“Am I sitting on you?” she asked before displacing herself back and beyond the grassy meadow.

An amused thought reached her.

No fear. You are safe here.

“So, you *are* learning... What about the others? Are they not safe here?” Ilea asked. She pointed behind herself and asked again. “Safe?”

No safe. Danger.

“Danger... why?”

Unsure.

Still learning, hmm? She found it felt nice to talk to something that wasn’t human for a change.

Zaiked is death?

“She’s dead, yes,” Ilea said. “I’m sorry.”

I’m... regret.

“Did she imprison you here?”

Unsure.

Ilea asked a bunch of questions, using visual aids from her ash to clarify words and meanings. It had already been clear that this creature was insanely powerful and intelligent, but she didn’t really see a reason why she shouldn’t teach it Standard.

If anything, it would help clear up if the creature was a monstrous devourer, an uninterested third party, a prisoner, or something entirely different. So far, it was clear that the being had some kind of connection to

the queen. It was unclear as of yet if that was a good thing for Ilea or the opposite.

"Prison," the being said into her mind fifteen minutes later. *"No prison. My... home."*

"You live here? Why the gates?" Ilea asked.

"Protection against... mana?"

"The ambient mana here is pretty dense, yes. It's like that in the whole realm."

"Damaging to... organism. You... survive. Can stay here... surprise."

"I'm pretty durable," Ilea said with a smile.

"Survived... battle with... Zaiked. Yes, durable. Amusement."

"Are you that tree?" Ilea asked, forming an ashen tree and pointing toward the pale blue thing.

"Body? No. Am here."

"Here? Where?" Ilea asked before she understood. "Aha... you're this entire room?"

Hmm.

"Did you open the space gate to our realm?" she asked, trying to illustrate with her ash.

"One... option. Yes. Queen Zaiked disliked. Did not believe... enemy. Pride too much. Survival not priority. She... refused flight."

"So you opened the gate to flee? Because of the spirits out there?"

"I can survive. Awakened here cannot. Protected here but starving... soon. Cold permeate and spirits will... come."

"Awakened?"

"You. Awakened. Zaiked. Awakened."

"I see... so sapient creatures. Beings that can think?" Ilea asked. *Or just really high-level sapients?*

The residents of Hallowfort called themselves Awakened, but she supposed to a being like this, anyone with the ability to think and reason could fall into that category.

"Eyes. Yes."

"Freaky way to put it, but I guess. So, the barriers that protect this place, those are your doing?"

"Yes. Straining but... possible."

"It's hard to keep the cold out?"

"Spirits."

“But you’re a much higher level even than the Astral Spirits I’ve seen. Couldn’t you just slaughter them?”

“The spirits... devour... mana. Too many are... impossible to defeat. And you have met... mundane creatures only. Daughters of Sephilon shall devour even... I.”

“Pretty scary if they can even defeat a creature like you. Can they go through the gate?”

“Yes, but they will die, in time. Or return. Your realm cannot sustain... them.”

Die in time? How long would it take for them to die?

“What happened? To beings going through?” it asked.

“The Awakened? The mana density is too low on our side. Many came through and turned into monsters... They lost their awakening, if you will. I’m sorry,” Ilea said.

The being was quiet.

“I had... assumed. But we had to try. It was impossible... to tell. I needed cooperation from Awakened. Your... species replied.”

“They thought this was the Realm of Life... What did you promise them?”

“Awakening,” the being said.

“But we are already awakened... or am I wrong?”

“Not they. Other beings, lost in their natural way, seeking light but treading in the dark.”

“You know how to awaken monsters? To make them sapient?” Ilea asked.

That would be interesting but scary at the same time. Humanity had plenty of enemies already.

The north, however, could flourish with civilization once more, she thought.

“Only through one’s own efforts can one awaken. Few ever find awakening themselves, but my guidance can influence the odds.”

“How?”

“I warn them of danger, lead them to food and water. I nudge them toward wisdom and intelligence until they can make decisions on their own.”

“So you helped every creature here awaken?”

“No. Reproduction does not cease, but awakening changes a species. The benefits are often hereditary. Sometimes they’re not,” the being explained.

“Why do all that in the first place?”

“Why do you eat?”

“I love food,” Ilea replied.

“As do many species, I have found,” the creature said, an amused thought attached to the words.

“So, it’s a hobby for you? To help creatures awaken?”

“A hobby... a pastime... No, it’s more meaningful than that. It is... what I am.”

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Meadow

The being was learning Standard even faster than the Enavurin. Ilea wondered what kind of conversations they would have.

It leads creatures to awakening?

“Do you remember your own awakening?” Ilea asked.

“Yes. Before the last darkening. I remember feeling the wind, hearing sound for the first time.”

“That’s pretty cool... I don’t remember my own birth.”

“Amusing. I am not a mammal. Your kind often needs time to develop fully. I was not aware of my development, nor was I birthed to a mother.”

“Formed by mana?”

“I have not been able to determine the circumstances of my creation. An unexpected mutation is my best guess. Perhaps I was merely a particularly resilient growth of grass before this.”

“What is the darkening?”

“The large spheres in the sky. Planets, stars. One covers the other.”

“An eclipse? There’s one happening here, right?”

“Eclipse... yes.”

“You know about planets and stars?” Ilea asked. “But yes, I think that’s essentially the meaning. When the moon temporarily covers the sun. But I don’t think it should last as long as this one has.”

“I have learned some things about the astronomy of this realm. In this case, it is not a moon covering the sun but the planetary body doing the very same. You are currently on the only moon of Sephilon. Erendar.”

“We’re on the moon?”

“Yes. The Astral Spirits you have encountered came here from Sephilon, no longer unwilling to wander this moon.”

“Because the sun is covered? Wouldn’t they just come every night then?”

“I don’t understand your question. What do you believe the sun does?”

“Provide light and energy?”

“Yes. And stability. To that which you call mana. Your presence here is a testament to your achievements. I knew it would be difficult for the Pale Ones to survive in your realm as soon as your group entered Erendar, but I had thought it impossible for your kind to enter my domain.”

“That still doesn’t explain why the spirits wouldn’t come at night.”

“Energy does not dissipate instantly. It takes many orbits without sunlight to cause a collapse. The one you see here has been in progress for some time. Enough for Astral Spirits to deem our surface acceptable, but perhaps not yet enough to prevent all formation of life.”

“This eclipse has been going on for more than a day?”

“Orbits of the sun, not Sephilon. It is an exceptionally rare phenomenon. Few beings remain who saw the last, and fewer still remember it. I could predict its return and tried to find a way to prevent the collapse of this civilization.”

“Fleeing to another realm was that option you talked about?” Ilea asked.

“I thought it impossible for a long time. The discovery of disconnected realms was surprising. A foolish hope turned into my only plausible option as our efforts failed, one by one.”

“Our efforts? Yours and Zaiked’s? Who was she?”

“The Queen of the Pale Ones. The strongest of them all. And one of the few who could communicate with me. A high level of Mental Resistance is necessary to comprehend my thoughts, something their species struggled with.

“Zaiked refused cooperation or subjugation, attacking your species in an effort of conquest and thus dooming the remaining survivors of her kind. It is understandable. Her history is one of warfare and struggle.

“She had never deemed communication a favorable trait. Those who had cooperated with me beforehand were slain when she came to power. Her strongest warriors failed to kill me, which allowed rare interactions to take place afterward. If only based on respect and fear.

“However, even in the most recent orbits, she remained suspicious, without trust. Her very last actions were to fight instead of flee into a new realm of limitless possibilities.

“She shared the possibility, and those who wished to take the risk have already gone through the fragile fissures. I know now that they did not survive.”

“Doesn’t sound like she was particularly wise, then,” Ilea said.

“Zaiked and her army fought the Spirits, both those of Death and those of Sephilon. They killed thousands, but losses soon became more regular. The Astral Spirits were too much for most of her warriors to kill. For every one they slayed, ten more would take its place.

“Children started freezing in their mothers’ arms. Those too weak to bear the slowly changing mana went mad and attacked their own. Crops failed, and hunger plagued even the most powerful of her kind.

“I believe that she was already lost when you arrived. Because she had lost everything she had held dear.”

“I’m sorry.”

“She fought to the end. The only end she could see, but there are survivors yet.”

Ilea nodded in understanding. It wants to save them. That’s why all of this came to be in the first place.

“She considered them lesser. They have the strength to survive but not the will to fight.”

“What do you think?”

“They are all eyes.”

“Eyes for what? You?”

“Eyes that perceive existence. Existence cannot be with no eyes to see. Thus, I seek to help awaken those who remain blind.”

“You seemed to have formed a deeper connection to Zaiked than her just being an observer, a set of eyes for you,” Ilea said.

“Empathy is a sure way toward awakening. I feel it as much as you do.”

“And you don’t blame us for coming here? For killing so many?”

“You are awakened, as are those who came with you. I feel that I must try and prevent the deaths of those I sheltered for so many orbits, but I will not kill Awakened to achieve that goal. Nor will I force my will. Zaiked made her choice, as did those standing beside her.”

“That’s why you’re talking to me? Why you haven’t eaten me yet?”

"I determined that there was a possibility of your cooperation. Your kind has yet to kill any of Erendar's awakened without reason. While the Queen thought cooperation to be an admittance of weakness, I think it the only way for Awakened to truly thrive.

"Desires, needs, and goals differ greatly among the various awakened species I have met. I have found no evidence to suggest that animosity is the only possible result, however. Yet we remain influenced by the instincts that once drove us.

"Most Awakened would not be able to accept my existence, responding either with terror or aggression. You have met many powerful beings, and thus you stand here with a less primal understanding of my existence, willing to communicate with a creature not of your own kind."

"Your goal is to transport the remaining survivors into our realm."

"It is."

"How many are left?"

"Fifty-three in total."

"Including you?"

"No."

So many people sacrificed, so many Awakened dead because of the mana density. And now there are so few left.

The Order of Truth had thought this some realm of wonder, while Zaiked hadn't been able to imagine working with Ilea and the others even when a stable fissure was established.

Ilea would do what she could to save the rest of these people.

"Yeah, I'm willing to help. It would be good to get them across. I'm just wondering how."

"You would be willing to accept the survivors of an unknown species into your realm?"

"We're all Awakened. The problem is that there simply isn't enough mana there to keep them sane. I've seen it happen."

The being remained quiet longer than before.

"Yes. That is a problem. I feel, however, that mana is flowing through the spatial tunnel, spreading into your world."

"Into a populated city that won't respond kindly to the invasion of another species," Ilea said.

"You do not have the power to convince them?"

They wouldn't want to give up Gyffold. Neither the current government nor the Empire. And even if they did, what future would wait for the survivors there?

No, they would have to go somewhere else. Somewhere where all Awakened are welcome and where the various nations around Gyffold can't reach them.

"I don't think so. There are too many parties involved."

It remained silent for a moment.

"Erendar is not a static place. Are there places in your realm where the mana density would be enough to sustain the creatures that remain within this palace?"

"Yeah," Ilea said. "That's what I was thinking. The problem would be getting them there."

"You have a way to cross into my domain. Do you not have the power to move them into such a territory?"

"Not really, I'm afraid. Not long distance," she said, thinking of Kyrian.

Maybe this being could help. Iana would probably lose her mind if she got a chance to talk to it.

"That mana spilling out is a problem, long term at least. Can you close the gate?"

"It would require an incredible effort, but it is possible for me to close the tunnel. I do, however, see no reason why I should do so. Not until the survivors have found shelter."

"I see."

"I knew the danger of opening a gate to an unknown realm. But understand that if I shut the gate, my entire focus will be needed. All efforts to prevent spirits from finding this location will cease, nor will I be able to fight them off should they arrive."

"And you can't just form another gate somewhere else?" Ilea asked.

"You underestimate the efforts that went into its creation. Opening another such gate would bring the Astral Spirits upon us just as much as closing the present one would do. This is the gate we have."

Then we'll have to go through Gyffold – and the low-mana territory.

"Hmm... I'm happy to help the others survive, but I don't know if I can. Not currently, at least."

"You are able to stand here, and I can feel that you have some affinity for both space and arcane magic. If you are willing to help, perhaps we

could find a way for you to protect the others?”

“You would teach me? Maybe there are others who could help figure it out... No, I guess most people wouldn’t be interested in sheltering survivors of an unknown species. They wouldn’t even know where to bring them.”

I already have a way to get back to Elos. Displacement already lets me form a gate between two places. Might just be there’s a possibility somewhere in there.

“If you are willing to learn, I am willing to teach. The eclipse has yet to reach its heights, and until then, the Daughters of Sephilon will not be able to walk this moon.”

“How long do we have?”

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Considerations

“When the eclipse reaches its most central point, the Daughters of Sephilon will descend. They perceive the palace even through the shroud of my magic, and they will come.”

“And when exactly will that be?” Ilea asked.

“If my calculations are right, based on what I’ve heard from your interpretation of time, we have ninety of your days until the Daughters may descend, when the mana density on Erendar has reached suitable heights. Though should I show myself, they may appear earlier.”

“So they can come anyway?”

“Should they find suitable magic for their unlimited need. I don’t think too highly of myself, but there is a lot of power here. Enough that even the strains of lower mana might be born to feast, if only for a little while.”

“I see. That’s... reasonable. Not a very long time, but we can probably work with that.”

“You are not an experienced space mage. Ninety days is not a lot of time to make meaningful progress, but I’ve been surprised before.”

She smiled. “Yeah, then I guess we better get started. Can you try a space magic spell on me? Maybe move me a bit? I have a spell like that. I want to see if I can resist it.”

Ilea felt the attack coming, a surge of incredible power pulling on her very being. She reappeared a few meters away.

Nothing. I couldn’t stop it even slightly.

She had seen the wisps too. This thing had plucked her from space as if it was plucking leaves from a tree.

“Your resistance is high, but your abilities cannot stop overwhelming power,” the being said.

“Did you try to move me here?” Ilea asked, gesturing around herself.

“No. I aimed for the entrance.”

At least my resistance isn’t entirely ineffective...

“What should I call you, by the way? I have no clue what the identification says,” Ilea said.

“I do not believe in such concepts,” the being said.

“Is Meadow okay?”

“I prefer Endless Meadow,” Meadow replied.

“Sure. Meadow. Short for Endless Meadow,” Ilea said and nodded sagely.

“Your attempts at humor are falling flat, Lilith.”

“Yeah, yeah, everyone’s a critic.”

“Before we move on, I believe it would be best if the survivors stayed down here. I will create writing as they cannot comprehend my thoughts. Bring it to them. It will let them know you are not their enemy.”

Several sheets of rock appeared, strange lines and squiggles forming on them.

“I’ll try to get them together,” Ilea said – just as the stone gate behind her exploded.

“Fucking finally!” Hector exclaimed. *“Hey creature, where are you keeping all the gold?”*

“Shiny metals held no meaning to most of Erendar’s awakened species,” Meadow replied.

“You taught it Standard? Well fucking done,” he said, rolling his eyes.

“I have learned from you as I have learned from her.”

“Is there anything worth looting here other than the trash in those vaults?”

“What you call ‘trash’ are memories of ancestors who died in battle. Each holds value both historical and sentimental,” it explained. *“I do not know what you deem worthy of calling treasure, water mage, but I suggest you look for it yourself.”*

“Maybe killing the remaining monsters here might at least get me some experience,” he said and stepped onto the grass. *“Or I could kill you. You’re just a tree, after all.”*

“Amusing. You are welcome to try, mage. I won’t hold a grudge against you for your baseless confidence.”

Ilea watched on in amusement. *He can’t really think he has a chance.*

“Come on, if we work together, we might get a four-mark kill,” Hector said, gazing hungrily at the tree.

“You can’t be serious,” Ilea replied. “But go on, I think it’d be quite amusing if you tried.”

“I agree,” Hector said, shooting a jet of water at the tree. The magic never reached it, vanishing into nothing.

“You are no longer welcome here,” the being said before Hector vanished, including his water sphere and a part of the floor he had stood on.

“Did you kill him?” Ilea asked.

“I do not kill Awakened beings. I merely placed him close to the exit,” Meadow said. *“And I will continue to do so if he attacks the others.”*

“Yeah, probably a good idea to keep an eye on him. I don’t think he’s used to being around people more powerful than him. I’ll check on the survivors and bring them down here. I assume just to the base level and not deeper into these tunnels?”

“Yes. The mana density is too high for them.”

Ilea nodded and left with the sheets of stone. She looked at them and smiled to herself.

This day is getting weirder and weirder. Not that I’m complaining. Space magic training from a four-mark creature? Sign me up.

Ilea appeared in front of a group of insects. She even recognized a few of them as the ants she had met in the throne room.

Most of them shied back.

She just stood there and held up the tablets.

They made clicking noises, obviously arguing with one another, before a few walked closer.

“You understand?” Ilea asked.

They replied in clicks. A few of them rushed out into the nearby tunnels, but most remained.

Ilea turned and walked back toward the Meadow’s area. *They’re following me. Good.*

She met Michael on the way, his eyes darting from her to the insects behind.

Ilea cocked her head at him. “What?”

“You can communicate with them?” he asked.

“Just one of them,” she said as they continued down into the same hallway she had entered before.

Felicia was still there, listening to Hector rant about tree monsters as she nodded along. She finally found Ilea’s eyes, a pleading look on her face.

“You... What did you tell that thing about me?” Hector asked as he approached her.

“You literally attacked it,” Ilea said, stopping him with a hand as he tried to enter her personal space.

“Why wouldn’t I? It’s a fucking monster! And a strange one at that.”

“Hold on, what are we talking about?” Michael asked.

“Endless Meadow,” Ilea said.

“It’s a four-mark down that way,” Hector said, pointing. “You brought the other creatures here? Why?”

Ilea watched as the creatures entered a set of halls near the beginning of the long corridor.

“Welcome, humans. I have come to an understanding with Lilith. Should you be able to support our endeavors, I will try to repay you in kind,” Meadow said.

Michael’s eyes widened. He gave Ilea a look and nodded quickly. “This is the one? The one who conceived the ritual?”

He was muttering now, the question entirely rhetorical, and his hands shook slightly as he checked his armor. He stopped a few meters in front of the destroyed gate at the bottom of the stairs and summoned a table and chairs.

“I’m Michael,” he announced. “I see that Lilith has already taught you our language? That makes things easier. I have several points I’d like to discuss and possible payments for your information.”

He nearly stuttered, his excitement palpable. Another Michael rushed past the group and joined his other self.

Another table and more notes appeared.

“Absolutely ridiculous... you’re all mad,” Hector said. “Hey, Redleaf, any clue when Lys starts their siege of Baralia?”

“The last time I was in a war camp was before our meeting at the ruins,” she said.

Hector groaned. “Useless. Well, we did have some interesting fights. Let’s see if there’s anything left of the capital.”

With that, he summoned a wave to take him up the stairs and left.

“Not the easiest personality,” Felicia said.

“Yeah. Getting the feeling that’s not the last I’ll see of him either. Though I hope it’s going to be a while.”

She wondered for a moment if he would actually leave for the capital. With what Michael had told her, she assumed he would return to Helena and then back to wherever he called home.

In fairness, we only beat Zaiked and the others thanks to his help. Just wish he wasn’t so irritating.

She breathed out and rolled her shoulders.

“Why Meadow?” Felicia asked.

The view back into Meadow’s room was blocked. The gate Hector had destroyed was back where it had been before, perfectly unblemished.

“It looks like one,” Ilea said.

“And you befriended it?”

“I’m not sure I’d call it a friend yet,” she said, walking back into the tunnel. “But I’m working on it. So don’t wait up.”

She teleported back into Meadow’s hall. “I informed the survivors.”

“I saw.”

Ilea sat down on the edge of the grass and hugged her knees. “So, you need me to be able to move them through the portal, through human lands, and to the north, where the higher mana density should be suitable for them to survive. I would have suggested just going out there and fighting spirits to level up first; my space magic Class isn’t exactly at a high level yet. What do you suggest? You’re an expert on Awakened, after all.”

“Have you reached the third tier of any space magic abilities? Especially any concerning awareness or perception.”

“Not awareness. But I do have two others.”

She quickly showed them off.

“That is good. We should work on your awareness then. Fighting spirits will be beneficial. And I will try to teach you what I can. Have you unlocked Core Skill points already?”

It knows about those?

The Superfae had let her know that she would soon unlock another Class. She wondered what Meadow could tell her.

“Yeah, I’ve unlocked Core Skill points.”

“Good. That means you’ve either reached a level threshold or unlocked an additional Class. How many options are available for them?”

“Three currently. Plus five locked options,” Ilea said.

“You can see the locked options. That confirms that you gained an additional Class before reaching the normally required level for Core Skill points. It should also mean that the locked options will become available once you reach the requisite level.”

“You don’t sound sure.”

“I have studied various awakened creatures since my own awakening. The Pale Ones, for example, are born at level one hundred. The Horned Beetles, on the other hand, at one hundred and fifty. They each are given a single Class upon their birth.

“The Rainbow Wisps were unique in that they were born without a Class but instead had powerful resistances to ward off the dangerous nature in this realm. Their limited ability to cast and comprehend magic led to a few preferred Classes, but in the end, they all perished due to the eclipse.”

“So, you’re saying that different species have different thresholds?” Ilea said.

The Elves are born at a higher level than humans too.

“Yes. I assume your own kind is not given a Class upon their birth?”

“Yes. Why the assumption?”

“You faced several Pale Ones with two Classes and prevailed, despite your level. The Queen was powerful within her species, yet she could not slay you. You can fight against level six and seven hundred spirits. This means your current levels are far beyond what your species usually achieves. Beyond the classification your level represents.

“Requirements are different depending on the species. Your kind starts their life without a Class and thus should have more variety in the abilities they can choose. With your comments on the third Class, I have to assume you are offered two once the mana within you has settled. And you have achieved a third, which should be rare for your kind. Harder, even, than for a Pale One to gain their second.

“Once you have reached a suitable level, you should be able to enhance your skills through Core Skill points. Perhaps that will yield a result that is helpful. Or we may have to wait until you unlock the fourth tier.”

Ilea grinned. “So there is a fourth tier.”

“Yes, but it is not easily achieved. If we had longer, perhaps we could work toward it, but I don’t believe it is a feasible option.”

“I’m interested anyway. Can you tell me about it?”

“I can, but know that my information may not be reliable. Besides myself, I have only ever known two Awakened who have achieved it.

“Only one skill per Class can be advanced to the fourth tier, and only once you have enhanced every single skill in the Class with Core Skill points. Either way, I suggest you refrain from spending any of your points until that option presents itself.”

“Noted. So I have to get my Classes higher?”

“Considerably so. You are lucky there are so many high-level spirits waiting to devour you.”

“Was that a joke?”

“Perhaps. You seem to enjoy the battle.”

“I did. Was Queen Zaiked one of the creatures with a fourth-tier skill?”

“No. Zaiked gained her second Class much earlier than her peers, but while she was the strongest one alive when you arrived here, she was not comparable to those who came before. Centuries ago, when this city was thriving and survival on Erendar was difficult for their kind but possible.

“You’ve been around for a while.”

“I have.”

“How many Classes do you have?” Ilea asked. “If you’re willing to share. I don’t want to be offensive.”

“Your consideration is amusing. Five. Though I awakened with them all.”

“Damn... Talk about powerful species,” she said and laughed.

“Power comes at a cost,” Meadow said. “It’s a joy to have found not one but three Awakened with the ability to converse with me. One of you has proven hostile, but you and Michael remain, each with your own set of questions, desires, wishes, and goals.

“But both of you accept my existence and are not driven mad by my very presence. I see and feel through magic, but conversation has been so very scarce in the last two centuries.”

Ilea smiled. “I’m sorry. I guess I was just awed by your high level.”

“I cannot fly, as you can, nor do I find joy in consuming food, for there is no need for nourishment. The killing I am forced to do brings me no satisfaction, only the loss of those who never found awakening. I have spent

centuries alone.” It paused. “Apologies. I did not mean to overwhelm you with emotion. I simply wished to explain.”

Ilea stood up and displaced herself a few times until she stood next to the tree.

“What are you doing, Lilith?” Meadow asked.

“It’s called a hug,” Ilea said, squeezing the hard magic tree before she let go. *“It’s supposed to be comforting.”*

The whole room vibrated for a moment, disturbing the fireflies before they found their place again and everything calmed down.

“I am not a mammal, ash mage Lilith. But I appreciate your simple gesture. Its meaning is understood, but I am not in need of your emotional support. I have endured millennia without a conversation. I merely tried to contextualize your perceived weakness.”

“Sure, sure,” Ilea said.

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The Days Ahead

‘ding’ You hugged an ancient and powerful creature to show emotional support – One Core Skill point awarded

Maybe I should try to flirt with it to get more points!

The meadow rustled as a breeze flowed through the room.

“Why are the Daughters an issue anyway? If you’re so insanely powerful. Can you not fight them off?” she asked.

“I survived the last eclipse, but few Awakened would be able to survive the wake of such a battle,” Meadow said.

“I see. So it’s about the creatures you shelter, not about you. Though I have to admit, I would love to see such a battle.”

“You would be squashed, young human.”

“I do have ninety days.”

The leaves rustled again, and she smiled.

“I have another question... My third Class. How likely is it to evolve at level two or three hundred?” Ilea asked.

“It should not evolve until you pass the levels you were at upon its acquisition,” Meadow said.

So, past three-fifty? Which means I can fight a bunch of spirits without worrying too much about my skills alone.

She didn’t see a reason to distrust Meadow’s claims, mostly because it didn’t pretend to know all the answers, simply providing assumptions.

“Is there a Fae in this realm?” she asked, feeling the two would likely hit it off.

“What’s a Fae?” the Meadow replied as a ripple went through the space around her.

“Was that you?”

Another rustle went through the grass. This time, it sounded deceptively like a sigh.

“You cannot even detect the source of that fracture? And you call yourself a space mage? Perhaps I should have a look at your healing.”

Its tone suggested sarcasm, but she wasn’t entirely sure.

“Why? Are you a healer too?” Ilea asked.

“Of course I have a healing Class. How do you think I survived this long? Even true Elementals fall to time and wear.”

She grinned. *A healer and space mage tree? Awesome.*

“Have you seen one die? An Elemental, I mean.”

“Have you?”

“I have, in fact. Yes. Though I don’t know if that was a true Elemental. Maybe there’s a difference.”

“Then that proves my point. You too have surely survived thanks to your healing. Though I hardly feel any life-attuned mana from you.”

“That’s because I don’t have life-based healing.”

“You don’t? But how do you heal, then?”

Ilea used her ash to cut into her arm before she healed the wound with Sentinel Reconstruction.

“Purely arcane... That’s... a first. Interesting.”

“Haha, Lilith does it again! Surprising a four-mark with my incredible powers.”

Stolen from an ancient healing order without any knowledge as to the Class’s creation.

“I would like to see that again... if you’re willing,” it said.

Ilea nodded. “Sure. Start with your space magic lessons, though. We only have ninety days, after all. Let’s put my thousand points in Intelligence to work.”

“That’s not how Intelligence works at all. It simply increases your magic skill damage and some other attributes connected to your skills,” it said, then paused for a moment. *“I see... You were joking? I am learning.”*

“Yeah, I’m not, so get on with it,” Ilea said, then she also paused. *“That was a joke.”*

“I know.”

* * *

“Your interpretation is somewhat correct. The ability changes the space around you, but you should try and focus on the details, on the change it imposes on whatever enters the area,” Meadow said, shooting a wooden projectile at her.

The dart slowed when it reached the area of Force.

“You’re a wood mage?” Ilea asked.

“Stay focused.”

The Meadow followed the attack up with a Grasp spell.

“You’re keeping me pinned where I am,” Ilea said.

“Do not resist, simply feel the magic’s impact.”

Ilea focused on the space around her. Analyzing someone’s teleportation ability or her own space magic was one thing. Here, however, the situation was a little different. It felt like she was in a techno dance club, in a cellar, a few hundred meters away from the ocean, trying to hear the waves.

It was frustrating.

“Can’t we start somewhere else? The wisps here are all over the place.”

“Which makes it the perfect place for you to understand what your magic does.”

She was annoyed because she knew the Meadow was right. And because it was difficult. For some reason, she had expected that learning from an ancient all-powerful tree would be easy.

“Your talks with Michael haven’t led to any breakthroughs yet, right?”

“You’re attempting to distract me. We’ve only been at this for a few hours.”

Ilea dropped the spell and lay on her back. *“This sucks.”*

“To answer your question, Michael would be capable of conducting the same ritual, but the problem of its location and the likely attraction of powerful spirits remain. I cannot move from this place. Not without leaving it unprotected.”

“You didn’t mention that before. So you can move?”

“There is a way, yes. But I would have to take a risk. Both for myself and everyone here.”

“How could you move, exactly? Ten thousand tiny little legs?”

“I would have someone else move me.”

“But you’re massive.”

“I understand the logistics of such a task. Which is why I would reduce my form to the minimum. Perhaps the size of your head. However, my power would be reduced too much to guarantee the protection of this place,” it explained, sending another projectile her way.

Ilea just let it hit her. *“I think I need a break. You don’t think fighting spirits is detrimental, right?”*

“Not at all. But do try to focus on your space magic and how it affects the fabric around you.”

She smiled and stood up. *“I’ll try. After I wreck some spirits. Can you still talk to me outside?”*

“Yes.”

“Great. I’ll be back in a few hours.”

A few teleports later, she spread her wings outside in the freezing air.

“Try not to perish, Awakened Healer,” the Meadow said.

“Don’t worry, you know I’m durable,” Ilea sent as she sped up. *“How far can we communicate?”*

“You will soon pass the range of your ability to reach me. I won’t be able to talk to you anymore either, but as long as you don’t go farther than your last battle, I can call for you.”

Long-range communication. I wonder how much it can see.

