

## Chapter 548 Catching up

Ilea spent days upon days hunting Astral Spirits, training with Meadow whenever she had social energy to burn on the god of sarcasm.

Its insight made the runes click far faster than she deemed possible otherwise.

It wasn't that Ilea could comprehend how the runes worked, not really, she simply felt the way they distorted space and magic.

With Meadow there, the creature could show her hundreds of different combinations of runes that prevented, slowed, reduced, interrupted, or otherwise disrupted her blink or Displacement.

*"Wait, I think I can see it..."* she said and focused on the moving framework. It was hard to grasp at active magic that wasn't grounded in a being or material but instead was born out of runes and spread into the nearby space.

Moving a spell or magical construct was one thing, moving herself out of one specifically made to prevent that proved much more difficult.

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 separated what she knew to be her from what wasn't her.

And then she blinked.

Ilea appeared at the intended position and jumped up in joy. "Take that you fucking tree!"

*"There is no need for profanity,"* Meadow said.

*"Don't take it personally,"* Ilea said with a wide grin.

*"You escaped from one of the simplest constellations. A laughable achievement, but an achievement nonetheless. To think you're the pinnacle of what your species is capable of. Pathetic. Maybe I should train Michael instead,"* Meadow said.

*"I'm literally immune to your banter. Save your mind powers. Also, honestly? It took me a few years to get to this point. I'd be more than surprised if I really was the pinnacle,"* Ilea said.

*"I would doubt it too. Your ingenuity and high potential is undeniable. The work and danger required is much. Your self regeneration and high resistance to damage and death allowed you to reach your heights far faster than most would but I agree. It would be statistically improbable if there are no other humans far above your standing. Though as you have said, they remain hidden, or perhaps they simply choose to not dabble in mundane affairs,"* the Meadow said.

*"They might be like me, just looking for interesting things to fight. The existence of other realms means a sheer unlimited amount of places they could go to,"* she said.

*"Are you suggesting there are humans of all things, capable of traveling through realms?"* Meadow asked in an exaggerated voice.

*"We were the ones to answer your call after all. Not super gracefully but that's how it is,"* Ilea said with a smidgen of pride. The horrific blood rituals after all weren't exactly efficient.

*"You act like you had a part in that," Meadow said.*

*"Shut up and teach me, old man," Ilea said.*

*"I am not an old man. I am a meadow," Meadow said.*

*"But you sound like one," Ilea said, squinting at the tree.*

*"Hah! I used your voice as a base. Your mind would shatter if I talked to you with my true voice," Meadow said.*

*"Please do. My Mental Resistance could use a few more levels," Ilea said and nodded eagerly.*

*"That was a joke," Meadow said, sounding a little deflated.*

*"Maybe your next Class then. The Enavurin could teach you," Ilea suggested.*

*"Another ancient creature you have met in your travels?" Meadow asked.*

*"Another one that sleeps all the fucking time," Ilea said and stared at the absolutely massive wolf being. She blinked close again, nearly reaching it as 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 retain an ability to think when confronted with the frost of an Ice Elemental," Meadow said.*

*"I don't want a miracle, I want to pet it," Ilea said.*

*"Then that will be your goal. One even I would fail to achieve," Meadow admitted.*

*"Really?" Ilea asked. The task suddenly didn't seem quite as mundane anymore.*

*"It is not fond, of petting," Meadow said.*

*"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. "Ever heard of Varrah?"*

*"The name is not familiar to me," Meadow said.*

*"A god, supposedly," Ilea said. "Blood magic."*

*"I would think most spirits here could be seen as gods in your realm. To those who do not choose the path of warriors," Meadow said.*

*"True. Just thought you might be interconnected somehow. A god network or something," she said.*

*"I am unaware of such a network. Though I have not traveled much," Meadow admitted.*

*"I'll send you an invite if I find it at some point," Ilea said and gave the creature a thumbs up.*

*"That is generous of you," the Meadow said.*

*"I'll get back to hunting then," Ilea said and stored the empty dish. "See you later."*

*"I will perceive you at another point in time," the Meadow said.*

*Normal friends. I'm not crazy. No. I'm fiine.*

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Felicia finished her report for the day and left her enchanted shelter. The word really didn't do it justice. It was the first time she had joined the Imperial army in an extended siege but having hundreds of expert mages around really made life quite a bit easier, despite the circumstances.

