

Neireen couldn't believe her luck. This woman had so many potential random sources directly or indirectly related to her research that she started to question everything. Who was she? Half the people she mentioned were supposedly already dead. She opened her eyes a little wider when Verena mentioned a Halas Bark. The same man quoted in one of the books she had found in a prominent library in Virilya. Dead on all accounts but Verena had known him. *He's been dead for like fifty years.*

The fact that people beyond level two hundred didn't exactly age much anymore wasn't a secret within the Medic Sentinel Corps, mostly treated as an anecdote. Something most of them would reach sooner or later. An incredible fact to Neireen. And just another thing the people here somehow took for granted. Or they were simply too used to it. She was guilty of similar matters. Nowhere else would she have dismissed a high level healer like she had that woman before, but there were so many here, and no one really cared.

She still wasn't sure if there was some kind of sinister plot at work here. A simple talk with Trian and an explanation of her goals had gotten her this room. Everywhere else she was ignored or yelled out, but here she got resources, despite her low level and little experience. Someone occasionally checked through her work but every teacher had expertise in their fields, providing her with feedback from their perspective.

The training was ridiculous of course but she would bathe in all the fire she had to if it provided her with these kinds of resources. The Class she got was powerful too. She would've never thought herself capable of fighting as well as she did, but it would come in handy, even just for finding rare ingredients in the wild.

"I'm pretty sure he just fiddled with this stuff for a few weeks or so. I remember him switching research and magical interests on the weekly. He died trying to seduce a Werewolf with the sound of a blood magic infused lute of all things," Verena said.

"That... doesn't seem like sound research," Neireen replied. "I did not intend that pun, apologies."

Verena breathed in deeply before she shrugged. "You would be wrong either way. I heard about his disappearance and investigated. The state I found him in... the signs of battle. Well... let's leave it at that. I had his notes on the subject filed away in the darkest corner of Keywire's library."

"I... uh... see," Neireen answered, fumbling with her notes before she got to some of her current problems.

"Other forms of healing?" Verena asked as she looked at the open page of the notebook.

"Yes. It would be helpful to see but they're exceptionally rare. Blood healing might exist but other than a few unreliable sources claiming beasts in the wild had healed them, there's not much to go on. Light magic can sometimes have healing properties but the potency is not particularly impressive and very few mages ever come across the option. Based on examples of other magic or even versatile warrior Classes, I believe that healing could be incorporated into most schools of magic. Poison is one of the go to examples but," she said and trailed off.

"Why work out a way to heal with poison when you can just get a healing Class," Verena finished.

“Exactly, and it’s frustrating to talk about. Sentinels at least take me seriously,” she said. *But most don’t really care anyway. The Classes are good, we can both fight and heal. Why experiment with something so abstract.* “But they don’t really get it either... even with Lilith supposedly able to use a special kind of healing.”

“Arcane I believe,” Verena said.

“You know about it? I guess with all the songs and stories... and you being friends with a high level Sentinel. It cures the mind somehow... makes pain resistance training much easier,” she said.

“Wish I had that,” Verena said with a sigh.

“Most of those above level one fifty have it in the second tier already. The rest was forbidden to train it specifically, and to wait for Lilith,” Neireen added. *What did she mean by that?*

“If you want to see some arcane healing, I can ask her to show you,” Verena said.

Neireen lit up. “You know Lilith?”

“I, do,” Verena said and looked towards the door for a moment.

The same Sentinel who had been with Verena appeared a second later. Ash flowed over her face to clear off blood. Not an uncommon sight during or after their regular training sessions.

“You needed me to punch something?” the woman asked.

Neireen looked at her for a long moment. *Could it be? Her? But she’s so ordinary.*

“She wants to see your arcane healing,” Verena said.

“In action?” the woman asked, glancing between them.

All Neireen could do was nod lightly. Her words were stuck in her throat. *They are just messing with you.* She thought and watched the woman dismember herself with two ashen limbs coming out of her back. Blood and flesh were enveloped by erupting white flames before they were turned to nothing. She watched as the woman’s arms regrew in seconds, as if flame summoned by a fire mage.

“Hmm... a bit fast probably,” the woman said. Lilith said.

“She just realized who you are,” Verena said with a slight smile. “One of the perks of being known. I do still prefer my obscurity.”

“How do you manage that anyway? You’re active in the Plains, aren’t you?” Lilith asked.

Verena shrugged. “I’ve been around for a while. People are less interested when you’re known and don’t get involved in their business as much as you do.”

Neireen felt a soothing energy flow into her mind, her eyes opening wide as she felt the same thing so many of her peers had described before. *Arcane healing! In my head!* She squealed a little.

Lilith laid her arm onto one of the work benches before she hacked it away. “Verena, some constant flame to keep the healing process visible?”

“This room would melt with the power I’d need to even try,” Verena answered.

“I’ll disable my resistance,” Lilith said.

“Too dangerous. She’s below level one hundred,” the woman said.