Ilea slowed down after a while, nearly reaching the same desert she had fought in previously. The spirits were gone, as were all the corpses. Everything had been replaced by an eerie quiet.

She saw bones poking out of the frozen ground, craters, crevices, and dirt mounds remaining from the intense battle.

Time to test my other skills and see if their second tiers are helpful.

Skills available for [The Faen Valkyrie]:

- Spear of Creation***
- Burst of Creation***
- Phaseshift***
- Shrouding Cloak***
- Blazing Force Shield***

All of them have some measure of potential, but right now, I’m most interested in Phaseshift.

‘ding’ Would you like to replace [Force] with [Phaseshift]? All skill levels gained in [Force] will be lost.

‘ding’ Be aware that all skill levels gained in [Force] will be lost if you proceed.

‘ding’ You have learned the skill: Phaseshift – lvl 1

Active – Phaseshift – lvl 1

By expending a large amount of mana, you can temporarily unbind your body from the physical and pass through barriers. You may let spells and physical objects pass through you unhindered. Be aware that certain types of magic will retain some or all of their impact.

Category: Space Magic

She made sure Force was still available in the list of potential skills and then moved on, flying through the desert.

High danger equaled high skill levels. Her second-tier Devour Resistance had made that clear once again.

“So how did she do it?” Ilea asked herself, charging Monster Hunter when she felt she had reached a suitable distance from the frozen city.

“I’m here!” she shouted, her voice traveling through the icy desert like a tsunami traveling through the ocean.

Her call had an immediate effect, Spirits of Death breaking out of the ice less than ten meters away from her.

No Astrals yet. That’s good.

She checked which skills she wanted to focus on. Her third Class would grow the quickest, but she would benefit from everything else as well.

Valkyrie stuff comes first, of course. But what else? Destruction will probably have to wait. Blink and Sphere will get there. Perception, too. Reversal is low. And Sentinel Huntress is pretty low. I need some high-level creature I can just pump full of destructive mana.

If what the Meadow said was true, she would have to get all her skills to the max anyway if she ever hoped to achieve the fourth tier. *One per Class.*

Ilea already wanted to think about which one she would choose, but then she focused on the now. She knew it would take a while, and she had

more tangible things to concentrate on at the moment.

She focused on Sentinel Huntress, trying to analyze the bones closest to her.

Ilea could already hear the monsters approaching, but as long as there wasn't a group of Astral Spirits, she doubted these mere spirits of literal death could kill her.

The first one reached her quickly, and Ilea dropped into a fighting stance.

The spirit looked a little like a malformed scorpion. It smashed its tail into her chest, damaging her armor slightly as it pushed her away. It attacked again, its tail passing through her this time.

"Phaseshift... it's pretty neat, isn't it?" she asked as she tried to displace the creature. It didn't work. Her spell simply didn't activate.

She tried a few others, but other than her healing, body enhancement abilities, and perception skills, she couldn't activate anything else or affect the world around her in any way.

Interesting. And the wisps are strange as well.

She deactivated it and appeared next to the being's tail.

[Spirit of Death – lvl 482]

She pushed and managed to displace the creature a few meters away. Not a massive success, but it worked better against projectiles anyway.

Ilea proceeded to focus on her lowest-leveled skills, mostly dodging spells and attacks as more and more spirits joined the battle. She could already feel herself calming down via the soothing influence of excessive violence.

She made sure to test a few things between ripping spirits apart with both new and old abilities.

Phaseshift's time required to activate and subsequent cooldown limited it greatly, but she just activated it whenever there were large amounts of projectiles coming at her. For that, it proved quite useful.

The spell took about one second to activate once she triggered it. It was cheap to activate. The real cost came afterward. Exponentially more for every second she kept it active.

Ilea noted that the cost stopped increasing after six seconds of usage, but still, it would drain her quickly. Sentinel Core *really* pulled its weight

here with its spell cost reduction, but it was clear the skill wasn't necessarily meant to be used for more than five seconds.

Death magic still drained her health slightly, but thanks to the skill, her armor remained undamaged. She wondered how it worked for other magic. It felt freaky, like she'd turned into some kind of ghost. But it was fun to try and time its activation to avoid incoming spells.

She displaced herself through the growing hordes, moving projectiles away or sucking them toward herself with her sphere.

Body of the Valkyrie requires actual damage... I hope this counts, she thought as thirty flashes of death magic homed toward her body.

Phaseshift activated before the energy collided, purple flames exploding and spreading over the ground without affecting her slowly moving form, partially removed from reality and retaining some of its momentum.

Her blink was often stopped by the death magic auras that some of the spirits possessed. She had no idea how it differed from Displacement.

Just shows how little I understand about space magic and teleportation.

Larger monstrosities started to show up, and she had to become more careful not to be pinned down. Even if she could heal herself, too many of those monsters would still overwhelm her.

She teleported a few times and picked up a large skull from the ground.

I wonder if this one is still around as a spirit, she thought, holding it up as spells flashed through her. Holding the skull extended Phaseshift's effect onto it. It didn't work on larger objects or any of the spirits, but it was something.

I can protect priceless art from an explosion. Maybe.

The skill also needed a second to deactivate, during which time offensive abilities and teleportation still weren't possible. She couldn't just shift in and out as she pleased, especially with the cooldown between uses, but she hoped it would get better with higher levels.

The larger monsters didn't seem to care for the lower-leveled ones as they all followed her through the empty desert, trampling or rolling over each other as they tried to get to the small human.

"Why are you so focused on me? I can't be more than a little snack," she said when the first Astral Spirits showed up.

There were two at first, arriving not by teleportation but by incredibly fast flight. The sudden cessations of motion didn't create the shock waves they really should have.

She waved to them and watched as beams of astral magic came for both her and the other spirits, passing through her as she activated Phaseshift.

They seemed to deliver nearly full damage despite passing through her. The beams didn't disintegrate her armor or flesh but straight up burned into her health.

Ilea paced herself, keeping an eye on the spirits and her health to make sure she didn't dip too low. Floating through the many creatures and attacks, it felt surreal to her that without her healing, she would have been entirely disintegrated in four to five seconds.

Good luck surviving out here without some insane healing.

Heart of Cinder sadly couldn't be charged during Phaseshift, but whatever heat she had accumulated before using it still remained.

The observation caused a theory to form in her mind.

Phaseshift didn't really move or remove her from the physical plane but instead changed the space she occupied to suit the skill's description. That was also why most of the magic still had an effect on her.

The headache she didn't get thanks to her healing made her anticipate the probable Space Awareness levels she would surely accrue by studying her abilities in more detail.

She started to avoid more of the astral beams when additional Astral Spirits appeared. It became clear after about twenty minutes that the Spirits of Death would soon be destroyed by the flying pale blue creatures.

But they were still here? Which means the Astral Spirits left last time... before they destroyed all the spirits?

Ilea displaced herself a few times to get away from the spirits' attention, blinking a few more times to make some distance. She watched as the astral beings burned down the remaining Spirits of Death, who didn't stop charging at them until the very last one was destroyed.

"There shouldn't be any left if the Astral Spirits destroy the Spirits of Death... Meadow?"

"Apologies. I was unsure if you were addressing me. What was the question?"

She repeated herself.

"Yes. The failing in your assumption is that Spirits of Death can be destroyed by astral magic."

"They can't? But I did get kill notifications," Ilea said.

“As do they. Physical representations of spirits can be destroyed even with more mundane weapons and magic. If I interpreted your spells correctly, however, you may hold a way to end their existence permanently.”

“My healing?”

“Precisely. Spirits of Death can be killed. The experience you gain should be a little higher, should you manage to permanently destroy them.”

“Is that why they charge ceaselessly?”

“They destroy all that is not them. All that possesses life. No matter how dangerous their enemy might be. From what I’ve seen and interpreted, I believe they do not consider danger to their existence.”

“Can they awaken?”

“I have failed to awaken a Spirit of Death so far. Though I cannot accept its impossibility.”

“You’re trying to awaken them? What if they still want to devour everything even after that?”

“Then so it shall be. I merely lead creatures to their awakening. Your concerns, however, are likely misplaced.

“Once sapience is reached, most beings gain some sense of self-preservation. It means, after all, the attaining of awareness itself. Questions as to why the consumption of all living creatures is necessary will be raised.

“I think it plausible that they will still find it pleasurable and life-sustaining to devour other beings but that it would not remain their single drive.”

“You assume that?”

“Yes. Either way, I will not cease my efforts.”

“Fair enough,” Ilea said. “Hey, if I can kill them permanently, couldn’t I clear this desert and eventually the whole moon?”

A thought of amusement reached her. *“Oh. You’re actually serious. That’s funny.”*

Ilea frowned. Then she flew back out.

But not to the same area. She found a new spot and called out with Monster Hunter.

Guess I’ll just have to show you.

SIXTY-NINE

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Dangerzone

Whenever too many Astral Spirits showed up, Ilea would change locations, flying and teleporting away to create distance before she called out with Monster Hunter.

The creatures either didn't care about pursuing her or had no way to do so. The Meadow informed her that the Astral Spirits only showed up when a large amount of mana was used in a certain area. For example, a few thousand death magic spells.

It assured her that the beings could show up randomly too, but they generally didn't care about something like Ilea's passive magic output. That was a possible explanation as to why they didn't pursue her.

Their drain abilities had a somewhat short range, allowing her to mostly avoid that problem during her fights. Ilea was really just a conduit to summon spirits of death and, through them, the astral beings.

Ilea returned to the temple after several hours of testing and battle. Admittedly, more battle than testing. She entered the structure through the hole in the throne room wall, checking her gains as she did so.

'ding' Sentinel Huntress reaches 3rd lvl 9

'ding' Azarinth Reversal reaches 3rd lvl 23

'ding' Eyes of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 21

'ding' Phaseshift reaches lvl 2

...

'ding' Phaseshift reaches lvl 11

'ding' Displacement reaches 3rd lvl 2

'ding' Space Shift reaches 2nd lvl 16

'ding' Space Shift reaches 2nd lvl 17

'ding' Body of the Valkyrie reaches 2nd lvl 15

...

'ding' Body of the Valkyrie reaches 2nd lvl 18

'ding' Deviant of Humanity reaches lvl 14

...

'ding' Deviant of Humanity reaches lvl 16

'ding' Monster Hunter reaches 3rd lvl 5

'ding' Veteran reaches 3rd lvl 8

'ding' Death Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 12

...

'ding' Death Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 14

'ding' Astral Magic Resistance reaches lvl 18

...

'ding' Astral Magic Resistance reaches lvl 20

'ding' Astral Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 1

Astral Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 1

The power of the stars, harnessed and used to wreak unimaginable destruction. Few beings are able to channel this power through their bodies. It does not come as a surprise to find a human, of all beings, finding a way to modify their weak vessel for its use. But do not let your encounters fool you: this school of magic is quite extraordinary and just as rare.

2nd stage: You have faced enough wielders of astral magic to warrant a second-tier resistance. Your body is much less likely to disintegrate against this powerful school of magic.

'ding' One third-tier General Skill point awarded

She stretched. "At least like this, things are moving."

It was fun. Facing the massive hordes of spirits. *I'll just switch between working with the Meadow and going out there.*

She whistled to herself as she made her way down to the being.

Before she could go down the stairs, however, she encountered something unexpected.

A group of humans.

"Hey there. You don't look so good," Ilea said to the group of heavily armored people who had reached the throne room.

All were close to or slightly above level two hundred. Their mismatched gear suggested they were adventurers rather than military.

There were ten people all in all, two healers with sweat dripping down their faces, one barrier mage who kept a dome around the group, and a variety of mages and warriors currently focused on fighting the high mana density.

They all tensed up when their eyes met Ilea's ashen form.

Various whispers escaped them, the name Lilith audible a few times.

"I'm right here," Ilea said and waved. "Who are you?"

"Lady Lilith! We are adventurers from Gyffold," one of the higher-level people said. A mage who had a staff made of dark green glass. "The guard put up a notice at the local guild for anyone brave enough to explore this place."

I guess they finally found the portal. Probably because of the mana leaking out of it.

She wondered what the Dawn Company were doing.

"Aha. Well, good luck. Don't leave the city. You'll be eaten alive," she said and blinked down to the vaults.

"How's it going?" Ilea asked when she appeared close to Michael.

He barely glanced her way. "Very well... yes... thank you."

A third Michael had joined the two previous ones. All were currently occupied with a single piece of paper and the runes drawn on it.

"There are adventurers here. Any clue what's going on?"

"I was informed that Gyffold authorities are now aware of the gate. Major Redleaf went to initiate talks," Michael said, sounding utterly uninterested.

"You don't seem to care."

"They cannot close the gate, and I doubt there are many who can even survive here for more than a few minutes. Yes, I don't care. Anything else? I

need to focus.”

It looked like all of the Michaels had a headache, and for once, she felt some kinship with the man.

The men? I should ask him about his copy ability at some point.

At least I’m not the only one struggling with space magic.

She smiled as she headed toward the portal. She assumed Felicia was fine, but she wanted to make sure. Or maybe she wanted to avoid more Space Awareness training... at least for a little while.

* * *

There were dozens of people in the hall, most of them in Baralia colors. She could feel the tension, but the fact that Felicia and the Dawn Company fighters were sitting and talking with some fancy-looking folks, who she assumed to be authorities or nobles from Gyffold, made her relax a little.

The many soldiers arrayed defensively around the gate eyed her with fear and uncertainty before an officer approached.

“You must be Lilith. We were informed that you were part of this operation. I’m Major Navon Enair.”

Navon offered his hand, and she took it. He looked young, likely in his late twenties when he reached the two hundreds. His black hair was bound, and his black eyes took her in before he gestured to one of the tables.

[Warrior – lvl 225]

“We have received concerning reports from Major Redleaf and several members of the Dawn Company. I was led to believe you had joined this operation without affiliation to Lys. Is it at all agreeable to you if I ask you a few questions? To confirm the circumstances of... well, everything here.”

“Good to meet you, Navon. And sure, we can talk for a bit, but I’ll be heading back through the portal afterward.”

He nodded. “Of course. Please join me. Would you like some tea?”

* * *

The Major was quite accommodating, and Ilea shared what she thought was relevant to the operation. She didn't mention the Lily or how their group had come to work together. Suspiciously, the man didn't question her about that at all. But he did have a lot of questions about their findings on the rituals and the Order.

When she was done, Felicia excused herself from her conversation with the Dawn Company and joined her.

"Lilith. Do you have a moment to talk?" she asked, adding in a whisper, "I'll owe you one."

"Sure."

What's this about?

"They offered accommodation while we're here. The building is a few streets away."

The building was more a hotel than an inn, with waiters and waitresses serving guests in formal clothing. Felicia led her up the stairs and toward one of the rooms.

"There are various enchantments to add privacy," Felicia said as she turned the key. "Dawn Company checked them."

Ilea looked at the magic woven into the walls. Her sphere wasn't enough to make out the detailed structure of it all, but it was sufficient to supply her with some knowledge of their purpose. It wasn't based on understanding but familiarity.

Now that they were in private, Felicia relaxed. "Thanks for the interview you gave. It will add a lot of credibility to our claims."

"No worries. I'll be happy if we can avoid more bloodshed. Now that the ritual is done anyway. What did you want to talk about?"

Felicia sighed, plopping onto a large leather chair. "Honestly, I really just wanted an excuse to get out of there for a moment... Thank you for the help."

Ilea laughed, though Felicia looked a little bit embarrassed.

"I really like having a nice room for a change," the wind mage said.

Ilea looked around, her armor receding to reveal her casual clothes. It really was a nice room.

"Gods, you look so different without that thing on," Felicia continued. "It's like you really have two people stuck in there."

"I'm just as dangerous as before," Ilea said as she summoned a meal, choosing to sit in a chair herself.

“Oh, I know. You should have heard the questions they asked about you. They think you’re some kind of monster. What you did in Riverwatch left an impression.”

“I suppose. You didn’t have trouble as a Major of Lys?”

“Not with the Dawn Company present. They have a reputation as well, and with all the evidence around, the local authorities quickly came to the conclusion that this situation could benefit them. And because of the gate they now have in their city, it could. It’s become clear to them that both the Order of Truth and the high king have forsaken them.”

“So they’re willing to make peace?”

Felicia shook her head. “They’re willing to become independent. The reports mentioned various cities already discussing such internally and with our forward forces. They’re in for a rude awakening, however, if they think they can come out of this war with complete independence.

“Lys isn’t known for backing down, and they’ve already marched into these lands. The least I expect is a complete abolishment of slavery. And I will personally push that the people responsible for the rituals are held accountable.”

“What about the capital?” Ilea asked.

“We’ll see. It’s their last stronghold, and I expect neither Alyris nor King Baron to find any common ground. At least there will likely be no ritual. The local nobles and Order members agree that it’s highly unlikely, even though the people in the capital don’t know about Meadow and that the ritual was a success here. The high king might have the capacity to unleash an attack on his own city, but he wouldn’t risk turning the nobility against him.”

“Will you be going there?”

“I will follow Velamyr’s lead once he returns. I’m sure he’ll be interested in joining the siege.”

“I see. Still no word from him?”

“No... he never shared the specifics of his ability with me. Balancing the talks with the local government is quite challenging. I’m essentially stalling, and they know what I’m doing. Once they have confirmed without a doubt that our story holds up, they will try to get me to agree to specific terms. And I’ll have to find excuses until either Velamyr shows up or I receive orders from the Empress.”

“Sounds like several migraines.”

“Oh no, it’s actually quite fun. The stakes are high, and every mistake could cost my House dearly, but it’s not like I’m fighting for my life.”

“Well, I’m glad to be fighting monster hordes instead.”

Felicia summoned a glass of wine, raising it toward Ilea. “So we both have our challenges. This Meadow, are you sure you can trust it?”

“I have a good impression so far, yes.”

“Just walking too close to its room makes everything in my body scream for me to run.”

“Maybe you should fight a few more monsters, get a bit of four-mark exposure,” Ilea said.

Felicia took a sip of wine. “I think I’m good. But you’re the expert. And I trust your judgment, Ilea. Let me know if you need anything, though I’m not sure how long I’ll be around in Gyffold.”

“Thanks, same to you. I’m glad you were around through all this.”

“You too. And come visit if you’re ever around Virilya. Once this war is over.”

“I’ll find you. You visit too, if you’re ever in Ravenhall.”

Felicia smiled. “I’m glad we met that day, deep below Karth.”

“Me too. Enjoy your negotiation stuff, Major.”

“Thank you, Lady Lilith. May your hunts be plentiful.”

SEVENTY

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Activities

The space around Ilea distorted, earth and wood forming in the very air around her as everything started moving around.

Meadow was getting more familiar with her Sentinel Huntress spell, adding the slightest magical and odor cues to help her train it. It was a puzzle for both Space Awareness and Huntress, each pushed to the limit as Ilea tried to figure out which blade of grass or piece of rock the Meadow had chosen for today's solution.

A fist-sized rock rushed past her head, dodged at the last moment.

Ilea formed a wall of ash to slow the roots about to skewer her. Phaseshift activated as her armor tried to stop the powerful magic. The wood moved through her without issue as soon as Phaseshift took effect, and Ilea deactivated the spell immediately after.

Meadow had already formed a wooden prison for her manifesting form, preventing her from using her teleportation.

"This is bullshit, and you know it," Ilea said.

The wood pressed into her from all sides, the spiky ends cutting through her armor and flesh.

Ilea ripped through the wood digging into her skull with ash before she cut off her own head, her regenerating form displaced away from the death prison with the rest of her body as she continued her analysis of the surrounding space.

"You shouldn't use that phasing skill against a sapient being, lest it catches you. Or only use it while you have momentum. It's far too easy to catch you otherwise," Meadow said.

“I know. But to be fair, you’re not like most things I fight,” Ilea said, dodging a few attacks.

“At least it’s efficient against the spirits. Your mana becomes near-invisible,”

Ilea felt the tiniest flicker in space and turned to her right.

“Found it,” she exclaimed, grabbing the tiny piece of wood.

“Congratulations. You’re getting better.”

“Not good enough. Make the space aspect harder again and the magic aspect a little easier. I hardly noticed anything with my Huntress skill.”

“As you wish.”

* * *

Velamyr returned to Gyffold four days later, furious and not alone.

His anger was soothed when he learned about what had happened while he was gone. His efforts soon focused on the topic of Gyffold and Baralia.

The man demanded no less than complete military support from Gyffold against their former capital, should they ever wish to reach some form of understanding.

The high king did not intend to support anyone. All his closest allies were already in the capital, and both the nobles of Lys and Baralia were aware of that.

Ilea kept out of the ensuing politics, restructuring, and war. She had her own things to work on.

It surprised her that Velamyr waited three days to even step over to Erendar again.

[Mage – lvl 300]

So his ability reduced his level? Seems pretty cheap to avoid death, she thought, wondering if the same was true for his skills or stats. Did he lose levels in both Classes? Or just the one that holds the skill?

“So that thing can speak Standard?” Velamyr asked as he joined Ilea at her side outside the temple. She had agreed to introduce him to the Meadow.

“It learned quickly,” she said.

He squinted at her but didn't say anything.

Ilea led him to the vaults. "It might be the only being capable of closing the gate."

"It opened it in the first place. What does it want in return?"

"Endless Meadow asks for the survivors remaining here to be brought to Elos."

He audibly ground his teeth.

"It's pretty reasonable. They're faced with an incoming calamity."

"We are human, they are not. Your empathy with other species will not lead to anything good," Velamyr warned.

"My experiences so far don't support your fears," Ilea said. She wondered how he would react if she told him about the elves. "Either way, they can't go to the Human Plains anyway. The mana isn't dense enough. It will take weeks even for the mana that seeps in from the gate to saturate enough of Gyffold for a reasonable transfer."

"That won't happen. Measures have already been taken to siphon away the excess energy."

"Right," Ilea replied.

Why not make this more difficult for everyone? Guess we won't even be able to station them there temporarily.

"You will help them anyway?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'll try."

"And where would you put them? They won't survive in Ravenhall."

She stared at him. "Far away. Where neither the Empire nor Baralia will be a concern."

He gave her a long and considering look. "I won't support you, Lilith. But this gate must be closed."

And that was that.

General Ryse began to focus on the end of the hall, likely starting his conversation with the Meadow.

She didn't expect them to reach some kind of agreement. Velamyr seemed pretty close-minded and arrogant as it was, but the fact that the most powerful human empire of the Plains was backing him up wasn't making things easier.

And yet he did say he wanted the gate closed. He won't help me, but maybe he's saying he won't try to stop me either?

At least she was making personal progress. Her first week on Erendar had already yielded some results.

Phaseshift had reached its second tier in less than three days, the low-level skill benefiting quickly from the powerful hordes of monsters she constantly engaged.

Active – Phaseshift – 2nd lvl 1

By expending a large amount of mana, you can temporarily unbind your body from the physical and pass through barriers. You may let spells and physical objects pass through you unhindered. Be aware that certain types of magic will retain some or all of their impact.

2nd stage: Resilience bonuses from skills are doubled when entering Phaseshift.

Category: Space Magic

With the increased resilience, Ilea could take a breather and heal herself more efficiently. She liked the spell more and more. Its use became a choice between evasion and damage reduction. If she couldn't avoid a spell for some reason, she could use Phaseshift to mitigate some of the damage or, depending on the magic type used, nullify it entirely.

Her precognition even somewhat lowered the negative impact of the spell's activation time. Considering her other active skills, she made the decision to keep this one. Force gave her some maneuverability and some defense, but Phaseshift allowed her to potentially negate enemy attacks entirely. Neither skill was better per se, but Phaseshift added something entirely new to her arsenal.

The second tier didn't solve the issue of moving the survivors, though. The Meadow had also let her know that Michael had no solution yet either, nor a place where he could move them.

They tried using her third-tier Displacement through the gate, but the spell failed to manifest in both realms at the same time. She also demonstrated her third-tier Blink, which only confirmed the solid structure of the spell. Its extended casting time and complex structure ensured its destination was unchangeable, even for the Meadow. She didn't cast it fully, staying on Erendar.

Placing her third-tier Displacement into the air in the Meadow's room to have it examined didn't lead to any major revelations either. The spell

would work in moving the survivors, but its range and apparent realm limitation made it irrelevant to their efforts.

Her third Class had yet to provide a solution, so they tried a different approach.

“Come on, don’t be afraid, little one,” Ilea said, gently pulling the ant creature a little closer toward the Meadow. They were in the corridor but still far enough away that the mana wasn’t too dense.

“It is in distress,” the incomprehensible landscape said.

“Yeah, I can see that,” Ilea said, using her healing to try and calm the creature.

“I believe it thinks it is to be a sacrifice.”

“You did that? Eat sacrifices?”

“I would push them away, but some have tried, yes. I do not consume creatures.”

“Yeah, not yet. I’m sure you’ll reveal your eldritch fleshwarper capabilities soon enough,” Ilea said and knelt down next to the large ant creature. “It’s fine,” she said, gently touching its carapace. “You’re not a sacrifice.”

“I am no flesh mage, Lilith. Nor am I aware of a magic type called eldritch.”

The ant calmed down a little as Ilea’s healing mana cycled through it. Its heart rate slowed down a tiny bit, but it was still somewhat stressed.

“It’s fiction. Incomprehensible horror type of monsters. Stuff that makes one mad,” she explained.

A bit of life magic came from the shattered gates and brushed over the ant.

“Truly... your healing is hindering the collapse.”

“Yeah, I can see it better now too,” Ilea said, focusing on the weird strain the ant was under.

The heavy mana burden of the surroundings created a form of pressure. Given that the creature was barely above level one-eighty, it was a wonder that it could survive in this place at all.

She walked back to the waiting insect creatures while mulling things over.

“Do you think it’s enough?” she asked.

“You saw yourself, didn’t you?” Meadow asked.

Ilea had hoped she'd been wrong. "Yeah. That one would implode the second it stepped through the gate."

"Is there no way you could enhance your healing?"

"I don't think so. Maybe another evolution, but you doubt one will happen anytime soon. What if we raise their Arcane Magic Resistance? Would that help them resist low mana density?"

"With me manipulating the mana and you to heal them through it, it's possible... but it would take weeks. Weeks you could spend studying or fighting."

"A few hours a day. We'll find out if it helps."

"They won't like it."

"Yeah, it's either death on the other side, death by spirits, or some painful mana exposure."

"I will try to explain that to them."

Ilea watched as more floating stone tablets appeared, runes appearing on them immediately after. She didn't know if it would be enough, having seen what the instant exposure to low mana density did to the creatures that appeared in Elos, but since her healing had an impact, it was something they could work toward.

"Your body was changed to allow for your arcane healing, was it not?"

"An elixir, yes. With a high death rate. I don't think humans could wield arcane healing otherwise."

"Which means, in some ways, you are an eldritch being yourself, are you not?" Meadow said.

Ilea squinted.

She could tell the Meadow was frustrated with her lack of understanding in terms of space magic. But now that they had another possible avenue through her healing, it was in a good mood. Its jokes were getting better too. Soon, nothing would be able to stop it.

"Sure, whatever... living grass."

"There is a tree too... and a creek. I think I look rather well-rounded. Not incomprehensible at all. I mean, you have ashen tentacles on your back. Like some kind of growth."

"Okay. I get it. You're the normal one. I'm sure you'll get an interview as a cashier at the local pharmacy."

"I would be overqualified as a seller of things. I can regrow lost limbs and mend otherwise fatal wounds. I can bend space to move hundreds of

objects at will.”

“Hospital logistics, then, or maybe a doctor’s assistant,” Ilea suggested with a nod.

“Assistant?”

“What? I thought I was the eldritch being here. So don’t overstep your position. Or I’ll eat you,” Ilea warned.

“*You’ll find it impossible to digest me,*” the Meadow said.

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SEVENTY-ONE

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Ten steps forward

They started the arcane resistance training and testing the same day. Both the Meadow and Ilea carefully monitored the survivors with their respective healing magic, and when the first level-ups happened, Ilea grinned widely.

“I’m catching that right, am I?”

The ant she was working with had adjusted ever so slightly to the lower density.

“I’m seeing the same. Coupled with your healing, this should work.”

“Awesome,” she said, feeling a breeze flowing past from the direction of the tunnel. “Now we just have to get all of them to the end of the second tier.”

The various species of Erendar glanced at each other.

“It’s gonna suck for a while, but we’ll find you a new home.”

Days passed, and then weeks. Ilea alternated her time between fighting and killing spirits, watching space distortions and spells with the Meadow, and healing the survivors while they worked on their Arcane Magic Resistance. Her arcane healing had the side effect of slowing mental exhaustion, but they still couldn’t go for more than a few hours per day.

By the time two months had passed, General Ryse and Felicia had long left Gryffold, leaving only a few members of the Dawn Company and five Michaels from their original crew. The latter was working day and night with the Meadow, both to find a solution and, just as much, to trade knowledge and theories.

Right now, Ilea was enjoying a meal, sitting on the half-frozen temple and looking out over the wastelands of Erendar. The sky was darker than

before, with Sephilon now covering more than two-thirds of the sun. There was no day and night cycle, only the looming eclipse.

She sighed and looked through all the level-ups and messages she'd received. She felt anxious, hoping that it would be enough.

'ding' You have defeated [Spirit of Death – lvl 530]

...

'ding' You have defeated [Spirit of Death – lvl 681]

There were thousands upon thousands of kill notifications. At first, it had been quite a welcome realization that there was an apparently endless number of Spirits of Death on Erendar, but as time went on, she grew more anxious. No matter how many she killed, there were always more. And if the Meadow failed to keep them away, they would seek out the gate and find their way into Elos.

The fact that she hadn't managed to kill an Astral Spirit yet didn't add to her confidence either.

'ding' The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 368 – Five stat points awarded

...

'ding' The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 370 – Five stat points awarded – One Core Skill point awarded

...

'ding' The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 380 – Five stat points awarded – One Core Skill point awarded

...

'ding' The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 390 – Five stat points awarded – One Core skill point awarded

...

'ding' The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 393 – Five stat points awarded

'ding' Kin of Ash has reached lvl 368 – Five stat points awarded

...

‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 370 – Five stat points awarded – One Core Skill point awarded

...

‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 380 – Five stat points awarded – One Core Skill point awarded

...

‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 390 – Five stat points awarded – One Core Skill point awarded

...

‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 392 – Five stat points awarded

Ilea was pretty sure that the more Astral Spirits were present in the fray, the more experience her kills awarded her with. As time went on, though, the rewards gradually slowed.

In the last few days, she’d only managed to level her main Classes once despite an even higher number of overall kills. Her familiarity with the foes and her own rising level must have contributed to the gradually lower rewards.

‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 191 – One stat point awarded

...

‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 200 – One stat point awarded – One Core Skill point awarded

...

‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 220 – One stat point awarded – One Core Skill point awarded

...

‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 238 – One stat point awarded

Ilea hoped she’d get all her third Class’s skills to the third tier before reaching level three hundred in the Class, just to be sure.

‘ding’ Absolute Destruction reaches 3rd lvl 30

‘ding’ Azarinth Reversal reaches 3rd lvl 24

...

‘ding’ Azarinth Reversal reaches 3rd lvl 26

‘ding’ Blink reaches 3rd lvl 30
‘ding’ Sentinel Sphere reaches 3rd lvl 30
‘ding’ Sentinel Huntress reaches 3rd lvl 10
...
‘ding’ Sentinel Huntress reaches 3rd lvl 12
‘ding’ Azarinth Perception reaches 3rd lvl 29
‘ding’ Azarinth Perception reaches 3rd lvl 30

‘ding’ Heart of Cinder reaches 3rd lvl 29
‘ding’ Heart of Cinder reaches 3rd lvl 30
‘ding’ Storm of Cinders reaches 3rd lvl 24
...
‘ding’ Storm of Cinders reaches 3rd lvl 26
‘ding’ Ash and Ember Unity reaches 3rd lvl 29
‘ding’ Ash and Ember Unity reaches 3rd lvl 30
‘ding’ Ashen Wings reaches 3rd lvl 28
...
‘ding’ Ashen Wings reaches 3rd lvl 30

‘ding’ Eyes of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 22
...
‘ding’ Eyes of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 26

Ilea now only had four skills in her main two Classes left to top off.

With a few new Sentinel Huntress marks, she used them freely on various spirits, trying to find them again amidst the hordes or after switching between groups.

Each level added another mark, the high level of the creatures or perhaps the distant marks on her allies helping with the skill. Sometimes, it even allowed her to get a feel for their remaining health.

Every waking hour, she spent among the spirit hordes, with the survivors, or training with the Meadow. She felt that her time here was limited, so she wanted to make the most of it. The results showed, especially in her third Class.

‘ding’ Phaseshift reaches 2nd lvl 2

...

'ding' Phaseshift reaches 2nd lvl 17

'ding' Flare of Creation reaches 3rd lvl 2

...

'ding' Flare of Creation reaches 3rd lvl 5

'ding' Displacement reaches 3rd lvl 3

...

'ding' Displacement reaches 3rd lvl 7

'ding' Space Shift reaches 2nd lvl 18

...

'ding' Space Shift reaches 2nd lvl 20

'ding' Body of the Valkyrie reaches 2nd lvl 19

'ding' Body of the Valkyrie reaches 2nd lvl 20

'ding' Space Awareness reaches 2nd lvl 9

...

'ding' Space Awareness reaches 2nd lvl 20

Ilea had advanced Space Shift as soon as the third tier had become available.

'ding' Space Shift reaches 3rd lvl 1

Passive – Space Shift – 3rd lvl 1

You can wield space more easily, allowing you to unravel its mysteries.

Teleportation abilities can be used again 70.5% faster [141%], and you can travel 40.5% farther [81%].

2nd stage: Interrupt or stop an enemy teleportation spell within a distance of 20.5m. Cooldown and efficiency are affected by available teleportation spells. You cannot teleport while this skill is active.

3rd stage: Your understanding of space magic grows. You learn to latch on to ongoing teleportation spells with your own teleportation abilities. Long-range and channeled teleportation spells have their range doubled, and their cooldown and cost are reduced by half.

Category: Space magic

'ding' Space Shift reaches 3rd lvl 2

The bonuses to her long-range abilities affected both her third-tier Displacement as well as her third-tier Blink. They applied after all the other multipliers, meaning her third-tier Blink could now be used every fifteen hours or so.

Active: Blink – 3rd lvl 30

Immediately appear at a distant place. Distance based on the level of the skill.

2nd stage: The time between blinks is reduced greatly. No ground contact needed between blinks.

3rd stage: You may set one destination you touch. You may change it every six months [37.34 days]. You may travel to said destination once every three days [14.93h].

Category: Teleportation Magic

The reduced cost changed her channeling time of the spell from six minutes to three.

Her third tier of Displacement now had a range of about one point eight kilometers and could be used again after about two minutes. The main benefit of her new third tier of Space Shift was the reduced cost, slashing the hefty mana cost of Displacement and its own third tier in half.

The spell now managed to provide a reasonable breather against several Astral Spirits too stupid to understand what was happening when their spells suddenly vanished right in front of her, only to appear somewhere else.

The first part of the new third tier had taken her some testing to understand, but essentially, she could connect Blink or Displacement to an ongoing teleportation spell that activated within the range of either of her abilities.

That meant that if someone used a teleportation ability, she could use either Blink or Displacement to be moved alongside whoever cast the spell she latched onto. Ilea would then be moved the same distance as her target.

She wouldn't have to guess where they went, nor did she have to watch the lines in space. As long as she attached herself to whoever used a teleportation spell and had one of her abilities ready, she would appear close to where they moved.

The distance and relation to her target would remain the same. If the target appeared inside an object, the spell behaved the same way as when she tried to blink into solid matter. She would simply appear outside of whatever solid object was in the way.

Ilea's double teleportation, coupled with her reduced cooldowns, already made it difficult for anything to get away, but now even a longer-range skill wouldn't be enough to flee from her or regroup.

Body of the Valkyrie had also reached the end of the second tier. And, of course, she immediately advanced it.

Passive – Body of the Valkyrie – 3rd lvl 1

The Flame of Creation flows through your veins, increasing your resilience by 35.5% [319.5%], Physical Damage Resistance by 9.1% [81.9%], and Magic Damage Resistance by 9.1% [81.9%]. You won't be fazed by heavy damage or powerful sources of light and sound anymore.

2nd stage: Your body has withstood incredible damage and endured the hardships of battle. The fires flowing through you have hardened your bones and muscles. Your health is increased by 7.1% [63.9%].

3rd stage: Your ability to adapt to your enemy grows. Continued battle against the same foe increases damage reduction against its attacks by 0.5% [4.5%] per minute to a maximum of a static 50%.

Category: Body Enhancement – Space Magic

'ding' Body of the Valkyrie reaches 3rd lvl 2

'ding' Body of the Valkyrie reaches 3rd lvl 3

A minute was a long time, but, coupled with her second-tier Phaseshift, the new bonuses allowed for much longer battles against the spirits before she had to retreat.

The only downside to the newfound defensive power was that it applied to each foe individually. That meant that if a new Astral Spirit arrived, she took full damage from its attacks until another minute had passed.

Ilea learned that the bonuses were applied in a similar way to the second tier of Aspect of Ash. As long as she considered the battle to be ongoing, it usually still counted. There were some plain range and time limitations too, but they never came into play when she blinked away for a short breather.

The spirits didn't make it easy to test how much of a difference the bonus made, practically speaking, due to the continued arrival of more enemies. Still, Ilea knew the addition would have made it quite a bit harder for Queen Zaiked to pressure her during their battle.

Contrary to the other spells, Space Awareness felt grueling to level. Every bit of understanding was beaten into her head by the Meadow, countless demonstrations and explanations that would have driven her mad without the constant arcane healing and fighting breaks.

Admittedly, the fighting breaks were usually longer than the lessons.

She doubted it would have been possible to get to the end of the second tier even with a year of training on her own. Even so, she found it the only skill in her third Class that she couldn't immediately advance to tier three once it hit the cap.

It was a little frustrating but hardly a mood dampener, knowing that her overall growth from these last two months surpassed most of her previous training endeavors.

Compared to her times in Iztacalum, Tremor, and the Descent, it didn't quite feel like she was a lower-level human hunting powerful monsters. She was more of a misclassified creature punching well above her weight. The levels would equalize in time as she continued to kill beings that were supposed to be far beyond her own power.

The Meadow categorized her at the raw power of a level five to six hundred monster, with added sapience and an incredible variety of abilities that let her face creatures at seven to eight hundred.

She finished by checking the accumulated General Skill levels from her time on Erendar.

'ding' Deviant of Humanity reaches lvl 17

...

'ding' Deviant of Humanity reaches lvl 20

'ding' Deviant of Humanity reaches 2nd lvl 1

Deviant of Humanity – 2nd lvl 1

You have faced creatures most other humans have nightmares about, call beings that occupy the pages of legends told by your kind your friends.

You have reached a level of power that few humans will ever call their own. And yet you push onward, knowing of the dangers that wait in the

dark. You anticipate them. Welcome them. Those who would dismiss you may now take notice, should you wish them to do so.

2nd stage: You remain human at your core, but your actions have pushed you beyond the limitations of your species. Inspire terror in the hearts of your own kind or those who would dismiss humanity, should you wish to do so.

The new ability felt a little like a more subdued Monster Hunter that could be active at all times. Ilea couldn't freeze lower-level people with this power, but they wouldn't mistake her for something she wasn't. Not even the densest motherfuckers out there.

She left it off most of the time, though. Her growing reputation and ashen look usually made enough of an impression already.

'ding' Gourmet reaches lvl 3

'ding' Identify reaches lvl 17

'ding' Divination Magic Resistance reaches lvl 7

'ding' Meditation reaches 3rd lvl 10

'ding' Monster Hunter reaches 3rd lvl 6

'ding' Sage of Torment reaches lvl 19

'ding' Sage of Torment reaches lvl 20

'ding' Sage of Torment reaches 2nd lvl 1

Sage of Torment – 2nd lvl 1

You have helped others reach strength through pain and struggle. As long as you train willing subjects, they shall find comfort and resilience in your presence. You are an example of what is possible through sheer tenacity. Also, you inflict a lot of pain.

2nd stage: You care neither for the species nor for the home realm of your pupils, pushing them beyond what they imagined possible or bearable.

You gain insight into the development of your pupils' resistances, allowing you to mercilessly abuse any weaknesses and overcome defenses. To better their abilities, of course. Definitely just that.

Ilea didn't gain the ability to see resistance levels, but she gained a better idea of how to apply damage for the best results. The effects were

much higher when she was the one actually dealing said damage. She could still offer some pointers to Meadow on how much it should push certain individuals, but it wasn't quite as efficient.

'ding' Veteran reaches 3rd lvl 9

'ding' Astral Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 2

...

'ding' Astral Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 20

'ding' Death Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 15

...

'ding' Death Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 20

'ding' Space Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 3

'ding' Space Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 4

'ding' Wood Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 4

...

'ding' Wood Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 14

Ilea had managed to convince the Meadow to add a little bit of resistance training, but the only schools she could currently level with the alien being were wood and space.

When she was done with her meal, she checked her full status and summoned some ale.

Name: Ilea Spears

Unspent stat points: 3

Unspent Core Skill points: 31

Unspent 3rd-tier General Skill points [1858 total skill levels]: 2

Class 1: The Azarinth Sentinel – lvl 393

- Active: Absolute Destruction – 3rd lvl 30

- Active: Sentinel Reconstruction – 3rd lvl 30

- Active: Azarinth Awakening – 3rd lvl 30

- Active: Blink – 3rd lvl 30

- Active: Sentinel Sphere – 3rd lvl 30

- Passive: Sentinel Core – 3rd lvl 30

- Passive: Azarinth Fighting – 3rd lvl 30

- **Passive: Sentinel Huntress – 3rd lvl 12**
- **Passive: Azarinth Perception – 3rd lvl 30**
- **Passive: Azarinth Reversal – 3rd lvl 26**

Class 2: Kin of Ash – lvl 392

- **Active: Armor of Ash – 3rd lvl 30**
- **Active: Aspect of Ash – 3rd lvl 30**
- **Active: True Ash Creation – 3rd lvl 30**
- **Active: Heart of Cinder – 3rd lvl 30**
- **Active: Storm of Cinders – 3rd lvl 26**
- **Passive: Ash and Ember Unity – 3rd lvl 30**
- **Passive: Ashen Wings – 3rd lvl 30**
- **Passive: Eyes of Ash – 3rd lvl 26**
- **Passive: Avatar of Ash – 3rd lvl 30**
- **Passive: Keeper of Ash – 3rd lvl 30**

Class 3: The Faen Valkyrie – lvl 238

- **Active: Phaseshift – 2nd lvl 17**
- **Active: Flare of Creation – 3rd lvl 5**
- **Active: Displacement – 3rd lvl 7**
- **Passive: Space Shift – 3rd lvl 2**
- **Passive: Body of the Valkyrie – 3rd lvl 3**
- **Passive: Space Awareness – 2nd lvl 20**

General Skills:

- **Dancing – lvl 3**
- **Deviant of Humanity – 2nd lvl 1**
- **Elos Standard language – lvl 6**
- **English Language – lvl 15**
- **Gourmet – lvl 3**
- **Harmony of the Drowned – lvl 9**
- **Heavy Archery – lvl 11**
- **Identify – lvl 17**
- **Meditation – 3rd lvl 10**
- **Monster Hunter – 3rd lvl 6**
- **Oxygen Repository – lvl 14**

- *Sage of Torment – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Soul Perception – lvl 5*
- *Teaching – lvl 3*
- *Veteran – 3rd lvl 9*
- *Warhammer Mastery – lvl 9*
- *Arcane Magic Resistance – 3rd lvl 17*
- *Ash Magic Resistance – lvl 1*
- *Astral Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Blast Resistance – 3rd lvl 1*
- *Blight Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Blood Magic Resistance – 3rd lvl 9*
- *Blood Manipulation Resistance – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Bone Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 6*
- *Corrosion Resistance – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Crystal Resistance – 2nd lvl 14*
- *Curse Resistance – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Dark Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 6*
- *Death Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Devour Resistance – 2nd lvl 6*
- *Diamond Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 3*
- *Divination Magic Resistance – lvl 7*
- *Dust Magic Resistance – lvl 6*
- *Earth Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Emerald Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Fear Resistance – lvl 11*
- *Flesh Magic Resistance – lvl 8*
- *Gravity Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Health Drain Resistance – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Heat Resistance – 3rd lvl 7*
- *Ice Resistance – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Lava Magic Resistance – 3rd lvl 1*
- *Light Magic Resistance – 3rd lvl 1*
- *Lightning Resistance – 3rd lvl 5*
- *Mana Drain Resistance – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Mental Resistance – 3rd lvl 5*
- *Mist Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Olvor Magic Resistance – lvl 3*

- *Pain Tolerance – 3rd lvl 3*
- *Poison Resistance – 3rd lvl 2*
- *Rot Resistance – 2nd lvl 5*
- *Ruby Magic Resistance – lvl 14*
- *Sand Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Sapphire Magic Resistance – lvl 13*
- *Silver Magic Resistance – lvl 1*
- *Smoke Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 3*
- *Soul Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 3*
- *Sound Magic Resistance – lvl 18*
- *Space Magic Resistance – 3rd lvl 4*
- *Stamina Drain Resistance – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Time Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Topaz Magic Resistance – lvl 18*
- *Vine Magic Resistance – lvl 14*
- *Void Magic Resistance – 3rd lvl 2*
- *Water Resistance – 3rd lvl 1*
- *Wind Resistance – 3rd lvl 2*
- *Wood Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 14*

Status:

Vitality: 1090

Endurance: 403

Strength: 384

Dexterity: 400

Intelligence: 1085

Wisdom: 1100

Health: 17970/17970

Stamina: 3992/4030

Mana: 21942/22000

The book of Ilea grows, she thought as she scrolled up to see how many stat points she had available. She hid the General Skills section again on the way there.

The secondary stats were cleaned up, though she had stupidly used three too many points in Endurance.

Now I'll have to get to five hundred. Well. More levels needed.

Her health and mana were looking strong, and with every level, her resources were growing.

She'd kept three stat points in reserve.

Just in case I really need a sudden and incredible power boost.

She smiled at her own joke and sobered up quickly at what they were about to do.

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SEVENTY-TWO

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Escort Mission

“They’ve all reached the end of the second tier. I fear this is as far as we can push them in the time we have,” the Meadow said.

“You worry too much,” Ilea said, but she could hear the tension in her voice. “They’re going to make it.”

She smiled at the creatures, all of which were gathered near the spatial gate that led to Elos.

To her, Erendar was another realm to explore, another place where she could face interesting and dangerous creatures with her magic. With her third-tier Blink, she could always return home, and with her healing and resistances, she could survive in every environment she’d encountered so far.

But to the Awakened beings of Erendar, this place meant extinction, the approaching height of the eclipse spelling out their deaths. And to them, this gate meant another chance.

If they could survive the environmental change.

Ilea took a deep breath, going over the plan once more in her head. She glanced down at Zeriveka, the first ant-like creature with whom they had tested her healing and the arcane resistance approach. She had agreed to be the first. To see if it was enough. They were reasonably sure it was, but neither Michael nor the Meadow could confirm with certainty.

Once through, Ilea would heal the Awakened, teleport and fly them out of Gyffold, and then fly them north, stopping in various known dungeons on the way there in case her mana ran out or the Awakened struggled to deal with the low mana density. Once they were past the Naraza range, and if the

mana density was high enough for them to survive without her healing, they would wait in a cave Ilea had found until she'd brought everyone there.

If that worked, she would take them north to Tremor. And then, if Catelyn agreed, she would take them to Hallowfort.

But that all depended on whether the creatures could stay alive.

She patted Zeriveka on her head. They could barely communicate, and Ilea knew the Awakened still didn't really understand the gesture. She made a few clicking sounds that sounded reassuring, but compared to the hisses of the Elves, Ilea had a hard time interpreting the Awakened of Erendar. Even with some attempted explanations from the Meadow.

"Alright," Ilea said. "I'll go and inform the locals. Wish me luck."

Baralia had still not fallen. That was kind of expected, given how easily Lys had conquered most of the kingdom. A lot of their higher-level people and much of their resources had been concentrated in the capital in recent months.

The highest-level individuals of Gyffold had joined the war effort, leaving a thinning garrison of both Empire and Gyffold troops that were busy enough with the situation as it was. Dealing with Ilea was beyond their pay grade. That was the hope, at least.

She stepped through the fissure.

The two dozen mages and warriors sitting behind powerful barriers and enchantments tensed and relaxed when they realized who had come.

"Hey. Hello. Yes, it's me," Ilea said.

The portal security troop had become even less impressive now that Gyffold had folded to the Empire's demands. She wondered why neither Velamyr nor other Imperials had sent people to reinforce the gate.

He said he wouldn't help me out. But it looks like he's making sure there's less resistance.

Velamyr wants the gate closed, after all. What better way to have that done than simply never mentioning the information to his peers? Seems like a risk if that's really the case. Maybe the Empress simply agrees with him?

Or would he just blame me if everything was revealed? Myself and Michael? No, he seems far too honor-bound to do something like that.

She found that it didn't really matter to her. As long as she could get the survivors out and the gate closed, she was happy to face whatever annoying consequences followed, if there were any at all.

“We’ve managed to figure out a way to save the species living on the other side. They’re insect creatures. Some of you have seen them before, but if not, be ready,” she said. “I’ll bring them out one by one and move them out of the city.”

“We have specific orders in the event that something non-human comes out of that gate,” today’s officer in charge said to her, her voice surprisingly steady for a level one-twenty mage.

“Yes. Well, here’s the deal,” Ilea said. “If you fight me now, I’ll knock you all out and rip off a few limbs here and there for good measure. If you attack while I’m bringing the creatures out and you kill one, I’ll kill those responsible. If you just ignore me and let us pass without a fuss, I promise we’ll be gone in no time, and neither you, nor Gyffold, nor the Empire will have to deal with any of it in the future.”

“You wouldn’t... the Empire would,” the officer stuttered.

Ilea charged Monster Hunter and whistled.

“We all want this gate closed. For that, I need you to stand down. Feel free to report what happened here, I’m sure a lot of people will be very angry. Both at me and you. Or you could just forget about it, wait for me to return, guard the gate for however long it stays open and then go home when it’s closed.” She waited, seeing the uncertain looks on everyone present. Nobody made a move. “I assume we have an understanding.”

The officer didn’t reply.

Ilea put her arm through the gate and gestured toward herself. She activated her healing and held her breath.

She felt Zeriveka’s head tap against her palm and slowly led her toward herself and the fissure. Slowly, she stepped out onto the other side, and Ilea poured arcane healing into her with every passing moment as she watched with every bit of magical perception she could.

Zeriveka’s body strained and convulsed.

She looked up and Ilea could see that she was still there, her eyes still holding a spark of personality.

“You’re resisting it.” She broke out into a smile and laughed out loud, then she grabbed the struggling creature and teleported them both out of the city before any of the guards could change their minds.

Zeriveka had calmed down enough to eye the new world warily when they appeared outside the walls after a few uses of Displacement, but her body was still stiff and twitching.

They had to get north. Quickly.

The continuous damage was extensive, but with Ilea's healing, it was manageable. She wrapped the ant into an ashen cocoon, then charged her wings and shot toward the north.

Ilea felt anxious for the first few minutes of the flight, but she soon relaxed as the familiar lands passed below. She wouldn't need the dungeons, but she still made sure to take the path she had planned, noting the various locations as she passed.

It only took a few hours, and for once, she was glad they were in Baralia instead of Ravenhall.

As they shot up and past the mountain range, Ilea breathed a sigh of relief when she felt the increased mana density. She checked Zeriveka and saw her relax. Her healing stopped when she felt Zeriveka no longer taking damage, her body no longer struggling to exist in the environment.

"It worked! Fuck yeah, Meadow!"

Zeriveka made loud clicking sounds and jumped up and down.

"We did it!" she exclaimed as a purple bolt of arcane lightning slammed into the landscape beyond.

Zeriveka scrambled and ducked, staying close to Ilea.

She found the cavern and took the ant there, marking her with Sentinel Huntress when they arrived. She hoped Zeriveka had understood when the Meadow explained the mark to her. Though, even if any monsters came here, the Awakened wasn't exactly helpless. The more beings Ilea brought here, the safer their group would become.

"I'll be back soon. Stay safe."

Ilea spread her wings and flew back.

When she arrived near the fissure again, some of the guards were arguing. They silenced immediately when she appeared.

"It worked," she said. "Now, this is going to take a while. There are over fifty beings I have to move."

She stepped through to the other side and saw the waiting group perk up at her arrival. There was a silent tension before she smiled brightly and gave them two thumbs up.

"We stuck the landing! ... uh, that was a shit line. We did it! Zeriveka is safely in the north."

Ilea could almost feel the weight drop from their shoulders, a strange tension in the fabric itself easing as she watched on with her Space

Awareness.

“You okay there?” she sent through the connection that the Meadow had established.

“I was worried. Please, there are more waiting.”

“Yes. I can tell you’re stressed.” She gestured to the beings. “Alright, now that we know it’s safe, we’ll continue with the groups.”

She popped over to the other side and peered at the guards as a spider-like Willow Mother stepped through the fissure, its long, thin legs shaking as it struggled to breathe. Next came a mantis, or Pale One, and the guards watched in horror as her ashen limbs extended to heal them.

Ilea waited as one being after another emerged, her mana slowly reduced as she healed them all. She took five of them this time, creating a large ashen cocoon to protect and move them. All of them remained stable.

And then she was off again toward the north.

She had to stop at one of the dungeons this time as the Pale One seemed to be struggling. It soon stabilized again, and they moved on. It had been a theory, but it seemed like the higher-level beings struggled more with the low mana density than the weaker ones.

The next group changed the theory again. Level mattered, but species had an impact too.

Either way, she got the creatures north, flying day and night until nearly all fifty-three survivors were gathered in the cavern, communicating in clicks that Ilea couldn’t understand, but she could tell they were excited.

Ilea watched the last creature push through the rift. The single remaining Rock Beetle struggled to move its massive body through the small entrance. She moved her ash to help, pulling on its front legs when a powerful push came from the other side, squeezing the large body through.

Ilea healed the damage it suffered before she displaced them both upward.

“You’re so fucking heavy,” she murmured, forming a large cocoon of ash that encompassed the entire creature. It definitely wasn’t comfortable, but right now, that hardly mattered.

Some hours later, she was done with the first part of the plan.

Now, she only had to get them safely through the hellscape of the north.

Easy, she thought with a smile.

An uncharged, uninterrupted flight to Hallowfort would take her about a full day of travel time. Possibly more with monster or storm interruptions

that she couldn't ignore.

She decided that taking the entire group would be best, using Displacement to get them from crevasse to crevasse and making sure to keep them protected from any higher-level monsters.

The journey would take several days, perhaps more than a week, depending on how much rest the Awakened required.

Ilea took a deep breath, relaxing as dark storm clouds moved past overhead.

I've missed this place.

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SEVENTY-THREE

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Northwards

Ilea had a meal and then gathered up the group of survivors when they were ready, starting their long journey through the ruined landscape of the north.

Miststalkers appeared from the forming lakes of mist when night fell, starting their ethereal dance in the apocalyptic terrain.

Okay, let's pray I don't attract some ungodly four-mark on the way, she thought and checked behind her.

The creatures were holding on despite all the teleportation.

They took a break as dawn approached and then continued onward through most of the day. They didn't encounter any high-level beasts, and sparse uses of Monster Hunter scared away anything else that got close.

They reached Tremor at the end of the third day of travel. Quickly checking the cathedral, Ilea found everything was untouched since her last visit.

She cracked her neck and sighed. *At this point, I'd rather be taking space magic lessons from the Meadow.*

She summoned a prepared sheet of stone to inform the survivors that they had arrived at their first destination and that she would return to them soon. She summoned some food and let the Awakened get familiar with the surroundings.

But, now that I'm here... she thought, checking the sunlight as her eyes moved over the ancient Rhyvor city. No more Knights patrolled the sunlit areas, and there were no Soul Rippers visible in the higher parts of the city.

Last time I fought them, I wasn't nearly as powerful as I am now. Not even everything in the third tier, let alone as highly leveled as I have them

now. No third Class and all the related bonuses. No third-tier resistances either.

She sat down in one of the broken windows of the cathedral and summoned her notebook. Flipping the pages, she soon found her notes from her level three hundred evolutions.

Oh boy.

I had no third-tier Meditation either.

Well, put it on the list.

She refrained from jumping into the fray immediately, not knowing how they would react to her killing one of them. She already knew they would flee when they found themselves damaged too much. And she wouldn't risk an attack on the Awakened while they were here.

Ilea blinked a few times into the dark zone of the city, quickly finding one of the creatures resting sideways on a wall, not a muscle of it moving.

[Soul Ripper – lvl ???]

Veteran informed her that the creature was at level six hundred.

Should be manageable. She frowned. *Barely even worth it, really.*

Part of her wanted to explore the dungeon deep in these enormous caverns, to find a clue about who had brought them here, to see the real runes Captain Reyker had found with his team.

Her decision to refrain from killing any of the beings for now was only reinforced the more she thought on it. If she somehow drew the perpetrator responsible for their appearance here, she would have another problem to deal with. It could be an Ascended or something entirely different.

She found a few more of the beings, their levels ranging from five-fifty to as high as eight hundred. Ilea wondered if the latter had any more abilities than those she had previously fought.

She could see them below, a few moving in the fields outside the city walls. With her sight-enhancing abilities and Eyes of Ash, she could see them as if there was daylight.

Ilea explored a little more of the area and found a broad river in the darkness, the water flowing in from a large opening in the stone. A large group of Soul Rippers had gathered at the dungeon's likely location.

She felt a shiver go down her spine, flying upward until she reached the cavern ceiling. Despite her enhanced sight, this place was still dark. And the

creatures still looked creepy, her enhanced sight not changing that fact.

Ilea doubted she was in much danger here, but in the darkness, these otherworldly monsters retained their horror. An instinct Ilea doubted she could ever fully shake.

Fighting and killing them would certainly help to reduce some of that effect.

‘ding’ Fear Resistance reaches lvl 12

Oh, nice, she thought as she flew back to the cathedral.

Tremor had arguably been less creepy with the Knights present in its streets. Now, it was just an eerie ghost town.

How many of these places remain in the north, untouched for thousands of years?

Ilea left Tremor and continued to Hallowfort.

The trip was short, and she soon appeared in the large crystal-lit cavern with its high-reaching statue that held Hallowfort, an unshakable beacon of civilization in these dangerous lands.

She saw the reinforced walls, the armored guards patrolling them, and dozens of Awakened walking the streets beyond.

Ilea landed near the brittle bridge, having already gained the attention of a few armed warriors.

She smiled at the old wooden contraption, left as it was either due to a sense of sentimentality or perhaps as a trap for intruders that couldn’t fly.

Beyond stood a wall of stone, a sealed gate now in place right where the bridge ended.

“Ashen healer, you have returned!” one of the guards said, his whisper-like voice traveling far.

“I suppose I have, steadfast warrior,” Ilea said, having no idea who the being was. Nearly all the guards wore heavy, full-plate armor in various shades of gray or black.

“Is she trustworthy?” another guard asked.

“She is,” a third one said as it signaled to someone behind the wall.

The gates opened toward Ilea, revealing a nearly three-meter-tall Awakened built like a stone golem, whose one visible eye blinked at her.

“I have opened the gates,” it spoke, its deep, rumbling voice entirely too loud.