“She’ll be fine. I’ve done worse to the students... just a few minutes ago actually. It’s the power of arcane healing. Gets rid of all that trauma right away,” she said.

Neireen looked on when both of the women turned their attention to her. She had never felt this small in her life. “V... Verena... who... who are you?”

“It’s of no concern,” the woman said.

“She’s an Elder of the Shadow’s Hand,” Lilith said.

*What.*

“Why would you just share that? Do you know how hard I work to keep this from being general knowledge? I don’t want creepy bards writing songs about me,” Verena hissed, a growl going through the room at the end of it.

Neireen felt herself freeze up, her body trembling slightly. She might’ve peed a little.

“Who’s freaking out the student now?” Lilith asked. “Come on, she won’t tell anyone, right?”

Four eyes on her. Neireen wanted to pass out but that was literally impossible with the healing magic flowing into her mind and body. She felt healthier than she had ever been.

“Guess I’ll just keep hacking away,” Lilith said as ashen limbs flowed from her back.

Neireen gulped and tried to focus.

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Ilea finished burning up the last arms, Neireen still murmuring to herself, writing down more notes.

The woman continued with scratching her head before she went over to another workbench and started gathering ingredients.

“Guess that was helpful,” Ilea said.

Verena grunted in an affirming way.

“Good luck with your research,” she said and left the room. Ilea cracked her neck and stretched.

“That training kind of made me want to fight something.”

“Hmm,” Verena mused.

*The Meadow is really spoiling me. To be able to go all out like that, whenever I want to. Just lacks the catharsis of winning,* she thought. “We could check those Taleen facilities Iana told me about. Care to join?”

“I wouldn’t mind,” Verena replied.

“Alright. Let’s go back north then,” Ilea said and moved them up and back into the city. They continued on towards the gate and out into the valley. The teleportation gate activated half a minute later, bringing them to the correspondent counterpart in the north.

Ilea found Aki training with Owl, the two circling each other in fast moving patterns. He managed to keep up with his higher accuracy more than anything, their spells sending explosive waves through the vicinity, a near transparent barrier set up by the Meadow shimmering around them.

She quickly went into the Soul Forge and checked the cozy room in one of the highest floors.

*“Meadow, can you help me with some bookshelves?”*

*“Wood or stone?”* it asked.

*“Wood fits more with the room,”* Ilea replied and piled up the books stored in her domain. She checked the adjacent rooms and found a suitable one a few floors up. *“This one claimed already?”* she asked, appearing inside. One of the walls was at a steep angle, the room rather small and used as a storage unit located at the edge of the cube. It was large enough to fit her bed however, and maybe another fireplace. Everything else she had in her domain or could simply teleport up with fabric tear.

*“It is marked now as the room of Lilith. All letters and complaints will be redirected to this address,”* the Meadow spoke. *“May I look through your collection of books as well? I’m always looking for new material.”*

*“Sure,”* Ilea replied, teleporting everything in the room into another storage unit. *“Probably nothing too impressive in there.”*

*“I will form my own judgment,”* the Meadow spoke. *“The shelves are finished, and I sorted the books by genre and author.”*

*“Thanks. We’ll turn this research cube into a comfortable northern headquarters in no time,”* Ilea mused. *“Gonna have someone buy furniture too. But I suppose we can’t go too overboard. Not with Iana and Train in charge. They’ll want there to be offices and research stuff as well.”*

She left the room as it was and left again. *“Can you add a hearth at some point, and just generally make it cozy,”* Ilea said. *“If you’re going to help with the setup anyway.”*

*“I’m not sure my idea of cozy fits the same as that of a human,”* the Meadow replied.

*“Not perfectly human anymore, am I?”* Ilea asked as she flew over to Aki.

*“You’ll have your hearth. And some comforting spatial distortions. I have a liking for fireflies and creeks, perhaps you will enjoy that too,”* the Meadow said and trailed off.

*Wonder what the fuck I’ll come back to,* Ilea mused and waved to the machine. *“Aki, can we talk for a second?”*

The two high level beings stopped their training, the machine walking over through the air before it landed with a graceful almost organic motion.

*“You’re getting good at this, terrifyingly so,”* she sent.

*“Indeed. This body is quite... adaptive. I feel like I could shred through the entire Sentinel Corps controlling this,”* the being replied, the two cannons flowing into sword like extensions before the tips changed into long fingered hands. Aki made a show out of the sharp tips, his hands turning around themselves as he looked at her with glowing eyes.

Ilea smiled and nodded. *“That’s good. They could use the training.”*

*“You understand. And I agree. They’re getting cocky,”* the machine replied. *“What is it you wanted to talk about? I don’t want to waste your precious time with humorous conversation.”*

Ilea rolled her eyes as she smiled. *“Did you get a sarcasm upgrade with the new machine too? Besides, humorous conversation is never a waste of time.”*

*“That attitude is reflected splendidly within your productivity. But with your continued growth, maybe we should all spend some more on this. Perhaps it’s conversations like these that really provide levels and powerful evolutions,”* Aki said.