“That you have, strong opener of the gate,” Ilea said, walking toward them.

“The gates are open,” it added in a satisfied manner. Still too loud.

It was entirely unnecessary for her to even use the gate, but she knew that many of those who became guardians in Hallowfort felt a deep pride in their profession. She wouldn’t make the opener of gates feel obsolete.

After she went through, Ilea blinked up to the guard who had talked to her first.

“Is Catelyn around?” she asked.

“The one blessed by fire should be in her den. Shall we inform her of your coming?” the warrior asked.

“No need. Thanks,” Ilea said and blinked toward Catelyn’s store.

The Hunter’s Den looked the same as it always had, at least on the outside, but Ilea noticed the increased magic from various new enchantments.

Not just the walls, then.

A few Awakened bowed as she passed. What had happened in the Descent must have made the rounds.

She greeted them and went inside. Her sphere couldn’t reach past the defenses anymore.

The inside looked much more orderly, and about a dozen creatures were working in the spacious room. Some were processing herbs, others monster pieces. A few were busy going through documents or books, while three Awakened were discussing a complex array of runes chiseled into a round piece of rock.

Catelyn herself was busy mixing something with the corruption agent from the Descent and poison from the eighth layer. Ilea recognized both immediately.

Ilea displaced herself in front of the large workbench and smiled below her armor. “I do hope your alchemy skills have grown a little since I last encountered them,” she said.

Catelyn blinked, her small form looking up to meet Ilea’s eyes. Her left eyelid twitched once.

Ilea laughed when the fox roared and expanded, hugging the monstrous form of fire as it pushed her to the ground. The nearby Awakened quickly tried to put out the flames that immediately spread to various ingredients and furniture.

“There, there,” Ilea said, rubbing Catelyn’s hard, flaming fur as her large claws dug into the ash on her chest.

Catelyn pushed her harder to the ground as she towered over her.

“You,” the fox growled, her head now close to Ilea’s. Her large, pointy teeth ground together, her breath hot enough to melt stone. “I thought you were dead.”

“Sorry, got a little sidetracked.”

Catelyn removed her claws, lifting Ilea up like a puppy before she hugged her close to her chest. As her head bumped the ceiling, water mages rushed in to fight the spreading flames.

Ilea was entirely wreathed in fire. *Warm*, she thought and closed her eyes, hugging the fox as her ashen armor scraped against the enhanced fur.

“I was worried,” Catelyn whispered, the sound a low growl.

“So little trust in me?” Ilea said with a smile.

“I’ve seen hundreds of experienced scavengers never return from places far less dangerous than the Descent.”

She slowly returned to her small form, her fire retreating.

Ilea’s ash did the same, their roles reversing until she held the fox close to her chest.

“Everyone, leave,” Catelyn said in her normal voice, jumping out of Ilea’s grasp and settling on her workbench.

“But the fires...” one of them said.

One of Catelyn’s tails moved, and all the flames died in the same instant.

The fox sighed when everyone was gone. And then she smirked.

“Don’t wait so long next time. Did you bring cake?”

SEVENTY-FOUR

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Foxy

“I assumed you wanted to destroy this,” Ilea said, shaking the small vial filled with corruption with an ashen limb.

“Resistance training. It was more successful than we had anticipated,” Catelyn said.

“Nice.”

“So, what happened down there?”

Ilea gave her a brief summary of the lower layers, her encounter with the Ascended, and what happened afterward. She didn’t say anything about Erendar yet.

Catelyn exhaled heavily. “Three hundred and ninety. And a third Class. I do suggest you refrain from delving into the Descent again. Both for your sake and ours.”

“Don’t worry. I’m not here because of that. There are plenty of things I have to work on before even thinking about deliberately trying to poke that Ascended.”

“I *hope* you’re here to meet a friend and reassure her that you’re healthy and alive,” Catelyn said with a slight growl.

Ilea summoned a cake and moved it slightly closer to the fox.

“Your attempts at bribery are misplaced,” Catelyn said.

Ilea added a second cake.

“Not even a letter,” Catelyn said.

Ilea didn’t mention the lack of any postal service willing to travel north from the Human Plains.

A third cake appeared.

“I was sure you’d forgotten about me,” the fox added, her voice lacking bite.

Ilea added two more cakes and took a step back.

The fox smiled as her body expanded yet again. Her voice rumbled through the Hunter’s Den with menacing power. “Consider your debt repaid.”

Ilea watched as Popi’s beautiful creations were slaughtered, ripped apart, their screams silent and unheard, a merciless predator of fire devouring every bit of their writhing corpses.

“How have you been?” Ilea asked, sitting down on an ashen chair and summoning a meal for herself.

Catelyn returned to her smaller form, the flames gone, and licked up the remaining cake splatters.

“I was stressed at first. Now I’m much... much better,” she said and flopped to her side, her face resting on her paws as she looked at Ilea. She closed her eyes slightly and purred.

“Things have gone reasonably well. Elana and many others are a huge help in taking care of everything. The first layer of the Descent is fully secured now, and our efforts to find and eradicate the corruption in the highest four layers have been mostly successful. And we’re expanding, trying to take over much of the ruins between Hallowfort and the Descent.”

“You mentioned resistance training?”

“Yes. The healers we have profited greatly from our efforts to train extended resistances against Blood Manipulation. They’ve even started to offer training for more common defenses.”

“Maybe we could offer that in the future too.”

Catelyn gave her a questioning look.

“We founded a healing organization in Ravenhall,” Ilea said, quickly explaining the progress of the Sentinels and informing Catelyn about Ravenhall’s independence.

“As to the reason I came here,” Ilea continued. “There was a thing with a bunch of rituals, and, long story short, there’s a spatial gate to another realm. They have some kind of astronomy-related problem that leads to spirit infestation. An ancient landscape asked me for help in getting some survivors to the other side.”

Catelyn blinked her eyes a few times. “What?”

“We succeeded after getting their arcane resistance up. I brought the survivors to Tremor, but they don’t speak Elos Standard, and right now, they’re pretty much stranded there. Their bodies prevent them from living in the Human Plains, and they’re the last ones of their species. I hoped you could take them in, with Hallowfort being kind of a haven for Awakened,” Ilea finished.

Catelyn smiled. “That’s far less problematic than what I expected from you.”

Ilea raised an eyebrow. “What exactly did you expect?”

“I don’t know, some ancient emperor or lich you found in the area while exploring?”

“Fair enough. So, what do you say? Want to meet them?”

“Of course. Any Awakened is welcome in Hallowfort, as long as they understand the rules and adhere to our laws.”

“I’d hoped you’d say that. There was something else I wanted to talk about too, but we can do that on the way.”

* * *

Ilea watched on as a dozen Awakened tried to communicate with the residents of Erendar.

Catelyn had met them and then allowed her to bring them into the town, the first goal being to establish communication.

“It’s somewhat similar to Krazveri,” one of the more insect-like Awakened said after a while, addressing both Ilea and Catelyn. “It’s obvious that these are experienced survivors. I’m sure they’ll fit right in. I think we should be able to have simple conversations in a few weeks.”

“That’s awfully quick,” Ilea said.

“Amongst our group, we speak twenty-eight languages,” the Awakened said and laughed with a gurgling sound.

Catelyn smiled. “Good, then see to it that they’re welcomed.”

The insect creature nodded and turned to one of the beings again, slowly clicking.

Ilea felt that the survivors had opened up more in half an hour here than during all their training with her.

“Language really is a huge barrier, hmm,” she mused.

Ilea glanced at the Awakened and smiled. *They'll figure it out.*

She could see the excitement in their bodies. A place not filled with sand or ice. Just a bunch of arcane storms.

"Language is the foundation of Hallowfort," a squid-looking Awakened said. "It's fortunate that Elos Standard was not lost here. Quite a wonderful language, really. Easy to learn and pronounce, with dozens of different sound organs." The heap of tentacles paused when it noticed her glazed expression. "Not a language enthusiast, I see... Well, I'm sure you have your own talents."

A wolf wreathed in shadows stepped over to the creature and spoke in an ethereal whisper. "That is Lilith, the ashen-clad savior."

Something happened in the tentacle creature, but Ilea had no clue how to interpret it. Her sphere did inform her of some discomfort.

"I... didn't know... apolo—" it stammered.

"Don't mention it," Ilea interrupted. "My reputation is getting kind of annoying."

"It's tedious, isn't it?" Catelyn said and snickered. "On another note, your elven friend has been pestering me for two months now."

"Has he now?" Ilea said.

"Yes. Yes he has. I won't repeat his words due to the lack of respect he showed me, but if you could visit him in the near future, I would very much appreciate that."

"Did he find anything special?"

"He found several things, none of it of import to Hallowfort. However, he mostly seems to wish for a meeting with someone."

"The Hunters, yeah. I promised I could introduce them. Well, I'm sure he can level for a little longer if what he found is no existential threat to all of Elos."

"No threats, but he does have a flair for the dramatic."

"He does, doesn't he?" Ilea said. She would visit him as soon as she was done with Erendar. "How has Elana been? Settled in?"

"She rewrote our entire code of law."

Ilea blinked at that.

"It's better now. But far more boring to read. She's been a great help in the council. Her talent and experience with organizing a country are obvious. And she's enjoying herself. I think she mostly enjoys the challenge of working with non-humans."

“Or she enjoys no longer working with humans,” Ilea said with a smile.

“Or that. She’s also been extremely helpful in terms of negotiation with the Dark Protector.”

Ilea remembered one of the recruiters talking to her. The Awakened of the north were fighting the Feynor dragon worshippers. Hallowfort wanted to stay out of it as much as it could.

“Is the war with the Feynor still ongoing?”

Catelyn sighed. “This isn’t like one of your human wars. It’s not a conflict that will be decided anytime soon. If it will be decided at all. The simple act of finding a battlefield is treacherous. Our strongholds are built for survival, and each living creature here is capable of fighting.

“Large groups of moving creatures, however, will attract predators neither side is capable of defeating. Nor do we seek the destruction of our few secure caverns. Not even the Feynor wish mutual extinction. In the last months, there has been more pressure from the Dark Protector’s side, but a few new trade agreements have provided some air.”

“Maybe the survivors from Erendar will prove useful as well,” Ilea said. “And I’m happy to help out whenever Hallowfort is in danger. You know that.”

Catelyn gave her a long look. “We’ll see. And I know that I can call for you. It creates a little less weight on my shoulders, knowing that you’re around. I know a lot of Awakened also feel that way after they saw you fight in the Descent.”

“I don’t know how to feel about that. But I guess I am pretty good at fighting. You should see me take on the spirit hordes of Erendar.”

“I really would rather not, thank you.”

“Oh... before I forget. I have a way to mark people now. It allows me to find you, and it’s a way for you to call for me should you need my assistance. Would it be alright if I placed it on you? It’s essentially the same thing as the sphere you gave me but better. Well, I think it’s better.”

“Because it’s a spell of yours?” Catelyn purred.

“Yes.”

Catelyn giggled. “I’d be happy to have one. And I could give the sphere to someone else.”

Ilea smiled and placed a mark on Catelyn before she returned the sphere.

“I have a meeting to attend to. If there is nothing else, I’ll leave you to your day. Be safe out there, and thanks for this,” Catelyn said, showing her paw with the barely visible mark. “I shall discuss the news and possibilities you shared, and we will be ready. Rest assured that the Awakened you have brought to Hallowfort will henceforth be under our protection. They shall receive housing and opportunities to build their new life with us.”

“Thank you, Catelyn. Always a pleasure to come back here.”

The fox waved her off as she left. “Next time, don’t wait that long.”

‘ding’ You have secured the continued survival of the Pale Ones – One Core Skill point awarded

‘ding’ You have secured the continued survival of the Awakened Willows – One Core Skill point awarded

‘ding’ You have secured the continued survival of the Wildflower Ants – One Core Skill point awarded

‘ding’ You have secured the continued survival of the Rock Beetles – One Core Skill point awarded

Ilea stood there for a moment as she watched the survivors talk excitedly to the Awakened of Hallowfort.

Seeing the points she had gotten, it felt so trivial compared to what it meant for these beings. A few months ago, they didn’t think they had a future. And now they were here.

Wait, how will that one Rock Beetle reproduce?

She considered the various bug creatures in the room for a moment and smiled.

Better not ask that question.

She informed one of the Awakened that she would be off, and a moment later, all the survivors turned their attention toward her.

“They express their gratitude for what you have done,” the language specialist said.

Zeriveka approached and raised its head. Ilea touched its head and smiled. “I hope you like the place. And if you ever need anything, I’ll be around.”

The various creatures gestured and called out in different languages and sounds when her words were translated.

Ilea just stood there and smiled, her hand still on Zeriveka's head. She felt a little sentimental about leaving them here. Even if she'd only spent a few months with them and could barely communicate, it had felt meaningful.

She waved at them as she spread her wings, and then she left.

Did I really just help save a few species from extinction?

She grinned to herself, allowing herself to feel some pride.

Almost makes up for the Drakes I nearly hunted to extinction.

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SEVENTY-FIVE

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Teleportation

Ilea blinked out of Hallowfort, quickly reaching the surface again. She had managed to get the survivors out of Gyffold to the north, and now they were safe in Hallowfort.

All but one, she thought to herself and displaced a small rock into her hand. She threw it at a larger rock and displaced it back into her hand as she thought about what to do. There was some time left. *I do need a small break. And then I'll test a theory.*

Ilea displaced a bunch more stones, throwing them at larger rocks until the sky darkened, the familiar growl of an arcane storm moving closer.

Hmm.

She formed a ten-by-ten meter field of distorted space above her, facing upward. Then she made a second distorted space around fifty meters away, aiming at a particularly large boulder.

The first few bolts of arcane lightning missed her. The sixth strike came and vanished through space, cracking sideways into the boulder.

A loud explosion of rock and arcane energy echoed in the air before a shower of stone chunks hit everything in a large circle around where the boulder had been.

Good way to protect someone from a powerful spell.

Ilea dispelled her third-tier Displacement before using the normal version of the spell to make a few larger chunks of rock appear somewhere else.

“Not so strong now, are you?” she asked, looking up at the storm.

The storm didn't answer her. Ilea assumed it didn't speak Standard.

Been a while since I tried this.

A few strikes landed close by, cracking the stone. The shock waves managed to push her a few feet away, but the impacts themselves couldn't damage her anymore. Her armor, coupled with all her resistances, was enough to resist it entirely.

She felt the next strike coming, holding up her hand before the bright snake of arcane energy slashed down at her with incredible speed.

Ilea found it too fast to displace, or perhaps just too powerful. Her third-tier Azarinth Perception didn't activate, the spell bursting through her in an instant. Part of the energy was deflected, slamming into the stone around her.

Her resilience bonuses were supported by Arcane Resistance, and a large chunk of mana was fed back to her by Sentinel Core with the help of her Lightning Resistance. The shock itself was reduced, as were the bright light, the loud noise, and the heat and energy produced.

She looked at her hand, sparks and wisps of purple energy exuding outward where her ash had been blown off, burnt flesh below regrowing as her armor reformed above. The damage had been nearly entirely reduced to pure health damage, similar to the arcane beams when she had Phaseshift active.

'ding' Phaseshift reaches 2nd lvl 18

She looked up again, spreading her arms as the volatile energy dissipated into the land around her. Ilea remembered how she'd had to hide and wait out the storms during the day when she'd first arrived here.

She grinned when a purple lightning strike slammed into her chest. The sheer force made her stumble back a step to stabilize. Wisps of lightning dissipated away from her as she healed the minor damage.

'ding' Okay. You can pretty much ignore chaotic Arcane Storms – One Core Skill point awarded

You're damn right I can.

She spread her wings and focused, quickly finding the nearby Penumra dungeon and jumping down onto one of the roots. The entrance looked the

same as she remembered, but she had never delved deep into this one.

The Drop Saurians didn't wait for long, a few of them cautiously crawling closer via the adjacent roots and walls. Ilea waited for one of them to charge, catching the creature with her ashen limbs.

[Drop Saurian – lvl 363]

“Even lower than me,” she said, looking at the frothing creature trying to bite and claw her but unable to break through its ashen restraints. The projectiles shot by the ranged variants that were sufficiently close to her didn't penetrate her armor.

Ilea sent a medium-charged Heart of Cinder at some of the creatures, killing three more with a few ashen spears. She called out with Monster Hunter, using her new second-tier Deviant of Humanity to make it clear that the creatures were simply no match for her.

She tried to grasp at what her captive felt and thought, but it remained aggressive, trying to cut through the ash with continued vigor. The others had retreated after her display, entirely uncaring for their captured friend. The corpses were left behind, one still falling into the green hell below.

Ilea had outgrown these creatures, as she'd expected, but she wasn't here to clear the dungeon. She just needed a creature to test.

She looked at the struggling Drop Saurian trying to claw her face off. Maybe it was a pipe dream, but she had grown to like the Meadow, and if there was a way to bring it here, she would give it a shot. If it wanted to, of course.

Space Shift allowed her to attach herself to another teleportation spell. And Displacement allowed her to move other beings. So, in theory, she thought it should be possible to attach another being to her long-range third tier of Blink, effectively bringing it with her.

And if that works, then maybe, maybe there's a chance.

The spell activated, and she held on to the creature still trying to bite her face off.

The space around her shifted, and she appeared in her home, a smile blooming on her face as she looked down and saw the struggling monster still in her ashen limbs.

So, with a small monster and in the same realm, it's possible. But how the hell would I move an entire landscape?

She hadn't wanted to test it with any of the survivors in case something went wrong. And she would've had to go north and change her destination – not something she'd wanted to risk doing because there would have been no way back. Maybe if her arcane healing coupled with their resistances hadn't been enough, it could've been a last-ditch effort.

She killed the Drop Saurian, then quickly checked on and fed the Swordmouth Tigers before she flew off to Ravenhall.

Ilea whistled to herself when she landed near the city and went to chat with Claire. It wasn't a particularly long talk. Things in the city and with the Sentinels were going well.

After a bit of back and forth and some cursing, Claire supported her endeavors – and her newest potential plan. Bringing unknown species through a spatial fissure into and through the Human Plains would certainly cause some consequences and headaches, but she would have Ilea's back if anyone complained.

Hearing about the Sentinels made her want to go back and help them train, check up on them, and see how they were progressing. But she also knew that she could trust Trian and the others. She would have to trust the Sentinels too, trust them to learn and make their own mistakes.

Easier said than done.

Ilea left again and made her way to Gyffold, where the guards were more than eager to ignore her arrival. She stepped into the cold of Erendar and took a deep, icy breath.

"You have returned. How did things go?" the Meadow asked, its voice sounding tense.

"I took them all to Hallowfort. Catelyn guaranteed their integration into the local society. The mana in the area is high enough for there to be no issues," Ilea said, making her way down to the Meadow's chamber. *"They're safe in their new home."*

A ripple of various magic types flowed across the garden-like space, the black grass moving as if touched by the wind.

Ilea knew that the air hadn't moved.

There was quiet for a long moment.

She smiled as she waited, watching the space around her. The golden fireflies fluttered, the creek flowed and bubbled.

"It's strange. I've worked toward this goal for so long... Maybe I hadn't truly believed it would work. It's been a while since I've felt like this. Thank

you, Lilith.”

Ilea grinned. “I’m glad it worked out. Thank you for the many lessons.”

“Then there remains only the closure of the gate.”

“No.”

“No?”

“One survivor is left.”

“It is flattering that you would consider me, but the Daughters of Sephilon will descend in twenty-five days. The gate must be closed before then, or some may enter your realm and cause untold chaos and destruction until they succumb to the low mana density. If they succumb at all.”

“You can’t do it on our side?”

“The gate closure itself would destroy the town of Gyffold, but even if we could evacuate, it would be like a beacon to any astral spirit. It must be here if we are to contain them in this realm.”

“You won’t be able to fight them off? You survived the last eclipse, didn’t you?”

“I will have to focus, and I will be weakened. I won’t be able to stop them from attacking.”

“Then I will help.”

“You have grown, and you are powerful. But it is not enough. You would die.”

“What about you?”

It didn’t reply for a while. *“I will hold them off.”*

“Very noble. We’ve got nearly a month left, right? This realm has been an incredible training ground for me. And there’s a lot left for me to do. I haven’t even properly fought an Astral Spirit yet.”

“You underestimate the danger, Lilith. I won’t be able to protect you.”

“Then you’d better make sure I’m ready to face whatever is to come.”

The Meadow remained silent.

“Besides, who will be there to protect you?”

“You are annoyingly stubborn.”

“You’re asking me to leave you behind while you face four-mark creatures. One, I’m not leaving a friend behind. And two, I’m not letting you deprive me of a good time.”

“Lilith—”

“Ilea. That’s my name. Now, I have twenty-seven days to train and fight spirits. I just tested my long-range teleportation spell and managed to attach

a creature to it. If we have to do it on this side, sure, we do it on this side. I'll train until then, and you help me figure out how we can get out of this and maybe even a way for me to take you to Elos."

"Take me to Elos?"

"Yeah. Because fuck leaving you in this spirit-ridden shithole. Or at the very least, we'll get you to safety, somehow. If you do want to stay."

"Ilea. I see that I won't change your mind, but I will not have you here when the Daughters descend, not as you are."

"Then start thinking of solutions. If I'm not strong enough, is there anyone on this moon who could help?"

* * *

Looking down at the pale blue crystal in her hands, Ilea smiled.

"It may have perished long ago," the Meadow said.

[Elemental Tear – Primal Quality]

"You haven't."

"That's true. It's quite beautiful, isn't it?" the Meadow said with a sense of nostalgia. *"It was given to me during the last eclipse by a creature I'd sheltered for a few decades. The few thoughts we exchanged back then were a pleasant distraction from the battles and the overbearing void of the frozen wasteland. Though I wonder if it would be willing to help in our endeavor."*

"It's the first item of Primal quality I've seen."

"I have treasured it for millennia. It resonates with the Elemental I spoke of. Just by moving it across this hall, I can determine the direction in which the Elemental resides. Or its resting grounds. After a few hundred kilometers, you should be able to tell at least if you're getting closer to the Elemental or if you're moving farther away," the Meadow explained.

"But you don't know if it's alive or if it would help you? If it is alive, how would I talk to it?"

"It isn't particularly... talkative. However, your arrival with the Tear should have an effect. I understood that it felt deep gratitude for the shelter I once provided. Otherwise... well, you have managed to befriend me... and

from our various conversations, I take it I'm not the first powerful entity you have allied yourself with. It is the best chance we have."

"I will try. I'll see if it's alive, and if it is, at the very least, it could help me train my resistances," Ilea said, focusing on the Tear.

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SEVENTY-SIX

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Search

Ilea felt the Tear tremble in her hand. Just enough for her to register.

She was on the right track.

Probably in this range, she thought, flying upward. The mountains here rivaled the north in Elos, bursting out of the ground beyond the wastes she had covered.

Ilea had flown for hours. Erendar had proved to be quite desolate.

But I guess it's quiet, at least. Just monsters to battle. For all of eternity. What a dream.

There were, however, no cooks, no humans to talk to, no cities or architecture to admire. Even for Ilea, that might be a little much. Perhaps as a short-term spa experience, it would be acceptable.

She felt the temperatures drop even further as she flew up toward the distant peaks. Everything was frozen, and even Ilea took damage from the weather. She started using Heart of Cinder to counteract the cold.

Her wings could barely move anymore, despite her high second-tier resistance. The crystal was thrumming now.

Please be alive.

Ilea displaced herself a few times, appearing in a broad valley. A cave entrance was visible on the side of a distant mountain.

What's that, a hundred meters high?

The storm cleared up more the closer she got. *Less snow too*, she thought, starting to see bones sticking out of the icy wasteland.

Mountains towered on either side of her, untouched for thousands of years.

Ilea looked down and saw something trapped inside the ice. A spirit. An astral one. She tried to gauge if it was still alive but couldn't discern any information at all.

The closer she got to the cave, the more skeletons and frozen spirits were visible in the ice, entombed forever. There were hundreds of each kind. Even the skeleton of one of the worms peeked out of a frozen mountainside.

By now, the snow had stopped, the air entirely still. Ilea looked at the cave entrance, finding that Heart of Cinder barely managed to keep the cold at bay now. She took a deep breath.

There wasn't much oxygen here.

Might be rude to enter its home without permission, she thought, looking at the crystal that now nearly hummed with power. Her Monster Hunter charged and was infused with the intent of a greeting.

"Hello!"

Her shout echoed through the soundless valley, traveling through the terrain like waves in a pond.

A few kilometers behind her, a crack formed near a peak. Massive chunks of ice broke off and quickly formed into an avalanche, crashing into the valley before everything froze again, long before it should've stopped moving naturally.

Ilea watched the cave, her arm outstretched and holding the crystal. She felt as if the air stilled even more, her own heartbeat and breathing the only sounds perceptible to her.

Then, she saw something move, and she smiled.

A creature emerged from the darkness, the pale light from the eclipse reflecting off the clear parts of its body. The being had the form of a wolf and the size of a hill, but its body was entirely made of ice.

Its form didn't come from bones and muscles but from smooth geometrical shapes. Each shape connected to the next at an angle, almost like the wolf had been carved from a piece of crystal. Some patches were covered in white frost, others were entirely clear, while some were a pale blue, just like the Tear Ilea held in her hand.

The creature moved with slow, deliberate steps, the ice on its body shifting, none of it making a sound. Antlers grew seamlessly out of its skull, reaching right up to the cave ceiling. The patterns didn't make any sense, forking out continuously.

Ilea noticed that the single forks of its antlers were moving, shaping themselves into new forms as the wolf-like creature stepped out into the open.

As it did so, its antlers grew upward, as if the air itself was water that froze at the being's touch. Its crystal-like eyes looked at her, frozen just like the rest of it.

[Ice Elemental – lvl ????]

Alright.

Calm now.

Just a puppy.

A massive Ice Elemental puppy.

It's alive, and all I have to do is convince it to help out.

Easy.

"Hello! It's nice to meet you!" Ilea shouted.

Veteran informed her that this creature was in the Meadow's league, but she was unable to determine any specifics.

It didn't react to her words.

Ilea tried something else. She held her arm out to her left and started forming ash.

The Elemental watched her but didn't interfere.

She formed Endless Meadow, both the grass, the tree, and the little creek that flowed through it.

The image was hazy, further distorted by the freezing temperatures.

Ilea flew up and joined her ashen creation, displacing the Elemental Tear toward the ashen Meadow before it floated back to her on a bed of ash, indicating that she'd been given the item.

She turned to the creature and watched in fascination as ice came into existence before her, forming yet another Meadow, but this time, an antlered wolf lay curled up near the creature.

It looked smaller than what she was seeing now, or perhaps the Meadow had been larger at some point.

She made the ashen Meadow smaller, adding the temple on top and creating the gate. Ilea added herself appearing beyond it before she formed an army of small Astral Spirits heading toward the temple.

Her arms moved slowly as an antlered wolf made of ash appeared on top of the building, fighting the spirits with massive claws.

The Elemental moved closer to her now, crouching down to meet Ilea's small form. Its eyes were as large as her torso.

She held out the crystal...

A wisp of ice floated out and touched her.

Ilea didn't resist. Her chest tightened, her lungs nearly freezing before the feeling resided. Her breathing accelerated slightly, but she calmed again once the being stood back up.

She watched it jump, its whole body fluidly running up the mountainside.

What?

It glanced back at her.

It wants me to follow? she thought, and she did so with a few uses of teleportation.

Ilea reappeared beyond the peak, watching the creature jump off of, and run on, vacant, freezing air.

She smiled to herself. *Awesome.*

Ilea followed on her wings. Beyond the valley, the temperatures weren't quite as insanely low, as long as she kept some distance from the Elemental.

The Elemental was heading in the right direction, and although it wasn't moving particularly fast, it was already reaching the frozen desert beyond its mountain range. She got the impression it would find the way.

Ilea held the pulsing Tear close to her chest and accelerated past the creature.

'ding' You have met an ancient Ice Elemental and didn't die – One Core Skill point awarded

'ding' Deviant of Humanity reaches 2nd lvl 2

'ding' Veteran reaches 3rd lvl 10

We didn't even fight, she thought as she landed in the temple once more. The landmarks on the way had been few and far between, allowing for a somewhat quick journey back.

"The Elemental is alive and on its way," she said, tossing the Primal item into the air, whereupon it vanished.

"That is good news. I'm glad you did not end up frozen for all eternity."

“Hey, me too. Judging by its speed, it’ll need a day or so to arrive. Maybe longer if it has to fight spirits on the way.”

“They will surely challenge it. I will have to shelter it in here... though the temperatures will not be suitable for humans anymore.”

“Just tell Michael he should move upstairs or farther out. Will the cold spread through the gate?”

“I will try to prevent that... though the Elemental was young when I first met it. Many thousands of years have passed in the meantime, and its strife must have been difficult during the last eclipse.”

“It didn’t wait out the eclipse here?”

“No, the Ice Elemental merely stayed for a few decades.”

How fucking long is this eclipse? How does that even work?

“Let me know when it arrives. I’ll get back to the hunt.”

* * *

She activated Phaseshift, displacing a few death flames and blinking up before the spell took effect on the space near her body. She remained in the air and was slowly floating upward when the first Astral Spirit finally showed up.

She needed to get stronger, but even without her time limit and her goal to help the Meadow, it would simply be unacceptable to leave this place without killing at least one of the creatures.

Her ethereal form was enveloped in burning astral energy, incinerating the Spirits of Death already climbing on top of each other behind her near-instantaneously.

Ilea continued to float closer to the Astral Spirit before she deactivated Phaseshift, her form flickering while the enemy spell moved through her as if she didn’t exist. The second of deactivation passed, and she displaced herself close to the spirit.

‘ding’ Phaseshift reaches 2nd lvl 19

Her ash sped out, and a nearly fully charged Heart of Cinder slammed into the spirit’s smooth body. Burns and blemishes showed immediately, the

body molten where it had faced the spell. A thick turquoise liquid seeped out of various wounds, all of it reforming quickly as it drained her mana.

She covered the creature in ash, igniting all of it with Flare of Creation. The spell blazed with the full five hundred health per second she could now add on top of the usual upkeep.

Ilea kept a close eye on her health and sacrificed a thousand points to activate her third-tier aura.

Her ashen limbs cut and slammed into the creature as quickly as she could manage. She grappled it from behind and pushed reversed mana into it as Absolute Destruction charged.

The hits she took from its astral area-of-effect spell were substantial, but she simply kept her third-tier healing active at all times. Her growing resistance and other bonuses made the enemy magic manageable.

Her resources dwindled quickly, but she kept grappling with the spirit.

Seeing two more Astrals arrive, she released her charged Absolute Destruction, her destructive mana coursing through the creature with all the buffs and bonuses she could muster.

Ilea was forced to jump, displacing herself as she dodged a few spells on her retreat.

Not quite enough... even with all that.

The hordes of Spirits of Death continued to be disintegrated by the astral variants until nothing was left but a group of nearly twenty of the latter.

If I go in now, there will be too many, she thought with a sigh.

It would be just as hopeless if she looked for an area with no Spirits of Death or if she tried to use an area where the Astrals had already killed all the death variants. In those cases, the Astrals simply wouldn't come.

Ilea's resistance to their drain was high, but they didn't just drain mana from her; they drained mana from Spirits of Death and even their own kind. Both the strength of their drain and the range they could use it at made the beings insanely hard to kill.

She wasn't ready. Not yet.

But she still had time.

SEVENTY-SEVEN

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Puzzling

When Blink was ready again, Ilea attached a few rocks to her spell and tried to bring them to Elos while the Meadow watched.

It failed. She appeared back in her home – but without the rocks.

“So, I won’t be able to take you with me,” she said, her arms crossed.

“Not how you are. Not with your lack of space magic understanding. But the pieces are there, and, perhaps, you may find a way.”

Her lessons changed, and the Meadow had her focus on them fully. Two days later, Ilea was growing frustrated.

“Don’t frown like that,” Meadow said.

“I have my armor on. You can’t see my frown,” Ilea said as she sat down on the black grass.

“I can feel it. It’s all-encompassing. You should focus on the task.”

“How can I?”

She teleported and tried to pet the wolf again, her arm freezing fully before it broke off.

“Come on,” she said, squinting her eyes at the Elemental.

The Meadow had enlarged its hall to accommodate the large creature, its space magic chasing off the many spirits that had followed the Elemental to the city. Not that many had survived for longer than a few seconds in the Elemental’s presence. It would support them when the time came.

Ilea’s arm reformed as she pouted, trying to solve the puzzle. A large chunk of ice nearly slammed into her face, manifesting so quickly she barely even noticed it. Managing to dodge, she narrowed her eyes at the massive Ice Elemental.

“I just want to pet her. Can you ask her again?”

“*She says you are free to try,*” the Meadow said.

The wolf looked Ilea’s way, resting on her icy paws.

The Elemental had started interacting with Ilea once it realized her body was damn near indestructible. It mostly froze her or sent projectiles, either to be malicious or help her in her training. Ilea wasn’t quite sure yet which.

Ilea grabbed her detached frozen arm and shook it at the creature. “Just wait until I have a third-tier resistance!”

“*I doubt it would make a major difference,*” the Meadow said.

Ilea didn’t listen, displacing various floating objects and projectiles as she silently flew through the magic-filled hall.

She felt dozens of pulses, the wisps here moving as if separated from the normal fabric of space. A lot was going on. The Elemental’s arrival hadn’t helped much with that.

She displaced herself again and stopped moving. Something peculiar stood out to her amidst the hundreds of floating pieces.

What is it?

Ilea moved her hand toward the floating stone but stopped at the last moment, right before touching it.

Phaseshift activated as she focused on the weird phenomenon. She extended her hand and grabbed not the stone but what lay beyond.

Despite the active spell, she found her hand coming back with an object grasped between her fingers. It was a piece of ice that she could neither feel, smell, nor see. Not with her eyes, at least. But she knew it was there.

‘ding’ Phaseshift reaches 2nd lvl 20

Phaseshift deactivated, manifesting her body, and with it, the piece of ice she had known to be there.

It instantly exploded and froze half her body.

The Elemental twitched its ears slightly, its tail moving over the black grass.

Asshole, she thought with a smile, the heat within her quickly taking care of the ice as the damage to her body healed.

“What was that?” she asked.

“*A surprise gift to celebrate your success,*” the Meadow said in a dry tone.

“Aha.”

“Check your advancement options, Ilea. What you just did should be impossible with a mere second-tier ability.”

“Really?” Ilea asked with a bright smile. She checked and indeed found it possible to advance Space Awareness to the third tier. “YES!”

‘ding’ Space Awareness reaches 3rd lvl 1

Passive – Space Awareness – 3rd lvl 1

You become more aware of the density and shifts in the fabric of space itself.

2nd stage: Further understanding of the spatial fabric allows you to manipulate its forces with greater ease and higher intensity. You learn to perceive even the tiniest ripples in space. In the case of active fissures, you find yourself able to peer into the other side.

3rd stage: You have peered through the fabric of space itself and learned to unravel its intricate structure. You gain the ability to perceive and differentiate magical frameworks and how to manipulate them within your space without failure.

Category: Body Enhancement – Perception Aura

What?

“I have no clue what this means. Meadow, please explain,” she said before reading the information to the creature.

“And here I thought you had finally gained understanding.” A sigh flowed through the entire cavern. “It is an important addition to your abilities. Definitely.”

The wolf formed a flower made of ice.

“She thinks the same. Very powerful indeed.”

Ilea squinted at both of the unfathomable creatures. And then she sighed.

“Please, oh great and all-knowing Endless Meadow, what does it do?”

“Better to demonstrate.”

A wooden root broke out of the ground and slowly moved toward Ilea. It slowed in front of her chest and touched her.

“What’s that supp—”

“Don’t talk. Perceive,” the Meadow said.

Ilea did just that, focusing once more on the space around her, the root, her body.

My body. The root. Is this...

She grabbed the root, trying to confirm her assessment.

Then she smiled brightly, looking at the tree with joy.

Frameworks, she thought, remembering the description. To her, it felt more like different flows.

She kept touching the root, a root that represented the Meadow, permeated by its magic and power.

The root still touched Ilea, preventing her from teleporting. At least, it had been until now.

She focused on its flow, on her flow, and then she displaced herself.

She appeared at her target destination, the root remaining where it had been a moment earlier.

“Fuck yeah!” she called out and jumped. “Do the full prison!” she said with a wicked smile.

“I shall oblige,” the Meadow said, forming a wooden prison around her with spiked ends cutting into her armor.

Ilea had to focus a little harder this time, the different flows not as easy to separate as the simple touch of one root. She still managed it quickly though, displacing herself out of the prison as if it hadn’t been there.

The damage to her armor repaired itself as she spread her arms and twirled. “I’ve finally reached my goal.”

“And what is that?” Meadow asked.

“Complete immortality!” she shouted, striking a pose.

The Meadow laughed in its usual magical way. *“Of course. Well done.”*

“Don’t patronize me.” She smiled. “More roots.”

Now I could fight that Ascended fuck.

Blink worked just as well as Displacement did.

She displaced herself close to the wolf’s head, trying to pet it again.

Then Ilea blinked back to where she had started, her form falling to the ground with an icy thud.

Not yet immortal.

Elementals suck.

Heart of Cinder came to the rescue yet again.

“She’s intrigued by your heat spell that seems to prevent long-term freezing. Most fire spells she has seen could not counteract her ice so easily,” Meadow said.

“It’s ashen magic,” Ilea said. “Forms the heat within my core.”

“Your resistance, healing, and general resilience are the main factors here. I believe she simply hasn’t met something both so weak and yet so durable in her existence. No high-level Awakened has crossed her path. Not of a species that starts at such a low level at birth. That would explain her reaction.”

“You two are really hampering my joy here. Will this help me get you to Elos?”

“It’s another piece of the puzzle, yes. But you need to understand more, be able to differentiate frameworks in a way that feels natural. Try your other spell, Phaseshift. I believe it should’ve been affected too.”

She activated it.

Oh yes.

She watched her ethereal hands.

That feels... yeah. Please.

Ilea blinked and then displaced herself. She deactivated Phaseshift, and she was back to normal.

“It works! I can teleport during.”

“You can, but that is a mere practical benefit. Watch with your awareness, and understand what happens.”

She tried it out again, activating Phaseshift. Displacement also worked on objects around her while the spell was active. She could teleport with it active, but seeing the changes with her awareness felt confusing at best.

But it’s a good addition either way. It means I can even move projectiles while it’s active.

It removed the single weakness of the spell, the fact that she could be captured once it ended.

She had hesitated thus far, but with this change, she finally felt confident in locking in her third active skill, pushing Phaseshift to the third tier.

Active – Phaseshift – 3rd lvl 1

By expending a large amount of mana, you can temporarily unbind your body from the physical and pass through barriers. You may let spells and

physical objects pass through you unhindered. Be aware that certain types of magic will retain some or all of their impact.

2nd stage: Resilience bonuses from skills are doubled when entering Phaseshift.

3rd stage: You have bent space to your will to avoid death – and to cause it. You gain a deeper understanding of the Flame of Creation. Abilities that sacrifice health may be used during Phaseshift. All effects of said sacrifice will activate once your body returns to its normal form. The duration of any resulting effects will equal that of the preceding Phaseshift.

Category: Space Magic

A safe space to stack Flame of Creation before it's unleashed?

She tried it out, activating the third-tier health sacrifice at its current six hundred health per second. The flames didn't form around her, but her health was still reduced.

Can't do more than six hundred per second in here either. Wait a minute. It said 'abilities that sacrifice health'?

Ilea used her third-tier Azarinth Awakening, putting a whopping five thousand health into the skill. Nothing happened as her third-tier healing pushed her health back to the max. She repeated it four times.

Four seconds passed, and Phaseshift's upkeep was steadily growing. She deactivated it, another second of the skill passing as the space slightly shifted. As she reappeared once more, a bright white flame flared out on her body, coupled with intense blue light from her Azarinth runes.

Holy shit.

She actually felt the change.

I can just dump my whole health pool into these skills while Phaseshift protects me against enemy attacks.

Ilea snickered to herself. Of course, she knew she'd need mana for all that, but these additions felt amazing.

What weakness do I even have left?

She glanced at the two beings in the hall and rolled her eyes.

Damn otherworldly four-mark Elemental still somehow freezing me despite all my defenses.

But the tree... maybe I can survive. And if I can, it should be enough for me to stay close during the gate closure.

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SEVENTY-EIGHT

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Beatdown

“With all those changes, can we have a bout?” Ilea asked. “An actual fight. No holding back.”

“*No holding back? Hmm,*” the Meadow said.

“Come on. You’ve been teaching me, but I don’t even know what you’re capable of. If I ever face someone as powerful as you, I want to know if I could survive.”

Maybe it was stupid, but if the Meadow couldn’t pin her down anymore, she felt like she could survive. And if she was wrong in her assumption, she wanted to find out why.

“Besides, you said I need to get used to my new awareness.”

“*I can see that you would learn from it. I’ll have to hold back to keep this place hidden, but it should be enough.*”

“So confident. Let’s start, then,” Ilea said, activating all her buffs, except her health-sacrificing ones.

“*Then let us proceed with the lesson, young human. First, I may be immobile, but this is my domain,*” the Meadow said, a powerful wave of mana pushing outward.

Ilea watched on as a pale white barrier thrummed to life around the entire hall, bending around the Ice Elemental to exclude it entirely.

The mana waves that continuously flowed out from the center of the hall pushed her back physically, her wings working to counteract it. She felt herself tensing up, part of her ashen armor shaved away with each pulse.

She felt an immense pressure that tried to pin her down. It was a familiar skill the Meadow had used to keep her from moving. Ilea pushed

against it, setting herself the goal of reaching the tree. Her wings flapped, but she moved painfully slowly.

She blinked but was pushed back by a translucent barrier that formed as she appeared. Solid rock formed around the tree, and she was suddenly displaced back a few meters by one of Meadow's spells.

Ilea started using her teleportation spells whenever they weren't on cooldown, trying to get closer but always hitting solid stone, wood, or magical barriers that hadn't been there before. The solid stone wall continued to build around the tree.

Every time she teleported, the Meadow pushed her back again, only rare, split-second openings allowing her to deliver a handful of blows against the wall of defenses. Any damage she dealt had already reformed by the time she reappeared.

An arcane barrier formed around the defensive perimeter of stone that now coated Meadow, growing thicker with each passing moment.

Ilea's spells, coupled with Flare of Creation, burned into the dense barrier, but despite her efforts, any damage reformed faster than she could inflict it. The Meadow even had a way to put her Flame of Creation out completely.

"Barrier magic is versatile. I merely use it to protect myself and others, but its offensive potential is quite staggering," the Meadow said in a voice that pushed against Ilea's ears and mind.

She saw hundreds of tiny barriers form around her, each as thin as a razor and angled in a way to cut her.

Displacement worked on them, but her efforts were partially countered. Even when it worked, she could only move less than a quarter of the tiny barriers.

The view her precognition provided wasn't promising.

Phaseshift was activated, but the second it took to change the space of her body was too long. Ilea teleported, but new barriers simply formed all around her, several hundred tiny magical blades burrowing into her armor.

Her defenses resisted the assault at first but were ultimately breached, and her ashen armor was pierced deeply before her skin was penetrated as well. Phaseshift activated as blood started to well up from dozens of cuts.

The barriers immediately moved through her, vanishing after they lost their purpose.

She healed the damage and started stacking her health sacrifice spells as a stone platform came into existence below her. Complex runes instantly formed, making her teleport away.

The platform appeared right where she did, the runes coming to life just as two massive barriers formed in front and behind her. As they closed in, Ilea found herself unable to teleport. Both of her abilities were stopped by whatever runic field the Meadow had created.

Motherfucker.

The barriers stopped moving a few centimeters away from her phased body.

Ilea was sure she'd be paste once her body returned to its physical form.

"Will you survive it if I squash you?" the Meadow asked in a normal tone.

"Have fun trying," Ilea said.

Her body returned to its physical form, Azarinth Awakening and Flare of Creation exploding in power and intensity, the white flames instantly igniting the thick barriers.

Ilea felt the pressure build as the barriers started to squash her, and the power of her spells wasn't enough to breach the thick constructs or teleport out of the magic field below.

Her body groaned, blood cells exploding under the pressure. Her eyes popped as all the air was pushed out of her lungs. She felt her organs tremble, her whole form slowly flattened between the two barriers.

Wooden tendrils appeared next to her and started digging into her body. When they reached a certain depth, they ripped whole chunks of flesh out, ignoring the durability of her bones by simply cutting through the connecting tissue.

Phaseshift was still on cooldown, and though reversed healing, Storm of Cinders, Heart of Cinder, Absolute Destruction, plain old ash, and all the strength she could muster pressed against the overwhelming power, it was all for nothing.

New barriers appeared where her arms would have reformed, preventing her healing from recovering the lost limbs.

Ilea activated her third-tier Displacement, squeezing one end between her back and the barrier and the other outside the hall. She tried to use her ash to squeeze herself through, but the wood and barriers kept her in place.

When she realized that the exit to her gateway was blocked by a barrier on the other side, she didn't know what to do anymore.

The Meadow ripped her apart until only her head remained, barriers all around it to physically prevent her from recovering the missing limbs while wood dug deep into her skull. Only her brain remained intact, left alone by the creature.

"Do I win?" the Meadow asked.

"This is barely a scratch," Ilea said, activating Phaseshift again.

"All you're doing is delaying the inevitable."

"Alright. Alright."

The barriers vanished, as did all the rock and wood. Ilea reformed her body with a pout, her armor covering her again quickly. She crossed her arms.

Utterly annihilated. Step by step, it took apart everything I had.

She felt like a child facing some eldritch magical horror.

Because that was exactly what the Meadow was.

"Did I miss something?" Ilea asked.

"You shouldn't have faced me in the first place," the Meadow said.

"Besides that. Your barriers even prevented me from destroying the stone plates that stopped my teleportation. How did that work, anyway? It formed damn near instantly. You're insane."

"Your offensive power is simply inconsequential to my creations. I admit that my knowledge of your skill set allowed me to pin you down quickly. Had I not known it, it may have taken me another five to six seconds. Enough for you to escape, perhaps. Or enough to surprise me with either Phaseshift or your gate creation. It is unfortunate for you that I'm a master of space magic."

"Very unfortunate indeed. If you couldn't stop my teleportation, I could've escaped. Right?"

"Of course. But the fact remains that I did. Your resistances are high, but the sheer energy a creature like me can use to stop you will simply be overwhelming. Had you created burning ash below the barriers to damage the delicate runes, you may have gained a split second to teleport away."

"I admit that I underestimated you massively. Anything else I missed?"

The creature laughed, a sense of serenity returning with the fireflies that once again floated through the meadow. The sound of flowing water was the only audible thing in the hall.

“Underestimated. Said a level four hundred to one above two thousand. The first wave of mana should have vaporized you. The fact that you can even stand here without coughing up blood is impressive enough, let alone demonstrating a real possibility of escaping my magic.

“This is all I can observe for now. Perhaps once you’ve gained more power, you would wish to try again. I do hope I didn’t discourage you with this demonstration.”

Ilea smiled. “Oh no. Not at all. I asked, after all. And I’ve learned how far I still have to go. But if anything, this proved that there’s a chance.”

“A chance of what?”

“Of me winning this fight.”

Amusement flowed through the hall.

Ilea smiled. “Again?”

She spent the next few hours trying new tricks, but as she adapted, so did the Meadow.

When Ilea focused entirely on the anti-teleportation rune platform, the Meadow covered the entire hall with them. When she focused fully on defense and healing, the Meadow still overwhelmed her in time. It felt like playing chess with nothing but pawns against an ancient grandmaster.

While her defensive and evasive measures failed miserably, her offensive ones did so spectacularly. Nothing got through the monster’s defense. It even reformed the tiny cracks and scratches on the stone and wood it created. Not that it really had to.

After dozens of attempts, Ilea had managed to escape exactly zero times. If anything, she was getting worse.

“I think this is as far as I’ll get,” she finally admitted, eating one of Keyla’s meals to distract herself.

‘ding’ Gourmet reaches lvl 5

‘ding’ Space Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 5

‘ding’ Wood Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 15

...

‘ding’ Wood Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 20

“Your attempts did get slightly better,” the Meadow said.

Ilea squinted at the tree and then stretched. “I’m going to hunt a spirit now.”

“*Do greet them from me,*” the Meadow said, a breeze flowing through the area.

Ilea looked at the sleeping wolf and then over at the tree, unsure which one would be more terrifying to face. She might be able to escape from the wolf, at least.

Probably has a way to freeze space itself and me within it, she thought as she left the hall.

She had gotten some upgrades, but if she wanted to survive a battle with creatures like these, she needed more.

I really should have started testing these new abilities with the Astrals. Now, my spirit is broken, and my day is ruined.

Ilea decided it was time to break other spirits to reform her own.

First, she needed a target.

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SEVENTY-NINE

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Docking

Before she left, she prepared.

At this point, Ilea had two third-tier General Skill points available, and one had to remain for emergencies.

She decided to use it on Mana Drain Resistance.

‘ding’ Mana Drain Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 1

Mana Drain Resistance – 3rd lvl 1

Rare foes have the ability to drain your mana, either for their own use or simply to weaken you. Having encountered one such being, you have learned of its destructive effect. This skill will help you reduce the effect any mana-draining abilities have on you.

2nd stage: Your mana is bound to you, making it harder for anybody to drain it from you. In addition, the mana removed from you damages the enemy, should they desire to use it for themselves. This effect increases with every point of mana lost.

3rd stage: Mana formed within you is intrinsic to your very essence. Any being that dares to steal what does not belong to them shall find themselves poisoned by your arcane power. Enemies take damage over time for each point of your mana in their pool.

She already had an idea of how to deal with an Astral Spirit, but this new addition would make it much easier.

She flew out into the cold, finding that the air around the temple was now much warmer than in the Meadow's hall. Her charged wings soon brought her to a nearby desert, where one use of Monster Hunter was enough to wake up some monsters.

[Spirit of Death – lvl 459]

It looked a little like a scorpion, but most of its form was melted and distorted, oozing with black slime. The creature slammed its death magic-enhanced stinger into her chest, scratching across her ashen armor before it dug into the ground.

Flare of Creation activated as a mist of ash descended onto the creature. All of it ignited with pale flames, and reversed healing, coupled with the fires, quickly destroyed the monster from within and without.

Five more creatures had appeared in the meantime, with hundreds more running, flying, or slithering toward her location.

Three of them jumped on her, and Ilea nearly buckled under the weight. She managed to stabilize herself with a few ashen limbs, and Space Awareness let her differentiate the flows of their mana. Ilea displaced herself upward before Heart of Cinder fired from an extended ashen limb.

Much more manageable than that ancient tree, she thought, smiling.

Nearly forty seconds passed before the first Astral Spirit showed up. Its body was smooth, without any blemishes.

There you are.

She had charged Heart of Cinder for long enough, activating Phaseshift as the creature finally took note of her.

In the next few seconds of her approach, Ilea sacrificed tens of thousands of points of health into her Flare and Awakening. She dodged the astral magic with Displacement.

The spirit didn't take her as a significant threat, instead using its manifested astral power to disintegrate the hordes of monsters below her, its initial target completely forgotten.

Ilea let the creature work, revealing herself only when the next Astral Spirit showed. Her magic erupted outward in a searing explosion of flame and light, her fist lashing out to strike the being's back.

Sentinel Huntress manifested as a runic mark on its glowing form, the rest of her spells burning into the creature with devastating results. Her

mana made bits of the creature bubble and burst, thick amber blood splattering down onto the icy desert.

Wounds opened and closed as Ilea continued her assault, its focus now entirely on her as both its area attack and concentrated beams burned away at her ash.

It didn't relent.

Ilea renewed the mark when the hordes below started to die down and more astral variants appeared in the area, adding to her falling health.

Every point of mana stolen would further inconvenience the creature, but the burst of power she received from her new phased state still wasn't enough to overwhelm the monster. It was regenerating quickly, the blemishes returning to pristine skin as it drained from her and its brethren alike.

Those, in turn, would drain from the others and Ilea, creating an increasing mesh of mana-draining entities. Too much for her to overcome.

The Astral Spirits effectively forced an attacker to overwhelm every Astral Spirit present if a single one was the target. The same was true for their offensive arsenal, quickly breaking through even Ilea's defenses as they grew in numbers.

She displaced herself a few times, adding blink into the mix as she put distance between herself and the spirits.

At least their spells don't multiply each other, she thought. Would be quite interesting if they could combine attacks like humans with artillery spells or like the Sun Sprites in the Descent.

Ilea smiled to herself as she flew over the ice desert of Erendar, watching the battle from a distance. The lost mana returned to her bit by bit, her gaze focused on the single Astral Spirit she had chosen to mark.

She could feel it. Sense it.

The remaining Spirits of Death were destroyed, at least until they rose again. Ilea didn't need an additional sense to tell that the Astral Spirit had healed itself back to full health.

It was unclear to her how much mana the creatures possessed, let alone how quickly they regenerated, but perhaps facing them like this wasn't beneficial.

Only about ten seconds passed as the ground froze again, streaks of burnt sand reclaimed by the unforgiving cold. When the spirits started to leave, nothing but scattered bones remained from the large-scale battle.

The spirits didn't leave as one, not in the sense of timing or destination. All were gone in the span of a few moments, flying away at incredible speeds, likely looking for their next encounter.

What do they even get out of it? Can they not regenerate mana themselves? Or is it just an instinctual need? To consume and destroy?

Ilea knew they didn't drain mana when they weren't injured, so that shouldn't have been their main goal.

Maybe they just like it? Like moths are attracted to light, Astrals are attracted to mana. And the death variants in turn seek life. And I seek battle, challenge, and progress.

She focused back on her quickly moving mark.

Her wings charged, and she followed.

Just don't fly back to Sephilon.

Sentinel Huntress led her through the wasteland, most of it desert, only the occasional mountain breaking the monotonous terrain.

Clouds of frozen ice hung low at the side of one especially large mountain. Ilea felt the chill even from a few kilometers away, watching the slowly moving giant traveling over the landscape at a steady crawl.

Another Ice Elemental? Or just a natural occurrence?

The temperatures would have challenged even a high-level Shadow with an Ice Resistance, or so she assumed. Her own body, though, had grown so used to the surroundings, if anything welcoming these kinds of extremes.

Feels good to put that natural regeneration to use.

The giant light blue ice cloud moved past her, replaced by yet more desert.

And Meadow managed to build a working civilization here.

Ilea thought back to the shared memory. Erendar didn't look much different without an eclipse underway. It just looked boiling hot instead of freezing cold.

The mark is getting closer.

She slowed down, looking up into the dark blue sky.

"Astral. Right," she murmured and shot up.

The air thinned quickly at her speed, but her Oxygen Repository came in handy. However long her battle with the spirit lasted, oxygen would likely not be the deciding factor.

Soon, Ilea stopped her charged flight, continuing on at her normal speed as the ground grew ever more distant. She could see the curve of the moon much more clearly now, the air cooling more with each passing second.

Is this the highest I've been?

Ilea wondered if her wings worked in zero gravity. At the very least, Displacement and Blink shouldn't be affected. If the Meadow couldn't disable the skills without using complex runic creations, low or zero gravity shouldn't affect them either.

Still, she found that she felt anxious looking up toward the void. She healed her mind and pushed further.

The air had thinned enough to let her fly faster; any resistance it had provided was almost entirely gone. All she heard now was her beating heart, her lungs useless at this altitude. Ilea stopped breathing and zeroed in on the mark that grew ever closer.

She would have missed it amongst the sea of stars were it not for her mark, but Eyes of Ash spotted the single spirit hanging in the distant space, its humanoid shape looking up at the dark planet of Sephilon.

All alone.

Ilea used Phaseshift, stacking her health sacrifices for a few seconds before she displaced herself closer. The spell deactivated and she grappled the being, a soundless beam of astral energy shooting past her into the void of space.

As ash formed around her, spreading onto her adversary and igniting with a brilliant white hue, the spirit lashed out, powerful spheres of astral energy burning away layers of ashen armor. Its arms slashed at her with condensed power, each strike stripping away entire chunks of ash.

Blood, both red and amber, floated away from the spiraling forms of the two entangled enemies, who slowly moved toward the ground as the now weak gravity of Erendar pulled at them.

Ashen limbs slashed into smooth skin, Destruction and Storm of Cinders dispensing their powerful destructive mana into the creature with every punch.

A bright sphere of fire and energy joined the spheres of astral magic as Ilea activated Heart of Cinder, the spell lighting up like a bright beacon in the eternal darkness of space.

The creature was hurt, and more of its blood and mass floated down toward the frozen moon, entangling with Ilea's ash, skin, and blood. Its

wounds only healed slowly, five more cuts opening in the time one took to heal.

A powerful astral magic spell cast near-instantly burned at her ashen armor, fighting the tough, dark material. But it seemed fruitless, the magic disappearing while her armor remained, gray moving toward an obsidian black as its density increased, all covered by a bright white flame.

Ilea didn't let up, her offensive spells lashing out with all the frequency and mana she could muster. The mana drain and astral spells were more of a nuisance than anything else. Flare of Creation burned away both her mana and the enemy's, the effects stacked from Phaseshift still active.

[Astral Spirit – lvl ???]

Her Veteran suggested a little over eight hundred.

Its spells were meaningless against her defense, resistances, and regeneration. Time was on her side, each minute adding to her defenses and power output. Even if she couldn't keep up the offensive onslaught for very long, she wouldn't retreat. The mana it stole from her would only damage it further.

It just had to remain here, alone, facing her without other sources of mana.

The bonuses stacked during Phaseshift receded, returning Ilea to a weaker state. Much of her mana was already gone after her excessive spending.

The spirit had been reduced to two-thirds of its mass, blood floating away from it as the two continued to spiral downward. Storm of Cinders had stripped away its mana intrusion defenses, the Flame of Creation was slowing its regeneration, and her mana continuously poisoned the creature from within.

Its many open wounds allowed her to use her ash freely, creating dense combined limbs and shredder imitations to rip through the tough material of the spirit, each touch and attack adding more white fire to her now blazing enemy.

Their speed picked up as they moved closer to Erendar, wisps of fire flaring as they entered the lower atmosphere and sound returned to their surroundings.

Ilea was preparing to use another set of skills when what remained of the spirit went limp and dings filled her mind. She stored the corpse and slowed down, blinking a few times before she stopped in the sky above the frozen desert. Everything was quiet now, from the far-reaching landscape spreading below to the curve of the moon still visible above.

‘ding’ You have defeated [Astral Spirit – lvl 821]

‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 394 – Five stat points awarded

‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 395 – Five stat points awarded

‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 393 – Five stat points awarded

‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 394 – Five stat points awarded

‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 239 – One stat point awarded

‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 240 – One stat point awarded – One Core Skill point awarded

...

‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 242 – One stat point awarded

Ilea twirled in the air and checked herself for injuries, her mana slowly recovering as she flew.

‘ding’ Azarinth Reversal reaches 3rd lvl 27

‘ding’ Sentinel Huntress reaches 3rd lvl 13

‘ding’ Sentinel Huntress reaches 3rd lvl 14

‘ding’ Storm of Cinders reaches 3rd lvl 27

‘ding’ Eyes of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 27

‘ding’ Flare of Creation reaches 3rd lvl 6

‘ding’ Displacement reaches 3rd lvl 8

‘ding’ Space Shift reaches 3rd lvl 3

‘ding’ Body of the Valkyrie reaches 3rd lvl 4

‘ding’ Deviant of Humanity reaches 2nd lvl 3

‘ding’ Monster Hunter reaches 3rd lvl 7

‘ding’ Oxygen Repository reaches lvl 15

...