*“I did make some powerful friends with it. You included,”* Ilea said. *“Iana found some hints in the Soul Forge that suggest your tech is somehow connected to this place. At least in part. And we got locations where the Taleen might’ve worked to... well, create you? Birth you? Forge you?”* she explained.

Aki’s eyes glowed a little brighter. *“I haven’t given that much thought in the last few months. You wished for me to know this?”*

*“I mean you don’t have to. You’re perfectly fine as you are. Just thought I’d mention it and offer for us to go there together, see what they did. Maybe we could find your birthplace, so to speak,”* she said.

*“I’m sure you have more important matters to attend to than delving into my history. Maybe I could go there at some point in the future, with a team of Sentinels,”* Aki suggested.

*“I have a few days,”* Ilea said with a shrug. *“And I’d be intrigued as well. So if you’re interested, we can leave right now.”*

The machine considered for a while. *“If there is truly nothing else you’d want to spend your time on. And I should return to the headquarters again shortly. It cannot remain without my protection.”*

*“Taking your job seriously,”* Ilea mused.

Aki remained quiet for a few seconds. *“I. I enjoy... the feeling of purpose.”*

Ilea raised a brow. *“First time I’ve heard you speak in that tone. I’m glad you can find purpose in working with the Sentinels. They’re sure as hell glad to have you around, both as a terrifying protector and unforgiving instructor. Wish I could say the same, but you’re not exactly on my level anymore,”* she said and winked.

Aki didn’t reply and simply stared at her.

*“No witty remark? You’re starting to freak me out. Did some Pursuer remain in you? Telling you to kill me?”* Ilea asked.

*“This model is powerful, but I’ve seen you fight, Ilea. Your claims are as bold as always but compared to your early days in the Shadow’s Hand, now they hold true,”* the being said in a somewhat serious tone.

*“I’m not so sure about that. There’s always another Drake,”* she mused with a smile, a glance towards the Meadow’s crystal tree in the distance.

*“Soon it will be Dragons you slay instead of Drakes,”* Aki said when Verena joined them.

*“Dungeon exploration?”* she asked, looking between them.

“Yep,” Ilea answered. “Gonna need to use a gate somewhere. Preferably in the north so that Aki doesn’t scare people.”

“How could I ever be perceived as a threat?” the murder machine asked, fingers extending into knife like ends before they grated against each other. Green eyes flashed as he tilted his head slightly to the right.

“Sure. Maybe speak in an Austrian accent to help with hiding the obvious,” Ilea said and opened the map on her teleportation key. “Probably should still avoid the one dungeon known to the Elven Monarch, hmm, how about this one? Doesn’t seem too far, and it’s to the south. Meadow, sendoff?”

“As *you wish*,” the being spoke and made them vanish.

Arcane lightning flashed a few hundred meters in front of them. Ilea spread her wings, her two companions simply floating where they appeared. She glanced at Aki and smiled. “Want to test those shields?”

“If you retrieve me should my core be exposed,” the being replied.

“You literally fought a four mark Lich a minute ago,” Ilea said.

The Pursuer stepped forward and through the air, speed picking up before he came to a stop inside the storm. A bolt of purple lightning flashed down and struck the being, his shield flaring up as the energy flowed over the spherical form, dissipating a moment later.

“*See, easy*,” Ilea mused, following with Verena in tow. “*Make yourself small, I’ll carry you too.*”

“*I had not expected to be able to so easily survive the notorious northern lightning*,” Aki replied and moved both arms and legs towards his torso.

“*Notorious for normal beings, not for a level eight fifty killing machine made by ancient dwarves*,” Ilea mused and charged her wings.

They shot off a moment later, towards one of the closest Taleen dungeons south of the Meadow’s domain.

*The Meadow’s domain*, Ilea mused, speeding over the northern hellscape. *A being I took here from another fucking realm. And it’s already established a domain for itself. Can’t wait to see the Sentinels struggle against both the north and the Meadow. Maybe some of the myths around myself will be less impressive once they see the kind of shit that’s really out there.*

The flight commenced without interruption, Ilea slowing down when they had reached the general location of the marked teleportation gate and Taleen dungeon.

“*Let’s see what we have then. Production facility, ancient ruin, or just an outpost*,” she said and floated down, open map in hand as she tried to triangulate their location with her marks. She sent a few infused spheres of ash down into the various cracks and crevices, with the task to find anything Taleen and bring her there.

“We’re planning to use their gates?” Verena asked.

Ilea smiled. “Yes.”

“Looking for a fight, I see,” the woman added.

“Last time we got that one,” Ilea answered, nodding towards Aki.

Her wings moved as she flew over the cracked ground, her dominion piercing the stone below to reveal any hidden tunnels, sources of magic, or potential entrances. The others followed, their own spells working to find what they were looking for.

Ilea stopped when a sphere of ash came flying towards her, the thing bobbing twice before it vanished once more. She turned and followed. "*Found it,*" she sent and watched the sphere suddenly fly straight down into a thin crack. *Well. Whatever,* she thought and formed an ashen drill aimed towards the ground.