‘ding’ Oxygen Repository reaches lvl 17

‘ding’ Mana Drain Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 2

As I thought. Alone, they’re far more manageable. More levels for me.

Now, where am I?

I’ll have to mark the Meadow as soon as I’m back.

She eventually had to use her third-tier Blink to get to Elos and then use the gate in Gyffold to return. Rather embarrassing circumstances that she hid behind her menacing armor and all the reputation she had garnered.

She attributed the lack of foresight to her repeated losses against the Meadow. Now, though, she had calmed down enough to continue her training.

“Congratulations on winning against one of the Astral Spirits.”

The Meadow formed a platform below her, the runes appearing near-instantly. Several hundred wooden spikes appeared all around Ilea, cutting into her as she tried to dodge and move around them.

Roots filled the whole arena, quickly growing in all directions as she tried to fight back against the powerful creation with pale white flames and ash. The growth didn’t stop, overwhelming her offensive power with sheer density and resilience.

The praise felt somewhat hollow, considering how strong the Meadow was, but Ilea realized that comparing herself to the ancient tree may not be the healthiest or most reasonable approach. She would get to a point where she could survive a fight against it, but she had to admit to herself that it would take a whole lot longer than she had initially thought.

And she would take it one step at a time.

Ilea soon found herself unable to teleport, not just due to the platform but mostly because she simply couldn’t get past the sheer mass of wood.

Phaseshift activated, the wood quickly filling in the space where she would have been. The runes below were now the only thing preventing her teleportation, but it proved to be enough.

“It’s just getting worse,” she murmured.

The Meadow laughed. *“You’re trapped in my forest.”*

Ilea laughed as well.

It's funny. Thinking that I could match the power of this being. Maybe I was so used to powerful beings showing off their magic that something as considerate and peaceful as the Meadow just caught me off guard.

No wonder it survived for so long.

"What happens if I appear now?"

"Either your body will prevail, or the wood will."

"Very funny."

"Maybe I could give you a helping branch," the Meadow suggested.

"I'm all ears. My mana is running out," Ilea said and smiled.

"The runes carved into the platform below, the field it creates, the very mana that flows from my form into each."

"What about them?"

The Meadow remained silent.

The seconds ticked past.

Ilea strained her senses, focusing fully on the platform of stone now hidden below her phased form and the sea of roots.

What about the runes?

She saw the stone in her sphere, the runes, the magic within them, and the way it all warped the space and mana within its area of influence.

And she had no idea what it meant.

The cost of Phaseshift maxed out, consuming her mana in chunks of several thousand per second. Far too much for her regeneration to sustain.

Mana flows from its body into the platform, the runes use that to create—

Phaseshift deactivated, and Ilea's body appeared within the roots as her spell tried to move her aside. She flickered a few times before her armor exploded, roots splintering and bones groaning.

Her flesh ripped, penetrated by wood, both sides pushing on each other for ownership of each cubic millimeter. Her ash and flesh lost as much as it won, though her skeleton survived the sudden shift without major damage.

Ilea found herself severely mangled and stuck within the forest of roots. Her health was down a third but recovered quickly. Much of the damage, however, was difficult to heal with the roots occupying everything around her.

She didn't mind much. Instead, she was focused entirely on studying the platform.

'Perceive and differentiate magical frameworks.'

The roots around her dug into her ash with every passing moment.

Could I see the runes themselves? The magic that flows in?

Or the field it generates?

"I give up," she said as the wood bored into her skin.

"Disappointing. My vague comment didn't lead to a sudden and major revelation?" the Meadow asked as the whole dense system of roots dissipated into mana.

"Not exactly... but you were talking about the frameworks, right?"

A windless gust of pure mana moved through the hall. *"Or perhaps it did."*

The platform remained, and Ilea kept her focus on it.

"Perhaps we should start with something a little less challenging," the creature said as ninety percent of the runes changed into solid stone, the remaining ones changing shape before a new effect manifested.

"Restriction on teleportation... without prevention of space magic-specific abilities. I could slip through with Displacement," Ilea said, the wisps and mana around her enough to supply the information.

"Yes. Well done. Your experience once again prevails over your primitive knowledge. Oh, and don't think this will be easy. At best, it will allow you to escape my grasp. At worst, you'll continue to struggle like one of those fish creatures you described when they're out of water," the Meadow said, but there was something in its voice besides the sarcasm.

Ilea just nodded along, staring at the runes with an intense glare.

EIGHTY

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Training Training Training

Ilea didn't get a revelation in the next few hours, but she did feel like she got closer to one. They had twenty-three days left until the closure of the gate, until the Daughters of Sephilon would descend.

The Meadow provided various runic systems and combinations so she could get a feel for them. With its help, she mainly worked on Sentinel Huntress and Space Awareness. Out in the wasteland, she worked on her more combat-oriented skills.

Only a few from her main Class had yet to reach the end of the third tier. Ilea checked her ashen skills to see if she could help them along somehow.

Passive: Eyes of Ash – 3rd lvl 27

Increases your perception by 63.5% [508%] when fighting without a weapon.

2nd stage: Effects apply with weapons as well. When opportunity calls, you notice possible critical weak points on enemies with more ease.

3rd stage: Your eyes are vastly improved. Great distances and a lack of light won't pose a problem to you anymore.

Category: Body Enhancement – Ashen magic

Maybe try to look around at the enemies farthest away? And focus on weak points.

Active: Storm of Cinders – 3rd lvl 27

Burn the inside of whatever your body hits with a surge of heat and embers or release the attack in a burst of fire and cinders.

2nd stage: The flame burns on. Targets hit will have fire burning through or on them. Time and consecutive attacks will increase the effect.

3rd stage: Storm of Cinders burns away all that stands against it, damaging mana intrusion prevention capabilities of defensive enchantments, as well as natural and manufactured armor.

Category: Ashen Magic

Alright, just keep attacking. At least I can use this one hundreds of times with my ash.

With her new additions, instead of fleeing from the Astrals, she stayed as long as she could, using all of her abilities and watching everything with her Space Awareness.

Six were already present, all the Spirits of Death in the area already destroyed. Beams of astral magic flashed past as she pushed her wings to the absolute limit of their flexibility. Her sphere and precognition allowed her to react much faster than a single spirit could fire its spells, but the combined efforts led to more than a few damaging hits.

With two teleportation abilities, she could keep avoiding the enemy spells, the bonuses from Space Shift making the cooldowns even lower. The spirits and their magic were simply too quick to never get hit, but she was getting closer.

This time, she didn't attack immediately, focusing on dodging in the hopes of leveling her Eyes of Ash a little quicker in the dangerous environment.

They'll add astral area attacks and concentrated slashes into the mix once I get close.

Ilea sped through the air, watching another Astral Spirit arrive, its spells immediately forming, aimed at her. She didn't teleport yet, dodging three massive cones of astral energy with the help of her precognition and wings alone. Her wings got damaged in the process, the cones simply too broad for her to dodge efficiently.

Damage is still alright, she noted, keeping an eye on her health. Her armor was shaved away constantly but reformed nearly as quickly.

She swerved around the group of creatures, moving between two spirits floating close to each other and the rest of the group. The maneuver didn't deter any of the monsters, whose beams were still aimed at her quickly flying form that refused to be incinerated.

Much of the astral energy slammed into the other spirits on the way, but they didn't seem bothered. Their mana drain, however, activated, now that their bodies had experienced minor damage.

Third-tier resistance, here you go, Ilea smiled. Any point of mana they drained would damage the creatures, in turn forcing them to drain more.

Just have to keep them in a perpetual loop, she thought, knowing full well that their own regeneration likely outpaced the effects of her resistance easily. *Let alone the fact that they steal mana from each other.*

Wait, shouldn't they all have high resistances too? Maybe not a third tier, I guess. If it works the same for unawakened monsters.

Another spirit showed up half a minute later, the encounter increasingly resembling an electronic music festival with an expensive light show. Ilea smiled when she noticed the slightly reduced damage she was taking due to her third-tier Body of the Valkyrie.

Five percent is more noticeable than I thought.

Distracted by her thoughts, she failed to dodge five incoming cones, her teleports still on cooldown.

Phaseshift activated, and she continued her dodging, Displacement taking her behind one of the spirits. The damage reduction allowed her to heal much more efficiently despite the higher frequency of attacks hitting her.

She even stacked some health into her Flare and Awakening, if only for the increased defense both would provide. When the combined efforts started to overwhelm her and her teleports were on cooldown, she used her third-tier Displacement.

The spirits didn't grow any smarter just because there were more of them, Ilea sending eight continuous beams through her Displacement gate right back at their fellow creatures.

She laughed in her phased form, stacking her auras with more health before the spell dissipated again. Her resilience increased immediately, allowing her to take a little more of the magic head-on.

Ilea's laughter was the only thing audible besides the low hum of the spells trying to catch her fast-moving form. She was focused entirely on this

dance. In the same way that she had trained with the Guardians of Iztacalum, she was now flying with the spirits of Erendar.

Mana wasn't as much of an issue, Sentinel Core filling her resources up thanks to her maxed-out second-tier resistance and the abundance of magic burning into her ash and body. Coupled with the much higher resilience of Phaseshift, she was coming out with more than she had entered with.

Minute number two, she thought, noticing the slight defensive boost.

Phaseshift activated once more, though her third-tier Displacement was still on cooldown. She displaced herself a little farther away, the increased distance forcing the spirits to move closer. Either that or their spells simply wouldn't hit her quite as quickly.

Every millisecond counts, she thought, watching with joy as one of the now more distant creatures left the field again. *Why, I wonder?*

It didn't matter. Another creature soon took its place, but every delay in combined attacks would lead to increased resilience and regenerating health. The mana drain cluster already seemed to be damaging the beings quite a bit – at least one of them was now constantly using the ability.

Ilea soon started to test Storm of Cinders. The area spells activated right when she reached the highest possible range of her limbs.

Ah, shit.

Now that she was closer to the floating group, the beams reached her almost instantly. It had been close before, but with her precognition and constant recovery, the difference was more than just noticeable. She was already getting overwhelmed.

Her ashen limbs vanished amidst the combined astral energies, only able to deliver a single dose of her spell.

But one is all I need, she thought, reforming her sixteen limbs after she blinked out again.

Ilea distanced herself, flying around the group of spirits.

Phaseshift, use the deactivation time to get close and blink in, hit once, displace out.

She did just that, though the timing proved to be a little tricky, even with her increased perception.

Every hit of her mana intrusion ability forced her to retreat again. More spirits showed up as time wore on, but their number seemed to plateau at around ten. Most were only hitting with half their normal damage now,

allowing her to fly around them without having to retreat more permanently.

A third-tier Astral Magic Resistance would make it even easier, she thought, using Phaseshift and Displacement again to catch her breath.

Slowly, she acclimated herself to their magic, the way they moved, the frequency of their spells, and her resource management. The latter was really the thing it came down to. That and her own positioning.

With each passing minute, Ilea became more efficient at delivering Storm of Cinders. She was still forced back every single time, her health occasionally dipping so low she had to disengage the group with full-distance blinks.

The difference between her and the creatures, however, was their limited ability to adjust based on her abilities. The Knights of Rhyvor had changed their behavior accordingly, just as much as the Specters of Rot did. The Astral Spirits, though, seemed to care less or were simply incapable of learning. They were more akin to a natural phenomenon than intelligent creatures.

She was forced to disengage entirely when the numbers rose to fifteen, the delicate balance shifting in the Astrals' favor.

Ilea didn't wait long to join them again, waiting at a distance until the monsters started leaving.

She approached them when only three remained, and the dance began again.

* * *

Ilea stopped when she was starting to feel mentally drained. Her healing meant she could keep going, but she was growing increasingly bored and disengaged at this point and slipped up more because of it. She marked a few of the spirits and fled.

She had moved quite some distance through the wastes in her search for higher-leveled spirits, the mark she had left on the Meadow now allowing her to travel much farther without any danger of getting lost.

It was hard to know how much time had passed due to her battle trances and landmark-less traveling.

I'm a little hungry, she noted. Meditation was both useful and dangerous when it came to situations like this. Could've just gone on. As long as my resources remain and neither sleep nor food is necessary. Might be a part of Mental Resistance too, or even some of my Class skills?

She landed in the desert and summoned herself a meal. When she was done, she cracked her neck and focused again.

Enough dodging. Let's take down a few of them.

Ilea followed the closest marked spirit, this one residing much lower in the atmosphere than the first one she'd hunted.

Phaseshift deactivated after a blink, tens of thousands of health blazing outward in the form of white flames, her body empowered by Azarinth Awakening.

She easily grappled the unwieldy creature, her fists and ashen limbs striking into it. Destructive mana slowly overwhelmed the spirit as it tried to kill her.

Her ash didn't yield, and each spell the creature used further fueled her offensive capabilities. Ilea didn't even reach the first minute of her third-tier Valkyrie skill before the Astral Spirit was killed and stored within her necklace.

She checked the few messages from her training on her way to the next marked monster. She tried to whistle a tune to herself but found that she was flying too high and too fast to hear herself. It was fun, anyway.

Hunting space spirits in the atmosphere of a distant moon. I knew that getting wings was the most important thing.

'ding' Phaseshift reaches 3rd lvl 2

'ding' Space Shift reaches 3rd lvl 4

'ding' Body of the Valkyrie reaches 3rd lvl 5

'ding' Body of the Valkyrie reaches 3rd lvl 6

'ding' Deviant of Humanity reaches 2nd lvl 4

'ding' Veteran reaches 3rd lvl 11

'ding' Mana Drain Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 3

'ding' You have defeated [Astral Spirit – lvl 742]

‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 396 – Five stat points awarded

‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 395 – Five stat points awarded

‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 243 – One stat point awarded

...

‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 246 – One stat point awarded

My third Class is coming along nicely.

Ilea continued to hunt down spirits, killing twelve of them before she finally reached a nice round number.

‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 398 – Five stat points awarded

...

‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 400 – Five stat points awarded – One Core Skill point awarded

‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 397 – Five stat points awarded

...

‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 400 – Five stat points awarded – One Core Skill point awarded

‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 247 – One stat point awarded

...

‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 260 – One stat point awarded – One Core Skill point awarded

...

‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 268 – One stat point awarded

‘ding’ Sentinel Huntress reaches 3rd lvl 15

...

‘ding’ Sentinel Huntress reaches 3rd lvl 17

‘ding’ Flare of Creation reaches 3rd lvl 7

‘ding’ Deviant of Humanity reaches 2nd lvl 5

Ilea stretched in the air, searching for the next group of spirits.

Judging by the time it takes me to level my Classes compared to my skills, I’m definitely catching up with the former. These Astrals are great. Though it seems the experience I’m getting is already slowing down.

She hadn’t expected an evolution at four hundred but still felt ever so slightly disappointed. Maybe that would’ve made the difference in terms of protecting the Meadow and fighting alongside the Ice Elemental, maybe even bringing the Meadow back to Elos.

The feeling, however, was quickly replaced by anticipation. She hadn’t thought about it much, but now that she’d passed the four-hundred threshold, five hundred felt right around the corner.

Something had to happen at five hundred. And she was getting better with the frameworks, noticing more small shifts in the fabric, the intricacies of her own teleportation spells and of the space around her whenever a spell moved through.

And so, she spent the rest of the day hunting Astrals.

‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 401 – Five stat points awarded

‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 269 – One stat point awarded

...

‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 276 – One stat point awarded

‘ding’ Azarinth Reversal reaches 3rd lvl 28

‘ding’ Displacement reaches 3rd lvl 9

The levels slowed even faster than she’d expected, but, for her third Class, the time spent was more than worth it. It was fun to hunt and take down the spirits, and the levels she was getting felt like an entire cake on top.

Eventually, Ilea summoned another meal and made her way back toward the temple, ready for a break. It had been a while, and she could tell

that her progress was slowing. She needed a bit of distance.

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EIGHTY-ONE

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Off the Beaten Path

“How long do we have left?” Ilea asked as soon as she felt the connection to the Meadow establish.

“Eighteen days.”

“Right. I’ll be out for a while, need a breather,” she sent.

“Enjoy yourself.”

She waved toward the temple and left through the gate. The defenders tensed immediately at her appearance, magic sparking and flashing as their varying spells were prepared.

Ilea glanced over the group and blinked up and onto the city wall. She stretched and smiled at the view. After staying in the wastelands of Erendar for so long, she welcomed the patches of forest in the distance and the lake below.

She jumped off before any of the guards even saw her, then enjoyed a quick swim through the monster-infested lake that acted as an oversized moat. A few of the creatures approached her but left in a hurry once they felt her Deviant aura.

My level really should be enough. How do these creatures even survive? Attacking something hundreds of levels above your own is just plain stupid.

She smiled to herself, using her insane boosts to strength and her Water Resistance to move through the lake with a grace and speed that rivaled, or even surpassed, most of the native creatures.

Ilea blinked out and dried herself using her fire sphere before her ashen armor appeared once more. She summoned her bone set but kept her ash

intact on top of it. Both pretty much had the same form anyway at this point. The bone armor just added a little padding below.

She took a deep breath as she spread her wings. *Half a day off at most.*

She checked her various marks. The ones for Meadow and Violence were distorted and incomprehensible.

Is that little shit in another realm? Without telling me? Maybe he's just home.

Might be interesting to see the siege of Baralia.

On the other hand, I'd just feel forced to get involved again. And it would hardly help my goals.

Just some time for me, then.

Ilea turned and gazed at Gyffold, marveling at how the city walls seamlessly flowed into the stone island below. Then she displaced herself a few dozen times, arriving in a grassy field.

It felt good to move around a bit, to see the wisps of space and feel how much stronger she had gotten. With her mission for the Lily – more a mission for General Ryse, really – one of her goals had been to work on her third Class. With her time in Baralia and then Erendar, the new skills had become familiar, as much a part of her skill set as her abilities from her main Classes.

She still had a lot to work on, but the new skills no longer felt like a set of novel fledgling abilities.

Ilea put on a set of casual clothes, moving her ashen armor to her neck. *No reason to hide my face when I'm out here.*

Next, she checked her surroundings with her spells, finding a few tracks. Most of them likely belonged to small critters. Or large ones with tiny feet.

She chose the largest one, deep furrows visible in her sphere. Her eyes had difficulty picking up the tracks, but her Huntress ability helped with that.

The tracks led her through the field of high, untended grass. She heard a noise to her right and checked. Nothing was within her sphere, but she quickly found the two eyes staring back at her a hundred meters away. A small rabbit with two fangs sticking out of its tiny mouth, its fur brown and fluffy.

Can you see me, little one? Or can you feel me?

She blinked close and displaced the creature into her arms. Healing mana flowed into it immediately.

[Vicious Hare – lvl 8]

The creature bit into her arms with ferocious attacks, screeching with anger and confusion. And she watched, seeing the framework of its magic, its life, its place in the fabric. She could affect it, knew that she could, easily separating the being from her own magical presence and place in the space around them.

Ilea carefully petted it, ignoring its failed attempts at breaking her skin with its serrated teeth. The hare soon calmed down, giving up on its attempts and settling into her arms as the soothing healing mana flowed through its tiny form.

“Level eight, hmm?” she asked, looking at the cute animal.

Pretty muscly. And aggressive. Never had any rabbits at home, but I doubt they’d be quite as ferocious.

She continued through the field, enjoying the cool breeze moving through her hair.

Ilea let the hare go after a few minutes. *Don’t want you to get lost*, she thought as she watched it rush away.

Dark wings formed on her back, pushing against the air a few times as she ascended.

Anything interesting in the area?

Bunch of trees, a hill... Thrilling.

Oh, what’s that?

She sped up and closed the distance to a pack of large wolves, the animals hounding a massive elk-like creature. The scene could’ve come straight out of a Nordic documentary were it not for the wooden roots forming near the elk from time to time to deter the attackers.

Let’s be honest, if there are magic animals on Earth, they’re in Scandinavia.

Or Iceland? No... those are the aliens and gods.

Ilea kept her distance from the creatures, not about to interrupt the hunt.

I could fly to any interesting place on Earth now, if I could get back. The cold would hardly be an issue, even in winter. Nor food or shelter.

Although, without monsters, it probably wouldn't be super interesting. What level would a polar bear actually be at? Ten? Twenty? The mass alone should count for something.

She shuddered at the thought of high-level creatures residing in the oceans.

The wolves silently followed the larger animal, occasionally jumping at its unprotected side whenever it was distracted. The elk was bleeding, stumbling now as its wood magic lashed out at empty air.

Ilea didn't wait for the end, leaving the animals behind as she sped through the landscape.

Finally, she found a small lake surrounded by fir trees, settling down for a little while as she enjoyed the sunlight. She sighed and summoned herself a meal.

Maybe I could try fishing?

Lying down in the grass, it didn't take long for her to fall asleep. When she woke up, the suns had set, and something was gnawing on her armored shin.

She looked down and came face to face with a fox. Their eyes briefly met before the critter rushed off.

Ilea stretched and slowly stood up. The lake reflected the stars above. She looked after the fox and smiled as it hid in the foliage. She let it be, rolling her shoulders before she spread her wings and flew up.

The lands were dark, and she felt well-rested, thoughts of frameworks and space magic runes running through her mind.

EIGHTY-TWO

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Preparation

“Wait, I think I can see it,” Ilea said, focusing on the moving framework.

It was hard to grasp active magic that wasn’t grounded in a being or material but instead was born out of runes and spread into the nearby space. But she felt grounded, felt like some of the recent experiences and understanding had settled in her mind.

Moving a spell or magical construct was one thing, but moving herself out of one specifically made to prevent that proved much more difficult.

And yet, it felt almost natural. She was so close to it.

She saw the connections and focused on herself. On her own framework, the mana that flowed through her, exuded from her, manifested in her spells and auras. She mentally separated what she knew to be her from what wasn’t her.

And then she blinked.

Ilea appeared in the intended position.

She looked around herself and then jumped with joy.

“I did it! Take that, you fucking tree! I win!”

‘ding’ You win – One Core Skill point awarded

What?!

She started laughing.

“There is no need for profanity,” the Meadow said. *“Well done.”*

Ilea smiled and then stared at the absolutely massive wolf that still occupied the chamber. She blinked close, nearly reaching it before the cold

took over.

“My body literally should not be able to be frozen!” she exclaimed, frustrated as she found herself unable to move despite Heart of Cinder burning within her.

She blinked away again and quickly thawed.

“It’s a miracle that you even retain an ability to think when confronted with the frost of an Ice Elemental,” the Meadow said. *“You really are quite durable.”* It sounded contemplative.

“I don’t want a miracle, I want to pet it,” Ilea said with a pout.

“Then that will be your goal. One even I would fail to achieve,” the Meadow admitted.

“Really?” Ilea asked. The task suddenly didn’t seem quite as mundane anymore.

“It is not fond of petting.”

“I mean, I can see that,” Ilea said, summoning a meal and sitting down on an ashen chair.

Ilea studied a new anti-teleportation field as she ate, but she found it difficult to focus. “I’ve gotten better.”

“You have.”

“You think it will be enough?” she asked. She wasn’t talking about staying and helping during the gate closure. She would stay either way.

“You now have all the pieces that you need. As for putting them together, we will see.”

* * *

Felicia finished her report for the day and left her enchanted shelter. The description really didn’t do it justice. It was the first time she had joined the Imperial Army during an extended siege, but having hundreds of expert mages around really made life quite a bit better, despite the circumstances.

Soundproofing, cooling, hot showers, and even comfortable chairs and beds had been provided by the various artisans who had come all this way to Baralia or been recruited in the area.

Outside immediately felt warmer, the mana in the air more noticeable. The impacts now sounded louder and closer.

Dozens of soldiers walked around in the vicinity, a few saluting her. There were dozens more stone shelters in the area.

A little too busy here, she thought, teleporting a few times to get a little out of the main camp. Much of the area had been claimed by their invading army, but she knew a few spots that were a little less crowded.

She stopped on a former meadow that had still had trees just a day prior.

Shredded apart, she thought, looking at a dozen trees bent away from a central point, their bark burnt, splintered, and destroyed.

She looked for a more secluded spot, summoning a hot tea as she took some time to calm down and take in the sights.

The forest had been destroyed or manually removed for kilometers ahead. Steam rose from the two rivers flowing past and through Baralia.

The inner walls reached heights comparable to those of Virilya and formed a star-like shape to make direct attacks easier to deal with. One river curved around it, providing a natural defensive line for most of the left side of the city. The right one moved in a straighter line, flowing into the forest beyond.

The field of battle stretched far and wide. As some of the smoke cleared, Felicia focused on what lay outside the massive central walls.

An extensive network of streets and houses covered the ground around the walls, spreading into the landscape for several kilometers. Much of it looked like ruins, smoke and fire permeating everything.

Her vantage point allowed her a good view, but she wasn't looking down into a valley, not exactly. Several hills loomed both within the city of Baralia and around it.

Something lit up to her left, making her move her gaze.

A large cannon-like contraption standing in the field a few hundred meters to her left concentrated a beam of red energy. She could just make out the people powering and maneuvering the massive siege weapon. There were eight of the cannons stationed throughout the camp.

The air seemed to be sucked away as her full attention focused on the magic. She heard a few people approach but simply watched as arcane energy condensed and was released in a brilliant streak of bright power.

Ten localized barriers formed near the central city walls towering over the ruins of its suburbs. Five shattered in an instant, and three more were pierced before the energy exploded in a deafening crash.

Slow and steady.

“Major,” a soldier said and saluted, walking past with a few others.

Felicia nodded.

The energy dissipated in red clouds.

No direct impact.

The Empire’s camp spanned a large part of the forest, the core itself clear of trees and covering several hundred meters. Compared to the Baralia war camp outside of Virilya, this looked more like an actual city.

The stone buildings were efficient and defensible, though obviously not built with the intent of permanence. They lacked artistry. *Cold and practical*, Felicia thought, sipping her tea.

Thousands of individuals bustled within the camp, expanding, building, and repairing. Another cannon was being built at the back of the small city.

In full view of the defenders.

She couldn’t help but feel some pride at the thought, knowing how long the Empire had waited and hidden within their walls before pushing back. Slow and steady. And now they were besieging the last fortress of Baralia.

A response to the attack followed – as hundreds of burning rocks, runed explosives, and arrows came flying out from the city walls, barriers flickered to life around the cannons. Many of the buildings were hit, some flaring with defensive enchantments while others were slightly damaged.

Another beam of energy had already formed in the next cannon.

It was a battle of attrition, defenses continuously checked and tested, whilst specialized units were preparing for night raids. This battle wouldn’t be decided any time soon, but whilst Baralia had failed to capture a single imperial city during the siege of Virilya, Lys was now moving unopposed through the territories of Baralia.

The high king had gathered his closest allies in the capital and forsaken the rest of his kingdom to blood rituals, raiders from the northern plains, and the Imperial Army. This was all that was left, and, piece by piece, they would take it apart.

She sipped her tea.

A few tents went up in flames from a cluster of explosive fireballs, twenty or so soldiers trying to get to safety. She saw dozens of smaller explosions and battles going on in the city ruins outside the main walls. Skirmishes between elite squads from either side.

Felicia hadn’t been here at the very start during the chaos of the forest battles. Baralia had endured ten times the casualties, not committing their

higher-level mages and combat specialists to the less defensible terrain.

The blood rituals and spreading news among both Order members and nobility had also sped up the negotiations with many cities in Baralia.

A few stone projectiles cratered the ground nearby, sending bits of rock and debris in all directions. Felicia pushed a gust of wind against the incoming wave of shrapnel, protecting her tea.

Another few hours until sundown.

Most people below level two hundred had issues seeing at night. The real powers clashed then. Her strike team would try to infiltrate from the east once more.

She relaxed and finished her tea. The next council would start soon, a constant play between overeager young nobles and experienced veterans. She counted herself as part of neither group, following orders and suggesting improvements when she saw them.

Her participation in the mission with General Ryse had solidified her position. He was well-liked, but he had opposition in the court as well, opposition that she now largely shared.

She had realized that the siege was just as much about internal nobility squabbles and politics as it was about actually taking the city. It was tiring, but necessary.

Felicia looked at the mark on her hand and wondered how Ilea was doing.

I can't believe she actually enjoys being in that horribly cold wasteland.

She shook her head and stretched, preparing for the day and night to come.

* * *

Ilea killed her last mark, the Astral Spirit slowly falling toward the icy desert.

She felt the call.

The Meadow had activated its mark. Her time was up.

Ilea took a long breath and flapped her wings. She let her armor move to her back, a shroud of ash cleaning off the sweat, dirt, and blood that clung to her still. Charging her wings, she shot off toward the distant temple.

The wasteland had darkened, the eclipse burning above. The slight blue hue of the distant planet of Sephilon was barely visible.

‘ding’ You have defeated [Astral Spirit – lvl 730]

...

‘ding’ You have defeated [Astral Spirit – lvl 782]

With her growing power, familiarity, speed, and marks, she could now kill the Astral Spirits quickly. Most of her time was spent flying between her marks.

The last weeks had allowed her to hunt and kill hundreds of the creatures, if not more. Initially, she had gained four levels from twelve kills. The speed slowed down at level four hundred and then more and more with every kill she got.

It still proved quite beneficial, the sheer level difference enough to reward her large chunks of experience.

‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 402 – Five stat points awarded

...

‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 438 – Five stat points awarded

‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 401 – Five stat points awarded

...

‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 435 – Five stat points awarded

With those levels came six additional Core Skill points and a plethora of stat points. Everything would help for the coming battle. The Meadow no longer insinuated that she wouldn’t be welcome near the gate.

Ilea wasn’t sure why her ash Class had gradually fallen behind. Storm of Cinders and Heart of Cinder provided reasonable damage, but perhaps her estimates weren’t accurate. That or other Azarinth skills contributed more than she thought. In the end, it hardly mattered. More levels would help either way.

Her third Class grew fastest, and the boosts from her third-tier Phaseshift and stacked Flare of Creation, coupled with all the defensive boons and Displacement, contributed more and more to her battles.

‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 277 – One stat point awarded

...

‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 355 – One stat point awarded

No evolution had taken place at three hundred, nor at three-fifty. Two-eighty and three hundred had rewarded one Core Skill point each. After that, it was one point per ten levels, just like in her main Classes.

Her remaining high-level skills hadn’t grown quite as fast as her Class levels.

‘ding’ Storm of Cinders reaches 3rd lvl 28

‘ding’ Eyes of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 28

‘ding’ Phaseshift reaches 3rd lvl 3

‘ding’ Flare of Creation reaches 3rd lvl 8

‘ding’ Flare of Creation reaches 3rd lvl 9

‘ding’ Space Shift reaches 3rd lvl 5

‘ding’ Space Awareness reaches 3rd lvl 2

‘ding’ Deviant of Humanity reaches 2nd lvl 6

‘ding’ Oxygen Repository reaches lvl 18

...

‘ding’ Oxygen Repository reaches lvl 20

‘ding’ Oxygen Repository reaches 2nd lvl 1

Oxygen Repository – 2nd lvl 1

Due to unfortunate circumstances, you have been deprived of air for extended periods of time. Somehow, you have pushed through to survive. Your body has learned that it may not always be supplied with what it needs. You may survive much longer without oxygen and store what little you get for extended periods.

2nd stage: Your body has adapted to a lack of oxygen. Extended periods without oxygen will weaken you significantly but will no longer be deadly as long as mana remains.

‘ding’ Veteran reaches 3rd lvl 12

‘ding’ Mana Drain Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 4

Ilea had gradually invested her stat points into Vitality, Intelligence, and Wisdom, though a few went into her other stats to even things out as her magical abilities continued to grow.

Status:

Vitality: 1250

Endurance: 450

Strength: 442

Dexterity: 450

Intelligence: 1200

Wisdom: 1250

She was pleased with the progress, witnessing the gradual growth of her skills and stats with every subsequent battle, the spirits falling faster, and her own injuries growing more and more negligible.

Whatever horrors descended when the Meadow revealed itself with the closure of the gate, she would be ready.

EIGHTY-THREE

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Arrival

Michael greeted Ilea upon her return from the desolate wastes.

[Mage – lvl 275]

Not a single level... with such opportunities. I wonder how much he learned from the Meadow.

His tables and makeshift library were gone, only his five copies remaining. He looked determined, not quite as tired as the last time they had met.

“Lilith. I understand that you will remain during the closure of the gate,” he said.

“I will. Don’t want to miss an opportunity like that.”

“I agree, however the risks would be too high for me to take. I assume with your space magic, you have a way to return?”

She nodded.

“Wonderful, then let me offer you another opportunity. My copies shall remain to watch and document the events and magic that will unfold. If any of them survive until the end, I ask you to bring back their notes.”

“I could do that. If it seems safe enough. I don’t expect it to be an easy battle, especially for me.”

“That is all I ask. If you have any requests in return, I will gladly accommodate you, or we can discuss payment once you have returned with my documentation.”

He hesitated. “I apologize again for the deceit in regards to the ritual. I hope your personal benefits from its success have offset whatever animosity you still held toward me. And thank you for the help. It was most interesting to converse with an ancient being like the Meadow. It is unfortunate that it cannot join us and close the gate from our side.”

Ilea was quiet for a moment. “I maintain that you could have just told me what you planned to do, but yeah, I’m happy with how things worked out in the end. And now that I think about it, one thing you could help me with immediately is a Gold Magic Resistance.”

“I wondered when you would ask. Very well, please view it as a token of trust, Lilith.” He nodded to the others.

“Awesome. Until next time, then, Michael.”

He glanced at her before looking at the group of his copies. “May you be successful.”

Then he left without another word.

Ilea watched his back before he teleported, then turned back to his copies. She had seen them work and talk occasionally. And she got the impression that they weren’t just mindless creations. She was pretty sure they even had quirks of their own. All of it made her wonder how the spell actually worked.

“We should start, then. We don’t have much time.” She deactivated most of her defenses and let them attack.

Ilea let the golden spikes slash into her, weird, corrupting waves of mana flowing into her from the impacts.

Continuous mana intrusion? Without actually touching me?

It didn’t take long. As she had suspected many times before, Michael punched far above his level, and these were just his copies. She didn’t think his focus was battle prowess either. And still, even with all her defenses, it took barely a few minutes for her to get a resistance.

‘ding’ You have learned the General Skill: Gold Magic Resistance – lvl 1

Gold Magic Resistance – lvl 1

The power of this magic is not only measured by its direct combat application. Gold is a fascinating metal to many creatures and species. Its manipulation is not often achieved. A precise form of magic, one that

benefits from mana intrusion and the inherent flexibility of gold. You have gained a resistance perhaps even rarer than manipulation itself.

“Is everyone prepared?” the Meadow sent to them from below. *“I will begin shortly.”*

Ilea nodded. *“You trust I will survive, then?”*

“At least for a while. Keep your distance as best you can, and support the Elemental.”

The ground started shaking.

Ilea watched as cracks formed on the floor around them before the whole section under their feet was suddenly ripped upward. The edges crumbled away until they stood on a round, floating platform made of stone.

The Meadow soon moved them out of the hall. Stone shifted all around, hallways collapsing behind them. When they came to a stop a hundred meters above the gateway to Elos, Ilea looked down to see much of the temple already gone.

Stone and roots started growing out of the now only vaguely pyramid-shaped remains of the temple, buildings nearby taken over or removed entirely as stone merged and grew.

Its sphere of influence reaches far beyond the temple grounds, Ilea thought, watching the nearby landscape transform.

She wondered how much of it the Meadow had built in the first place.

Flowers and trees occasionally bloomed on the living construct of earth, stone, and wood before their leaves froze and died.

The noise was deafening, even from their position high above the ground. Ilea felt the winds, bracing herself on the floating stone platform as her wings spread.

The Michaels used their magic to stabilize themselves on the stone.

Snow?

Ilea turned to see a blizzard moving to the edge of the frozen city of stone, settling as the Ice Elemental revealed itself. It emerged from the frozen mist, its antlers growing toward the sky in complex patterns. Perhaps a challenge to the network of wood and rock the Meadow was constructing.

The Ice Elemental looked up toward Sephilon, dim light at the edges of the large celestial body casting light down onto the moon of Erendar.

Then it howled. A single long sound that shook the ground, tremors continuing when its voice had already settled.

The Michaels stood frozen around her, while Ilea flapped her wings to rise off the platform. The Meadow moved them farther out and up, its creation already reaching about fifty meters high.

A wave of mana and power burst from the Elemental, blasting ice and debris through the air.

Ilea braced against it and gritted her teeth, feeling the cold air. She couldn't help but grin. "*Can't believe you got an Ice Elemental to help you,*" she sent to the Meadow.

"A magnificent creature," one of the Michaels exclaimed, noting something in his book. "To see this spectacle... What greater purpose could there be?"

Ilea understood.

"Staying alive would come close to such purpose," another Michael said.

She agreed with him too.

The Meadow carved out a path in the land, a rectangular structure slowly growing below them. Walls and roots had already covered the gate and the Meadow itself.

"*What can I say?*" the being said. "*I'm very charming.*"

"*That you are,*" Ilea replied.

And then she focused. She would try her best to protect them.

The first spirits started to appear in the distance then, moving toward the spectacle that the Meadow hadn't attempted to hide in the slightest. Swaths of spirits were caught in a moving haze of freezing air, their bodies solidifying in an instant.

It didn't even fucking move, Ilea thought, looking at the Elemental.

The wolf-like creature didn't look her way, its attention focused upward.

And still, she felt that it was being smug. Or maybe that was just her envy.

Stone and wood flowed together freely, geometrical shapes floating through the air to interlock. Patterns and runes appeared, fields of space magic manifesting and changing in instants.

Thousands of large chunks floated through the air, the sheer size reaching that of a small town, the cold winds of Erendar howling as they

moved past the half-floating structure. All was added to the growing stone monolith, the Meadow, and the gate at its center.

Ilea had no idea how many tons of stone and wood formed that creation as its smooth form reached several hundred meters in height, shimmering with magic runes that covered every square inch of its design. Arcane barriers formed all around, the thick mana pouring into them visible to the naked eye.

"You said some of the Awakened called you a god. I think I'm starting to understand why."

"Don't start with that now, I was just beginning to like you."

Ilea smiled. *"Why not? Once I beat you, I can say that I'm stronger than a god."*

"Amusing."

It sounded more focused than she had ever heard it before.

She exhaled and stared at the monolith now towering above their position in the air.

Enhancements formed around the Michaels that would protect them against the temperatures and, hopefully, some of the rest.

"We will take up our positions now," one of them said, the group splitting up and teleporting through the city, each using a bright spell to signal their final location.

"How do you like it?" the Meadow asked.

"Very impressive. Yeah," Ilea said, her sarcasm for once entirely silenced.

"Remember, do not venture close to me if the situation does not demand it."

"Noted," Ilea said.

The two hadn't exactly found a perfect agreement in the end, the Meadow going as far as requesting that she wait several kilometers away until the gate's closure had concluded.

Let's see if your worries are justified.

"I shall begin," the Meadow said.

Ilea's precognition told her of an attack, but what she felt instead was pure mana. The fabric of reality seemed to shift as her eyes started to water, the pressure flowing out of the monolith like an ocean of mana.

She felt herself blown away, if only a few dozen meters.

The low thrumming sound coming from the monolith increased until it turned into a steady hum that shook the surroundings. Ilea watched with Space Awareness, seeing the wisps turn and spin, the manifestation of space flowing toward the Meadow's monolith.

A growl rippled out from the Elemental, its form rising up before it stepped into the air. Steady movements brought it close to the top of the monolith, the blizzard around it growing in intensity.

Ilea had to displace herself a few times to get out of its range, her health dropping steadily in the swirl of ice. She moved her wings, her healing active as heat formed within her core.

The sound of burning fire brought Ilea's attention back up, a glowing form approaching with increasing velocity.

There you go, she thought with a bright smile.

The being didn't slow down, its entire form glowing as it entered the atmosphere of Erendar. It looked vaguely feline, other than for its six legs and smooth oval head. It was entirely pale blue.

She watched as the creature crashed into the nearby mountain range, the sound and shock wave echoing out into the desert and toward the ruins of the mantis city.

It stepped out of the smoldering crater it had left behind, its smooth head focused on them, two blue horn-like extensions the only discernible features next to its three white, glowing eyes.

The creature moved with grace, its size about half that of the Elemental but towering over everything else. It looked thin, malnourished even, the six legs adorned with claws of astral energy that cut into stone and ice alike as it made its way down into the city.

Its spine ended in a thin blue tail that trailed up into the sky, reaching such lengths that its end wasn't yet visible to Ilea's eyes.

She identified it from hundreds of meters away, the creature's attention fully on the Elemental and the monolith it stood to protect.

[Daughter of Sephilon – lvl ????]

There's your four-mark, Ilea mused, judging it to be around one thousand seven hundred based on Veteran's instinct.

The creature charged.

Spheres of ice formed around the monolith and crashed into the approaching creature like meteorites, crystals of ice forming as the projectiles shattered and exploded in a shower of shards.

Ilea moved closer, staying out of the blizzard around the Elemental.

She dodged the ten-meter large shrapnel shards that howled through the air, more spheres forming as the Daughter soundlessly advanced.

Ilea felt the sudden drain of mana, ten times as powerful as the same ability from a whole cluster of lower Astral Spirits combined.

She kept her distance for now, sending ashen lances at the being as Heart of Cinder continued to charge.

Her projectiles went up in white flame, leaving streaks of fire on the creature. The ash hit the creature without an effect, but the Flame of Creation remained.

Every little bit counts, she thought and continued her efforts, flying parallel to the monstrous creature.

It swatted away a few large ice projectiles and turned toward Ilea with a quick twist of its body, the massive claws slashing her way.

Oh shit. It worked!

She blinked backward, letting the swipe pass.

Oh no.

Her precognition picked up the beam as the creature formed it, insane swaths of mana pulled from the surrounding space, leaving it dry as the astral energy solidified in front of its eyes.

Three large spears of ice slammed into its side, throwing off its aim.

Ilea was pushed backward by the release of its spell, three beams of astral energy shooting out in different directions. Her breath caught as she watched the beams arc through the air, homing in on her flying form.

She used her third-tier Displacement and activated Phaseshift, one large portal appearing in front of her. The second portal appeared as far away as she could form it.

The monster's spells vanished through her gate, flying out into nothing where the exit floated in midair.

She watched the creature stand up on four legs, another set of beams forming.

Ilea turned her head and saw the initial spells arcing back through the air, one aimed at the Ice Elemental, the other two coming for her.

Shit.

Phaseshift activated in time, though her efforts at directly displacing the beams failed.

She blinked to the side of the beams but found them arcing to catch her nonetheless. Ilea braced for impact, feeling the energy flow through her a moment later.

Her health was eaten up by the thousands, her third-tier healing keeping her health slightly above half before the energy passed.

This is nothing. You'll need more to take me out of this fight!

She deactivated Phaseshift and healed the rest, watching the Elemental form a set of thick ice shields out of nowhere. Their near-instant creation sent a shock wave of air outward before the astral energy slammed into the defenses.

Then the second beam that had been aimed at her struck, Ilea teleporting away when her health hit sixty percent. Phaseshift ended and she sped up again, watching the second set of beams leave the Daughter's eyes.

It jumped into the air right after the spell was released, floating up toward the Elemental before four sets of claws slammed into the ice walls.

Spikes exploded outward, the blizzard now entirely enveloping the monster. Its assault continued, the claws shaving away dozens of tons of ice with each swipe, the air screeching with the fast movement of the large claws.

Two beams homed in on the Elemental, which jumped back and landed in thin air. Mana emanated from its form. The energy blasts scored a direct hit, astral energy flowing over the wolf-like creature's crystalline form.

The Daughter stood on the monolith now, cutting apart the remains of the ice before it charged another set of beams. Ilea watched the remaining beam from before swing around, its target little old her. But anything taken from the Elemental and the Meadow would help.

She created as much ash as she could, forming several walls in front of her, all connected to her via thin tendrils. Flare of Creation activated as she pushed several thousand health into Azarinth Awakening.

Her health was topped off again when the beam hit. It ate through the ash near-instantaneously, and Ilea braced for the impact as she flew backward, forming more burning ash to counter the overwhelming magic.

She gritted her teeth upon feeling the overwhelming presence of the energy, but she knew that Flare of Creation damaged magical constructs too.

She was finally enveloped by the astral energies, letting them burn through her defenses and body as she watched on with her healing. Her

precognition was overwhelmed by the mana output, but her perception didn't slow.

She couldn't outheal it, so she blinked as far away as she could, healing and building more defenses immediately as the homing energy continued to follow.

The spell reached her again, the remaining energy exploding in a bright light when it caught her ash. Ilea was flung backward, her wings and body burned and mangled.

Her vision went black, but a moment later, she blinked her eyes, healing flowing through her disintegrating body. She turned in the air and focused on healing as she descended, booms echoing where the battle between the Daughter and the Elemental raged.

Then she crashed into the remnants of the city below, breaking through three houses before rolling to a stop. She coughed once before she blinked up, her wings reforming and her body healed.

"Still here. Still fighting."

The tail of the Daughter had formed a circle around the city.

Ilea could feel the magic emanating from it. She glanced around and charged back into the fray.

EIGHTY-FOUR

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Storm

Ilea felt the magic take effect, flying to close the distance between herself and the two battling titans. She had felt it before.

Time.

The Daughter moved faster, its speed accelerated by the enormous spell.

The behemoth of ice pushed back the spirit time and time again, the blizzard freezing large parts of it but without causing permanent damage.

Let me see if I can do something about this, Ilea thought and displaced herself, blinking right after as her wings brought her toward the slowly moving tail that now circled around the whole city more than once.

She could survive this, could hold her own. And she would be as annoying as she could.

She created ash, spraying it in a broad cone toward the pale blue tail before Flame of Creation ignited it all. Ilea managed to set alight several hundred meters of the tail before the Daughter moved, disengaging from the Elemental to rush at her once again.

Not just a tickle, she thought with a wide grin. She didn't know how much her flames affected the large being, but they were capable of reducing regeneration and damaged magic itself. If enough of it was burning, she was sure she could annoy the fuck out of it.

The Ice Elemental didn't let the Daughter get far, keeping pace with the time-accelerated being.

It sent a push to Ilea's mind, a warning.

She didn't need to be told twice, blinking upward to get out of the Daughter's line of sight.

Ilea felt the air stand still, her heartbeat audible to her as she continued to push upward, the monster below her following as its eyes charged another spell.

But the Elemental was faster, a wave of power pulsing out as a beam of glacial energy flowed forward in an entirely silent but instant spell. Everything was frozen as everything in a thousand-meter-long line turned into ice.

Ilea sighed with relief, regenerating some mana as she watched a mountain of ice form above the entirely frozen Daughter of Sephilon, hovering like a guillotine above the creature's feline form. The ice's volume then increased exponentially, forming an upside-down pyramid reflecting the pale light of the eclipse.

It's not dead yet.

The Elemental let go of its massive creation, pushing it downward and onto their enemy. Ice broke and shattered as a loud crash echoed through the city for the better part of a minute, the pyramid breaking apart from its own weight and momentum.

Even as everything below was flattened, the Elemental returned to the top of the monolith, its gaze once more focused upward.

Why not fini—

Ilea's thoughts were interrupted when she gazed at a *second* creature floating down from above.

Why did I think it would be just one?

A squid-like being approached from the direction of the eclipse, its astral tentacles stretching out for hundreds of meters, a thousand eyes on its central body as it gazed at everything. It lacked a mouth or other discernible features.

Hundreds of flashes of astral energy lit up around it like stars, bird-like forms of magical energy that quickly accelerated, most of them focused on the Elemental and the monolith. They seemed to have their own mind, flying in circles and wide arcs with flapping wings of pure energy.

Ilea didn't focus on them, blinking toward the prone form of the first spirit, lying amidst the broken pyramid of ice, her ash spreading out as she set it aflame once more.

The creature twitched and moved, its body shattering in parts before it reformed. It tried crawling when Ilea appeared right in front of its head. The eyes alone were as large as her entire body.

She sacrificed another few thousand health and released Heart of Cinder in a concentrated beam into one of the ocular organs.

The Daughter didn't react as the spell lit up, flashing into its eye with heat and fire. The organ bubbled and burst, its entire head burning with the pale white flame as Ilea kept summoning more ash.

She jumped back when she felt the energy condense again, beams forming. She watched as its eye slowly reformed, the flames still burning. Ash formed in front of her as the two beams were released.

They didn't connect.

A sudden all-encompassing power pushed down from above, her wings unable to work against it.

She tumbled down and watched as the Daughter was hit, its projectiles slamming into the frozen debris with bright explosions. The monster's body bent and crashed into the frozen ground, bones breaking as it kept its eyes on her.

Ilea too hit the ground, her back crashing into frozen stone as all the air was pushed out of her lungs.

Gravity.

She screamed as her body was pushed into the stone, cracks forming below her as she was pushed farther down.

But the magic was familiar. She had faced it before in the Descent. The spirit wasn't done.

Fireworks, she thought, seeing the lights in her peripheral vision, unable to form a smile under the increased gravity.

Hundreds of bright birds reached the city, the Ice Elemental lighting up with astral energy as its defenses were hit by several hundred projectiles all at once. Shields and defenses flared on the monolith, parts of it broken with deafening explosions of energy.

Ilea felt the heat around her, saw the birds coming for her. She activated Phaseshift, blinking out but unable to escape the aerial bombardment entirely. Second upon second passed as the thundering explosions turned the city's remains into glassed rubble.

Ilea's third-tier healing kept her alive through it all, Sentinel Core returning a large chunk of the astral energies in the form of mana. Her form returned to normal a second later, the gravity not as overwhelming as before.

The air was burning, and the ground reflected the light of the eclipse. The monolith was damaged but standing, and the Elemental was alive. They were yet to lose.

Ilea breathed out and focused again on the injured Daughter of Sephilon. The creature stood up and staggered, half of its six limbs nearly gone.

She had to keep it distracted while the Elemental kept the floating eldritch being busy. One glance had been enough to know that she couldn't even annoy the massive creature.

She displaced herself in front of the Daughter's head, straight up punching it with Destruction. Her ashen limbs added both fire and cinders to the mix, slowly building up within the being.

Her mana was draining quickly, but the bombardment had nearly topped her off again, so ridiculous was its power.

Ilea blinked back to avoid a swipe from the creature, tucking her legs in to pass between two of its claws. Three beams formed and shot out, all focused on her.

Now would be a good time for some increased gravity again.

It didn't come, Ilea instead flying over the frozen and glassed ruins. Her wings and teleportation were being pushed to their limits. She formed condensed ashen spheres and sent them behind herself, the ash expanding into shields that tried to slow the homing beams.

She glimpsed at the Daughter and saw it form another three spells.

Shit.

Ilea rushed it again, the spells on her trail as the next wave was released in front of her. She let them get close enough to damage her armor and displaced herself, having slowed down enough to allow the six streaking beams to hit each other.

She was thrown to the side by the ensuing explosion, four of the spells detonating as they hit each other. Two were still coming for her.

Two I can handle.

Phaseshift was on cooldown, but she just focused on her ash and healing, boosting her resilience with sacrificed health.

The Daughter's legs had healed, the creature now running toward her in midair. Ilea held her arms up, taking the first beam head-on as she kept moving backward, feeding her ash and Flame of Creation into the astral power.

Her armor and wings disintegrated before she fell, but she kept herself angled toward the beam even as her skin melted. The rest of the spell burned past and into the ground close to her, Ilea's skin reforming with her ash on top. She displaced herself to get a little more time.

The second beam reached her before either of her teleports became available again, sped up by the time magic provided by the monster's tail. Ilea was hit by the full force of the spell, her ash and fire doing little to impede the energy.

She was pushed backward, rag-dolled through frozen debris as her body disintegrated. Her healing pushed against it, slowly losing out. But before she burnt up into nothing, the astral energies subsided.

She persevered.

Ilea reformed quickly and grinned, blinking away when she perceived the massive claws striking at her prone position.

Yes. I'm still here.

The Daughter kept up with her, swiping its claws with increasing speed.

Was that a feint?

Ilea kept flying through the monster's claws, avoiding its somewhat rudimentary attack patterns.

Never met something you couldn't just squash with overwhelming force?

Ilea activated Phaseshift when she felt the gravity increase again. She didn't have time to look up, instead avoiding a few more strikes from the enemy in front of her.

Both she and the Daughter were pushed down a moment later, Ilea blinking up once before she was taken by the magical force again.

Her spell activated before she hit the ground, her remaining momentum taking her the rest of the way there. All the while, the Daughter was crushed, slowly embedded into the frozen ruins.

Ilea looked up to see a thousand birds once more. The Elemental also seemed to be missing a few parts of its body, slowly regenerating as a blinding beam of frost shot up at the floating spirit.

The second Daughter reacted by forming a shield of astral energies, the birds flying down once more.

Ilea prepared her teleportation as she watched the spectacle.

More birds had focused on the monolith this time, exploding in bright flashes as they punched through the enchantments set up by the Meadow,

digging into the stone and wood below. Large chunks of stone fell from the monolith, whole sections now unprotected.

At the same time, the massive astral shield shattered, half of the Daughter freezing solid from the remains of the Elemental's spell.

The Ice Elemental turned, leaving its momentarily frozen opponent behind as it ignored the birds exploding on its massive body.

Ilea took the hits as the bombardment reached ground level, watching with a smile as the Daughter close to her was ripped apart.

She looked up, feeling a massive spell form. The Elemental was charging energy in front of its crystal snout.

Ilea saw the floating Daughter do the same, an enormous force of astral energy gathering to be sent down at the Elemental like righteous fury.

No you won't.

She displaced herself up as far as she could. Her third-tier Displacement was ready.

She blinked right as the Elemental released a large-scale spell toward the prone feline spirit, while she focused on the one floating above.

This was no arcane lightning. If it hit her directly, Ilea knew she was done for.

Displacement activated in the form of a massive spatial field floating above the Elemental. The second end came to life where she had stood before, aimed at nobody other than the downed Daughter of Sephilon.

Come on.

Ilea felt her back freeze due to her proximity to the Elemental. She watched as the Daughter released its spell, a surge of astral energy booming through the sky as if a god had chosen to strike down a mortal creature.

Her space magic didn't mind the nature or power of the enemy spell, simply letting it pass through.

The cone was so large that some of the energy moved past close enough to burn away her wings and ash as she hid under the distorted field of space magic, protecting herself and the Elemental with gritted teeth.

Ilea didn't see the result behind her, keeping her gate up until she felt the monstrous spell dissipate. A split second later, a shock wave hit her from behind, pushing her through the air and toward the massive ten-armed eldritch entity.

[Daughter of Sephilon – lvl ????]

She had already known it, but this creature was significantly more powerful than the first one.

As she floated up, she heard a ding within her mind.

‘ding’ Your group has defeated [Larinis – Daughter of Sephilon – lvl 1740]

She held her breath, feeling the crushing power of overwhelming magic above her.

More messages appeared in her mind, but she ignored them. She was floating upward, her wings pushing against the forces with futility.

Hundreds of beautiful astral birds flickered to life as the Daughter shook off the ice that still covered a large part of its body. Hundreds of eyes swiveled to focus on their prey.

Ilea kept her teleportation ready, watching the projectiles move in. Then she blinked, letting dozens of the birds hit each other. She followed up with Displacement, increasing the distance between her and the spirit once more.

The birds kept coming, and they moved at a pace she couldn’t outrun, fly, or teleport. Her second spell displaced as many of the things as she could move, but they simply homed in on her again wherever she had placed them.

Ilea formed ash in front of her, setting it alight to slow the energies. But before a dozen spells could hit her, she felt an all-encompassing cold.

Massive teeth of ice caught her, pulling her away, and the Elemental was hit by the spells in her place, shields of ice forming from thin air as it jumped down toward the ground.

Ilea felt her body go numb, the monstrous power overwhelming her resistance. Heart of Cinder was still charging, now fighting hard to keep her core from freezing over. She kept healing herself, focused despite the creeping cold.

The Elemental’s massive jaws opened up to let her out and she fell, landing with the sound of glass hitting stone. She couldn’t move, most of her entirely frozen.

The Elemental nudged her carefully.

Take care of yourself, you big dummy, Ilea thought and displaced herself, activating Heart of Cinder to break the layer of ice on her body.

She sacrificed health to her auras and flexed, breaking most of the remaining ice.

Her left arm cracked and broke off.

She reformed it quickly and shivered, cracking her neck carefully as she looked up at the flickering lights in the distance.

Shit.

The spirit was now focused on the monolith. Waves of air and energy spilled out from its blows, the stone structure reduced to rubble as the astral energy dug down toward the Meadow.

As the Ice Elemental turned, the dents and cracks on its massive body were obvious. Ilea went in close, extending an ashen tendril to the creature. It glanced at her when her healing flowed into it, its crystal eyes not revealing any of its thoughts.

“Let’s go protect our friend,” Ilea said and charged Monster Hunter.

She looked up, released Monster Hunter, and howled, imitating a wolf, both to appeal to the Elemental and to taunt the powerful spirit floating kilometers above.

The Elemental glanced at her for a moment. Then it raised its head and howled too, the sound flowing out like a wave, vibrating through her with overwhelming force.

I’ll regret it forever if I don’t at least try.

Ilea blinked on top of the monstrous creature’s head and landed. “Let’s go.”

She held on with ash, continuously healing the Elemental as it charged toward the remaining stone and wood protecting Endless Meadow. She displaced herself toward the rubble when they got close, shattering her frozen legs and lower torso with her own ash before it all reformed.

Worth it, she smiled.

In the distance, she saw another form clad in fire enter the atmosphere, impacting a mountain range with a deafening crash.

The corpse of the feline Daughter they had killed was slowly reforming, and the spirit above was already summoning another set of birds, gravity magic charging up.

“Meadow? I don’t think we can hold out for much longer.”

“Impeccable... timing...” the Meadow replied a few seconds later, another bombardment stopped by ice and ash. Mostly ice.

The Meadow had sounded focused – and exhausted.

Ilea watched a third Daughter approach, a ball of snake-like protrusions floating slowly toward them.

Her attention turned to her surroundings. The space around them had condensed in a way she had never perceived before.

A moment later, it all vanished.

‘ding’ Space Awareness reaches 3rd lvl 3

Ilea’s perception slowed down, her head turning toward the location of the gate, where white lightning appeared from out of nowhere. The arcs hit stone, disintegrating the material instantaneously.

A ball of black energy surrounded by a layer of white cracking lightning started to manifest, lashing out farther with each passing millisecond.

“Thank you for the help, my friend.” Though Meadow’s voice reached Ilea’s mind, it wasn’t speaking to her. It sounded relieved. The massive form of the Ice Elemental vanished, reappearing kilometers away. *“May your hunts continue forevermore.”*

The Elemental looked up and howled in the distance.

“Ilea, seeing as you survived, do you still want to go through with your plan? I could use an assist.”

“I didn’t come this far to leave you behind now, Meadow.”

A ripple flowed through space. *“Then stay where you are. And enjoy the show.”*

Pure arcane barriers flashed to life in a large dome around Ilea and where the Meadow was still hidden, thickening with each moment that passed. Ilea added her ash, activating Phaseshift as she watched the expanding lightning. One arc thrummed into the shields, shattering two layers in an instant.

“Your gates need a safer way to be closed,” Ilea said.

“There was no time, and your mages on the other side sucked.”

Phaseshift manifested, and Ilea started to push health into her auras immediately. Her perception was still slowed down, letting her observe the expanding storm of white lightning.

“There is no need for that spell,” the Meadow said. *“I am no longer distracted.”*

“You’re not the only god around here anymore, Space Tree,” Ilea said.

The Meadow sent an amused thought her way.

The arcs of lightning now burned into the approaching spirits, their need for mana overwhelming their other instincts as they kept approaching. Smaller versions came too, now unimpeded due to the absence of the Elemental.

As the Meadow added more and more shields, Ilea added more health to her auras.

The spirits were close now, their entire focus on the growing sphere of energy.

“Will they eat it up?” Ilea asked, seeing the Daughter they had killed stand up once more, its three eyes also focused on the sphere.

Lightning burned through the creatures, their bodies shredded and reforming faster than ever before.

“The remains are far too unstable. Cover your ears, little human.”

Ilea didn't care, watching as space distorted once more and a flash of white exploded out, blinding her despite her resistances.

Her eyes adjusted almost instantly, revealing stunned and burnt spirits. She knew that hadn't been it, and she focused on the sphere before it cracked and shattered.

Ten continent-sized storms, condensed into one small city, flashed out in an instant. A sphere of lightning, pure energy, wind, and space itself. Arcs of light and shock waves washed out, shredding everything they touched.

Her hearing went as a dozen barriers cracked and broke near-instantly.

Ilea spread her arms and watched the enormous power expand, leaving the spirits dead, unconscious, or heavily injured. Bits and pieces of pale blue skin and blood the size of houses floated around, gravity and space distorted in the whole vicinity.

The small variants had been removed from existence entirely, disintegrated to pieces so small that she could not perceive them.

Two-thirds of Meadow's barriers had shattered, while the rest were cracked and damaged.

“See, absolutely no problem.”

“That was close, wasn't it?” Ilea said.

“Oh. You have no idea. Now come, we don't have much time.”

EIGHTY-FIVE

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A Realm of Wonder

“Can you open a path?” Ilea asked, staring at the remains of the massive monolith in front of her.

She watched the ground shift, her wings keeping her afloat as a tunnel formed.

Ilea blinked down and reached the Meadow. *Not particularly deep anymore. They were close.*

“Remember, my power will be vastly reduced in this form,” the Meadow said, quite literally folding in on itself. The grass rolled up, and the tree cracked and shattered. The water from the creek evaporated as the mana density first increased and then lowered.

“Perfect. Then I can get my four-mark kill early,” Ilea said, displacing herself toward the basketball-sized chunk of stone. It looked simple enough, perhaps a last-ditch ‘playing dead’ kind of spell.

“You’ll find this rock difficult to crack.”

“Damn, you’re heavy,” Ilea said when she grabbed the creature.

“Of course I am,” the Meadow said, sounding proud of all things.

Ilea displaced herself and the being out into the open, finding the task manageable now that it was weakened and small. She assumed it wasn’t resisting anymore either, maybe even helping the spell work. It was the foundation of her plan, after all.

And still, just feeling the complex framework of the Meadow, even in this form, she felt somewhat anxious.

Fuck. I hope it works.

The space outside was distorted. A massive crater had formed where the portal had been previously. Debris, ice, and pieces of flesh floated around in the space magic-related aftermath that spanned farther than the destroyed city walls.

Ilea couldn't help but stare at the massive Daughter of Sephilon floating a few hundred meters above, its body shredded, barely a husk now. Its many eyes looked lifeless, but she saw the surrounding mana float upward.

"Where are the Michaels?" she asked.

Two notebooks appeared in front of her.

"They managed to bury them far enough away before they perished," the Meadow said. *"Oh... one of them has survived. I'll lead you there."*

Ilea raised an eyebrow.

She sped up, her wings carrying the two of them out of the ruins. Any spirits that arrived now were focused entirely on the corpses and whatever mana remained from the closing of the gate.

A howl echoed in the distance.

Ilea looked toward the distant creature, its antlers of ice visible even from kilometers away.

"Thank you, friend." She waved with a bright smile, seeing a blizzard form around the Elemental as it turned away.

What a fucking beast.

Sucks that it didn't even want to try and join. But I guess this is its home. And someone has to remain to fend off the spirits.

Not like I could use Displacement on something that large, anyway. If I ever get the ability to return, I'll come and find you, Icy. Still haven't managed to pet you, after all.

The remaining Michael was limping through the frozen desert, clutching his book with his one remaining arm.

He went all this way?

Ilea landed nearby.

The man didn't react.

"Michael," Ilea called out.

He shuffled to a stop, turning toward her before he collapsed.

His skin had been burnt, and several deep wounds adorned his whole body, which was barely held together by his blood magic. One of his eyes was gone, and the other was bloodshot.

Ilea extended her ash and started healing.

“There is... no point,” he said in a strained voice. The man coughed a few times, blood and gold splattering onto the ice.

“I am... a construct. My resources... are... spent.”

Ilea noticed it too. The wounds did close, but the man was dying either way. There was nothing she could do.

His one eye widened. “The... book...”

He tried to look down but failed to find the notebook he still clutched in his arm.

“I have it,” Ilea said, kneeling down next to him and placing the Meadow on the ground. She checked for spirits but found none were pursuing them.

She grabbed the notes, gently easing his grip on them.

“Is that... the Meadow?” Michael asked, looking over at the spherical stone.

He narrowed his remaining eye and then raised his eyebrows. Then he started cackling, coughing again before he calmed down a little.

“You... you found a way... Oh... this is wonderful. If you... succeed... don’t... waste this opportunity... Humanity... requires its power...”

He died in that moment, his body dissolving into blood and gold.

Ilea stood up silently, grabbing the Meadow and charging Heart of Cinder.

“Will the spirits follow us?” she asked.

“Your mana output is too small. I may attract mundane spirits, but... the Daughters should not be interested. Not while the eclipse has yet to reach its height. We have a few hours at least.”

Ilea aimed a spell at Michael’s remains, her fire engulfing everything, Flare of Creation adding to it until little remained.

He had only been a construct, but it hadn’t felt that way to her. Whatever the true nature of the spell, the copies seemed to retain memories, and they seemed ever so slightly different from each other.

Ilea spread her wings and flew off, the two of them soon reaching another mountain range. She looked for a cave, checking for spirits briefly before she settled down on a peak outside a large crack in the rock, setting the Meadow down next to her and summoning a meal.

“You’re quiet. You know you don’t have to go through with this,” Ilea said.

“What he said... about opportunities...”

Ilea laughed.

"I'm serious."

She stopped herself and touched the chunk of rock next to her. The chunk of rock that happened to be one of the most, if not *the* most, powerful beings she had ever met.

"Whatever you do on the other side, whatever secrets or technology you may help us reveal, whatever battles you take part in, it will be your choice. You're a powerful friend to have, but I didn't offer to try this because you're powerful. I offered it because I didn't want to leave you behind."

They remained silent for a while, Ilea gazing out into the wasteland beyond.

She wasn't even sure if it would work. She could attach something to her third-tier Blink, but teleporting to another realm was a more complex endeavor. She understood that by now, yet, her understanding of frameworks, and of her own magic, had grown. She had one try, and she would give it all she had.

Claire had thought the idea was ludicrous, but she also thought the potential was enormous. Her friend was a little too focused on business opportunities sometimes.

Catelyn had understood her intentions a little better, being an Awakened herself who had found the safe haven of Hallowfort. She was more concerned about the danger that a being like the Meadow would pose to her people.

Both of them had trusted her to make the call.

And she had made the call.

"So, what's your decision, friend?"

"It does hurt to leave this place behind. There may be others out there."

"There is someone right here. And the people you already saved are waiting for you on the other side. As are thousands more you could help protect, help awaken, in a world that isn't a frozen desert plagued by four-mark spirits."

"You are right. Though it does feel like defeat."

"You said the eclipse would last for a very long time."

"It will."

Ilea smiled. "A tactical retreat, then, to heal up, grab some food, live happily for a few hundred years, and then come back to reclaim your home. Maybe with some help if I can make it."

It sent an amused thought. *"You are as stubborn as you are resilient, Ilea. Very well, then. Let us find out if my teaching has born fruit."*

Ilea finished her meal and displaced them both into the cave.

She felt anxious. "If it doesn't work... it was fun. And I appreciate all the time you spent helping me. Also, I'll try to find a way to come back."

"Thank you, Ilea. You helped me protect the beings I cared for. And I suppose I will admit that it was a little fun as well."

"Ready?"

The Meadow confirmed it was.

"I didn't switch the location, as we discussed. You won't mind the low mana density?"

"I will survive. As long as we find a more suitable place within a few weeks."

She nodded, more to herself than to the Meadow.

I hope this works.

Ilea breathed in and focused. She didn't wait any longer and activated her third tier of Blink, feeling the power manifest, runes form, and space distort.

She could see the intricacies of the spell, understood most of the runes that she saw, could feel what they would do.

She saw the gaps where Displacement would slot in, where it would attach.

More and more power gathered, and as time went on, she started smiling.

This is nowhere near as hard as some of those puzzles you had me solve.

When it activated, she breathed in deep and connected the Meadow to her long-range teleportation ability.

Ilea appeared in her home an instant later, a ball of stone in her hands.

She breathed out.

"You're here!"

No reply came from the being.

She shook it lightly. "Hey, you alright in there? Talk to me."

"Yes... yes... I'm here," the Meadow exclaimed.

Ilea raised the being up. "It worked!" She couldn't hide her delight as she looked at the stone sphere.

"It did. I can feel it. Finally... I can take over your realm."

Ilea squinted her eyes at the being. “You’ve been sitting on that one for a while, huh?” Ilea asked with a smile, stepping out onto her balcony and closing the door behind her.

“There is... so much life... There are so many creatures!” the Meadow exclaimed.

Ilea felt deep-reaching emotions emanating from the being, invading her mind with joy and relief. She leaned back, still holding the sphere. “We did it.”

The ball shivered, but the Meadow didn’t say anything else for some time. *“Two suns... magnificent. Peculiar, the balance is sustained, but something is... missing.”*

“There were three suns a few thousand years ago. Or we think so, at least.”

“A sun taken from the skies... It seems I have much to learn.”

“Yeah, if you can find a few Ascended. I’m sure they’d be interested in meeting you.”

“I am unfamiliar with the Ascended. You do not sound fond of them.”

“I’ve only met one, and it nearly killed me. Though I wonder how I’d fare now. But let’s find a place for you to stay. The flight north will be long. How’s your body looking?” she asked, unable to see any issues via her healing.

“Any adverse effects shouldn’t come for another few days.”

Ilea flew up and charged her wings, aiming northward. “We’ll be in a more comfortable climate by then,” she said and shot off.

“Trees,” the Meadow said when they passed the southern mountains.

“Lots of those around these parts.”

“Can... can I see them?”

“Of course,” Ilea said and descended. “Should I make you touch one? Or can you expand here?”

“It would be... appreciated. And yes, but I can only do so every so often. It would be foolish to do so in a place I do not plan to stay.”

Ilea smiled, touching Meadow’s stone to the tree. Then she laughed. The situation just felt so absurd, and at the same time, she felt a tremendous sense of relief.

They had survived, had closed the gate, and she had brought the Meadow back with her.

And I was part of that insane battle. Those spirits.

I rode the Elemental!

She checked her messages from the last battle while the Meadow communed with its kind.

‘ding’ Your group has defeated [Larinis – Daughter of Sephilon – lvl 1740]

Highest level kill I’ve ever gotten. Temporary kill, that is.

‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 439 – Five stat points awarded

‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 440 – Five stat points awarded – One Core Skill point awarded

...

‘ding’ The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 447 – Five stat points awarded

‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 436 – Five stat points awarded

...

‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 440 – Five stat points awarded – One Core Skill point awarded

...

‘ding’ Kin of Ash has reached lvl 443 – Five stat points awarded

‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 356 – One stat point awarded

...

‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 360 – One stat point awarded

...

‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 370 – One stat point awarded

...

‘ding’ The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 375 – One stat point awarded

*And there was the Meadow initially thinking I shouldn’t stay.
She shook her head with a smile.*

‘ding’ Azarinth Reversal reaches 3rd lvl 29

‘ding’ Storm of Cinders reaches 3rd lvl 29
‘ding’ Eyes of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 29

‘ding’ Phaseshift reaches 3rd lvl 3

...

‘ding’ Phaseshift reaches 3rd lvl 8

‘ding’ Flare of Creation reaches 3rd lvl 10

...

‘ding’ Flare of Creation reaches 3rd lvl 14

‘ding’ Displacement reaches 3rd lvl 10

‘ding’ Displacement reaches 3rd lvl 11

‘ding’ Space Shift reaches 3rd lvl 6

‘ding’ Space Shift reaches 3rd lvl 7

‘ding’ Body of the Valkyrie reaches 3rd lvl 7

...

‘ding’ Body of the Valkyrie reaches 3rd lvl 10

“You can remove me from the tree,” the Meadow said.

Ilea did just that, flying up again as she checked the rest of her messages.

‘ding’ Deviant of Humanity reaches 2nd lvl 7

...

‘ding’ Deviant of Humanity reaches 2nd lvl 12

‘ding’ Meditation reaches 3rd lvl 11

‘ding’ Monster Hunter reaches 3rd lvl 8

‘ding’ Veteran reaches 3rd lvl 13

‘ding’ Mana Drain Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 5

...

‘ding’ Mana Drain Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 7

‘ding’ You have ridden an Ice Elemental into battle – One Core Skill point awarded

‘ding’ You have successfully distracted a Daughter of Sephilon – One Core Skill point awarded

***‘ding’ You have saved an incomprehensible being from its dying realm –
One Core Skill point awarded***

Damn right.

“Is that... a lake?”

“You want to look at everything?”

“YES,” the being said.

Ilea laughed and descended. “Alright. Let’s travel on foot, then. There’s no rush.”

“I appreciate it... Now, please throw me into that lake.”

“I’m not going to throw you around willy-nilly,” Ilea said. “Can you imagine? Taking you here from Erendar and then losing you in a damn pond?”

“With your abilities, it’s highly improb— Ah, a joke. I’m distracted.”

Ilea threw the Meadow into the lake.

It landed like a rock would.

“Those are... the fish you mentioned?”

“Mhm, there are many kinds. Also great to eat.”

“You would... eat such a magnificent being? A travesty,” the Meadow said, mentally shaking its nonexistent head.

“Have you tried? Hmm, wait... better not teach the four-mark space mage the joys of eating flesh.”

“I lack the necessary organs. Can you move me out of the water? I can see something very interesting.”

“Is it dirt?” Ilea asked, displacing the ball into her hand. *“Oh... yeah, I get it.”*

She looked at the small meadow that abutted the lake. “Do you want some alone time?” she asked with a wink.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Ilea,” the creature said, rolling a few thousand mental eyes.

Ilea laughed and sat down, placing the Meadow onto the meadow.

“So, what’s the plan again?” the creature asked after a while of subdued rolling around.

“We can quickly check out Gyffold to see if the portal closed fine on our side. Then we go north, see if Catelyn is willing to have a chat, see if you like the area. If not, we find another place for you to stay.”

Ilea took off at a jog before she changed into a sprint, soon speeding through the Empire's lands and northward. The Meadow occasionally asked to stop and inspect some random growths, plants, flowers, dirt, and creeks.

By the time the suns went down, the two hadn't gotten very far on their journey.

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EIGHTY-SIX

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Tour Guide

“So that is one of your towns?” the Meadow asked.

Ilea nodded. “I haven’t actually been here before. It’s not that large compared to some of the places I’ve visited.”

“It’s quite impressive. The buildings, that is... The walls are... not enchanted?”

“Probably not, no. Most creatures aren’t quite as high level as the spirits on Erendar. And most don’t approach the lights and noise of a town.”

A contemplative thought reached her mind.

“Do you want to go in? Look around?” Ilea asked.

“I would love to.”

Ilea ran closer and used Displacement, causing them to reappear on a dirt road. A single drunk man, without a shirt on, yelped.

“Greetings,” Ilea said.

He gulped. “Ah... greetinsh, my lady.”

“You didn’t lie... this man is level eighteen. How did he survive so long? He looks at least a decade old!”

“He’s at least thirty years old, actually. The walls are your answer. Walls and a lack of predators in the area, I suppose. He wouldn’t go out into the wild without protection or in a large group,” Ilea said. *“Many of the monsters around aren’t far above him in level, by the way. It’s not just us humans.”*

“I didn’t mean to insult you. I hope you understand. It’s just that... I haven’t ever seen something quite like this.”

Ilea chuckled. *“Don’t you worry. I’m quite aware of my species’ limitations. And our potential.”*

“Killing Astral Spirits... when you started like that? I think I should be impressed. Maybe I am impressed.”

“Don’t flatter me now. I’m happy to accept compliments once I’ve bested you in a bout.”

Ilea entered the local inn, putting Meadow into a pack she summoned from her necklace. There were plenty of patrons around, so her casual adventurer look didn’t stand out much.

Ilea tried identifying the Meadow but failed, the spell unable to pierce the fabric of her backpack. If at all possible, she wanted to keep her guest hidden for the time being.

Ilea ordered two mugs of ale before sitting in a corner of the room. The large space was lit by oil lamps fastened to the wooden beams and walls.

Most of the patrons looked like farmers or simple townsfolk, though two groups were more the adventurer type. A single man played lazily on a lute, not singing at the moment.

“There are so many people... This is nice.”

They didn’t stay for too long, but the Meadow remained quiet. She assumed it was taking in the atmosphere and listening to the many conversations.

“How many people are you listening to?”

“Everyone, of course. Most of them are asleep. Do you need that much of it?”

Everyone in the entire town. Right, forgot who I was talking to.

“Mhm. It lessens as you level and depending on skills and Classes, but yes. Humans do sleep a lot,” Ilea said, finishing her drinks before displacing both of them out of the town.

“Thank you,” the Meadow said.

Ilea just smiled, spreading her wings before she lazily flew off over the surrounding fields. It felt grounding to travel with the Meadow. The being appreciated everything so thoroughly. It was inspiring.

She really had appeared in an interesting world.

* * *

Gyffold remained where it stood, appearing undamaged from a quick aerial view.

“Seems like it worked,” Ilea said as she descended to the shoreline. “I’ll quickly go check inside. Can I leave you here for a minute?”

“Please, Mother! Don’t leave me alone in the wilderness! I will be eaten by wolves!” one of the most powerful creatures Ilea had ever met said.

“You have your mark. Call for help if critters start mangling you.”

“You heartless wench.”

“Says the tree with literally no heart.”

“How would you know?”

“You win this round,” Ilea said and vanished.

“I’ve won every round.”

She quickly entered the city, appearing in the gate room a moment later.

Only two guards remained, playing cards on a chunk of rubble. The gate was gone, and the surrounding space and mana had returned to their normal state.

No residue, nothing.

The guards scrambled up when they finally noticed her.

Ilea displaced the fallen cards back onto the chunk of stone. “Enjoy your game.”

She vanished again and rejoined the Meadow.

“What’s that?” Ilea asked, looking at the fox scrambling away at her appearance.

“I attempted to lead it to awakening,” the Meadow said.

“I take it you failed?”

“Of course I did. It usually takes decades or centuries. So, now that we are on the other side, how did it look?”

“Everything’s normal. Gate is closed and already half-forgotten, it seems.”

As Velamyr had intended.

Ilea spread her wings once more and took off into the third night that had fallen since they had returned, dawn already on the horizon. She sped up until they crossed the Naraza mountain range, the northern mists visible beyond.

“Ah, that is a more comfortable density of mana.”

“Yeah. It’s only going to increase from here.”

“It’s quite an extreme change.”

“You sound contemplative. What is it?”

“I suppose I don’t know enough about this realm yet. It just doesn’t seem like a natural occurrence to me.”

“You think so? Well, people have meddled plenty. I mean, one of the suns is missing.”

“That’s true. I will try to learn more.”

“How is your defense looking, by the way? I can see the first arcane storms forming already.”

“Unstable arcane energies won’t be a problem for me, even in this form. Do not worry.”

“Good. Then we can fly during the day too,” Ilea said and charged her wings. “There’s little on the way that you won’t be able to see from Tremor or Hallowfort either. On the surface, that is.”

“Then let us fly.”

Ilea smiled and shot off into the distance, vibrations and shock waves from the closest arcane storms brushing past her.

The Meadow pointed out a few things as they were flying, but it seemed even the four-mark had trouble perceiving everything at their high speed while in its subdued form.

Ilea slowed down, looking up before arcane lightning struck her directly. The energy flowed through her with a bright purple spark. It left one of her eyes injured and some of her organs slightly singed.

“Alright in there?” she asked the slightly smoking ball of stone.

“You did that on purpose.”

“I did,” Ilea said with a laugh, displacing them through the stone and into Tremor.

They landed in the ancient cathedral.

“Here we are.”

Ilea walked up to the altar of whatever gods the people of Rhyvor had prayed to. Then she decided to set the Meadow down on a random wooden chair. She sat next to it and sighed with joyous relief.

“What do you think of the mana density?” she asked. “Do you think you could stay here?”

“It’s much, much better than your house. Not just the interior design, from a mana standpoint too,” the Meadow said. *“My abilities allow me to be a little more flexible. Your house would have been challenging, but everything you’ve been calling the north is perfectly reasonable. I could*

stay here, yes. My presence would increase the density a hundredfold, however."

"So we probably shouldn't put you in the middle of a settlement. But at least Tremor is an option in case either you or the council doesn't want you to stay near Hallowfort."

"I'm happy to stay wherever there are other beings... and here, there are already thousands. Are you aware of the void magic species living within this cavern?"

"Soul Rippers, yes. They're from another realm too, apparently."

"They are very peculiar. Devoid of... a mind. Though I may be wrong."

"They still move around and attack if you get too close. You want to try and awaken them?"

"It seems highly improbable. Perhaps not impossible... but I tend to be optimistic. I would first focus on the eight other species in the vicinity that show far more promise. There is a particularly powerful mind mage species present."

Ilea cocked her head to the side and then smiled. "The little chicken? It's still around?"

"There are many more than one."

"Really? Guess I was lucky," she said and laughed, then stretched and spread her wings. "Can I leave you here for a little while? I'll go visit Catelyn and the council, see if they're still open to having a chat with you. If you're still up for that?"

"Of course. I'll try not to roll off this chair and fall into the abyss beyond this cathedral."

"I'm sure it's a manageable task for a four-mark earth and space mage."

"Perhaps I can finally reach the fifth tier with this challenge."

Ilea rolled her eyes and blinked up. She was glad the Meadow seemed to be enjoying itself. She charged her wings and made her way to Hallowfort.

The guards let her pass immediately, every single one apparently familiar with her.

Gotta say, it's quite flattering.

* * *

Ilea found herself waiting in the Hunter's Den moments later.

Catelyn had gone to inform the other council members that the time had come.

Elana was the first to arrive, the silver-eyed former Queen of Rhyvor taking Ilea in as she entered. Her hair looked less disorderly now, a little shorter. She wore a set of black armor. Light and mainly protecting her vitals, it had various spikes and adornments of silver. But no roses.

Haiden was close behind her, the feline barkeeper of the Abyss looking as graceful as ever.

"Hey," Ilea greeted the cat being.

"Ilea, you've... changed," he said with a smirk.

"You're in the way." An absolutely massive Awakened stepped inside, ducking under the already high door frame.

Haiden moved out of the way, his expression reserved.

The three-meter-tall being was clad entirely in black armor, the metal moving and adjusting in a way that suggested it wasn't plain old steel. His voice was deep, resonating in the room with a hum.

Didn't even touch the door frame... and his steps are almost entirely silent.

"Oh? Is this the one everyone talks about...? The ashen healer?" he asked, bending down to meet her eyes with his massive smooth helmet.

[Warrior – lvl 315]

Pretty high level. Why weren't you in the Descent? Can't imagine I'd miss something this bulky.

A powerful aura spread through the room, exuding from the warrior. It felt like a challenge.

Ilea saw both Haiden and Elana tense up slightly. She smiled and activated her own.

The warrior took a step back. "Oh..."

Ilea deactivated it again and smiled. "We can take it outside. If you want to."

"The stories... maybe they're not all made up," he said. "They call me Doravin. We will have to fight."

"Okay," Ilea said.

He stepped aside, filling a good quarter of the large hall as he sat on the ground.

A four-legged winged insect creature a little over a meter long appeared next, two large fly-like eyes taking in the room. A small trunk adorned its face instead of a mouth.

[Warrior – lvl 235]

“Varahan is this one’s name... It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance at last, ashen one,” she said and bowed slightly.

“Greetings,” Ilea said and waved at the creature.

“This one has heard you found a powerful creature interested in moving here?”

“All in due time,” Haiden said.

Varahan made a sucking noise but relented, finding a spot particularly far away from Doravin before she settled within an empty cupboard, her spindly legs hanging out.

Catelyn joined them with the last Dark One, another warrior. He seemed familiar, but Ilea couldn’t place him. He looked just like some of the guards around town.

The armored creature bowed. “Ashen savior. Welcome back to our humble town. My name is No.”

[Warrior – lvl 211]

“Nice to meet you, No,” Ilea said.

Catelyn closed the door with one of her tails. “Everyone’s here, except Goliath.”

“That old smith wouldn’t leave his home for the end of time itself,” Doravin said in a booming voice, laughing to himself.

Catelyn looked at him but didn’t comment. “We’re here because Ilea has brought a potential ally to a nearby dungeon. It’s important that we meet this being and determine if it would be acceptable to accommodate it here in Hallowfort.”

“Is it a Dark One?” Doravin asked.

“Yes,” Ilea said.

“Then my answer is yes.”

“What is the nature of this being? You mentioned it was powerful, but you wouldn’t have gathered the entire council for something mundane,” Haiden said.

“It’s better to meet it directly,” Ilea said. “I can introduce you... after a short flight.”

* * *

The group moved through the crevices near Hallowfort, all moving at a reasonably fast pace until they reached the area near Tremor.

Ilea brought them the rest of the way with Displacement when no storms were around, glad she could even move the bulky warrior with her spell.

“Here we are,” she said as they appeared in the decrepit cathedral.

“Where is the creature?” Doravin asked, looking around the large hall.

“Here,” Catelyn said, her voice composed but her ears pressed down onto her head.

Elana moved a little closer to the fox.

“*There is no need to be afraid,*” the Meadow said.

Haiden recoiled, holding his head, as did Varahan.

“Is it the presence?” Ilea asked, blinking to the two and healing them with her ash.

“*Their mental fortitude is not enough to comprehend my lacking telepathy. I greet you, Council of Hallowfort.*”

Catelyn looked at Ilea before she took a deep breath.

Doravin walked to the wooden chair near the altar and casually went to grab the Meadow. “Are you the one talking in my head?”

“*Indeed,*” the Meadow said, blocking the warrior’s hand with a distorted field of space.

Subdued, but still enough for this guy?

Ilea smiled.

“Greetings, Meadow,” Catelyn said.

“*I shall refrain from talking to those two. Shall I create writing?*” the Meadow asked, stone forming from thin air before an apology in Standard appeared.

By now, Haiden and Varahan had calmed down, their minds not too damaged. Elana's eyes were fixated on the ball of stone, not a word having left her mouth since they'd arrived.

"That would be appreciated, yes," Catelyn said. "There is much to discuss."

* * *

Ilea walked around the ruins between Hallowfort and the Descent, the Meadow in hand. The council was waiting nearby.

They had agreed to let the Meadow stay, though not in Hallowfort itself due to the high output of mana its presence would cause.

"We're nearly midway between the Descent and Hallowfort. Can your powers really reach that far?" Catelyn asked.

"Yes. I will be able to reach both the surface and deep into the Descent. I'll be able to warn you of creatures moving within your territory and protect Hallowfort accordingly," the Meadow said.

"Deep into the Descent?" Catelyn asked. She seemed doubtful.

Ilea smiled.

Just you wait, old friend.

"Meadow said it will make some changes to the architecture. I think this place should work well. The massive cavern with the big lake is just beyond that wall," Ilela said, motioning behind herself. "It will be a nice view." The same view that Hallowfort had, just from farther down the massive statue on which the settlement was built.

"You may begin, then," Catelyn said.

"Um... you probably want to get some distance before it settles in. Meadow's current form isn't exactly representative of its power."

Ilea waited as the council moved some distance away, and then she looked at the sphere of stone in her hands. "Do you like the place? I don't want to push it on you, I just thought—"

"It's perfect, Ilela. I can already feel the hundreds of differing minds above and below, and I can't wait to perceive them truly."

"All right then. I'll set you down and join the others. Start whenever you're ready."

She set the being down and spread her wings, flying a few hundred meters through the large cavern before she landed next to the council of Hallowfort.

“Is this really necessary? I have seen four-marks be—” Doravin started before a wave of magic flowed past.

Ilea smiled and extended her ash to heal the others.

Another shock wave came and went. The ground trembled, the air stilled, and wisps of space started to flow around the point the Meadow had chosen.

Ilea heard a loud groan as the ruins and cave all around shook and cracked, the high-reaching wall behind the Meadow opening with shifting rock to reveal crystal light from the cavern beyond.

She raised her hand when a golden firefly fluttered into existence before her. Hundreds more followed, and soon, the cavern basked in glittering light. A creek had appeared, surrounded by black grass, and amidst it all stood a tree of blue and silver crystal.

“This place is so vibrant with life. It is more than I ever dreamed of.”

A wave of magical power spread out, and it felt like existence itself shivered.

“I suppose this is the formal introduction. I am Endless Meadow, your newest citizen.”