Soundproofing, cooling, hot showers, even comfortable chairs and beds provided by the various craftsmen and women that had come all this way to Baralia or were recruited in the area.

Outside immediately felt warmer, the mana in the air more noticeable. The impacts now sounded louder and certainly closer.

Dozens of soldiers walked around in the vicinity, a few glancing her way. There were dozens more stone shelters in the area. Only high ranking officers had one for themselves. And all the luxuries still cost gold, it just turned out her personal connection to General Ryse and her contributions so far earned her more than she had expected.

*A little too busy here*, she thought and teleported 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 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.

Instead she looked for a more secluded spot, summoning a hot tea as she took some time to calm down and watch 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 that compared to those of Virilya, formed into a star like shape to make direct attacks easier to deal with. One river turned in a bend, providing a natural defensive line for most of the left side of the city. The right one moved in a straighter line, vanishing into the forest beyond.

The field of battle stretched far and wide. As some of the smoke cleared, Felicia focused on what lay outside of the massive central walls.

An extensive network of streets and houses covered the ground around the walls, spreading into the terrain 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 Baralia and around it. Coupled with the rivers, the sight proved quite impressive. *Not quite as impressive as Virilya.*

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 only barely make out the people powering and maneuvering the massive contraption. There were eight of the cannons stationed throughout the camp.

The air seemed to be sucked in as her full attention focused on the magic. She heard a few people approach around her but simply watched.

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, three more pierced before the energy exploded in a deafening crash.

*Slow and steady.*

“Major,” a soldier said, walking past with a few others.

Felicia nodded.

The energy dissipated in red clouds. *No direct impact.*

The Empire camp spanned throughout a large part of the forest, the core itself clear of trees and spanning several hundred meters. Compared to the Baralia war camp outside of Virilya, this looked more like an actual city.

The stone buildings were definitely efficient, defensible, and sturdy, though obviously not built with the intent of permanence. For that they lacked artistry. *Cold and with a purpose*, she thought and sipped on her tea.

Thousands of individuals bustled within the camp, expanding, building, repairing. Another cannon was being built at the back of the small city. *In full view of the defenders.*

She couldn't help but smile at the thought, knowing how long the Empire had waited within their walls before coming here. *How long we fled and hid.*

The response to the attack came swiftly, hundreds of burning stones, spiked ice spheres, runed explosives, and arrows ten times that number came flying out of the city walls.

Shields flickered to life around the cannons. Many of the buildings were hit too, some flaring up with defensive enchantments while others were slightly damaged.

Another beam of energy already formed in the next cannon.

*And so it goes, back and forth.*

It didn't bother her much, she found. In a way it was relaxing, to have some form of routine, watching their camp grow, seeing the volleys of magic and arrows fly towards them. It was a slow and methodical process, quite the opposite to the more direct confrontations she took part in during her various missions.

A few tents went up in flames from a cluster of explosive fireballs, twenty or so soldiers running around trying to get to safety.

She didn't think too much of it, seeing the dozens of smaller explosions and battles going on in the city ruins outside the main walls. *Pressure until they break.*

Most of the eight to ten meter high wall protecting the outermost part of Baralia had been destroyed, turned to rubble by explosions and spells that hit it even now.

*Downright puny compared to the central walls.*

Eighty percent of the city landscape was outside of the highest walls, Baralia focusing even more on their central district than Virilya did.

The large guns were aiming for the center but the most active battlefields remained within the outer parts.

*How many did they actually evacuate?*

Felicia hadn't been there at the very start, the chaos of the forest battles. Baralia had ten times the casualties, not committing their higher leveled mages and combat specialists to the less defensible terrain.

Few civilians not within the central district would have survived the extensive battles by now. She could hardly make out ten houses that looked to be fully intact. Hundreds of spells rained down into the city from the high walls, with no regard for their own, should any have remained.

*It's good the Generals agreed on the slaves and refugees at least.*

The blood rituals and spreading news both among Order members and nobility sped up the negotiations with the many cities in Baralia. When it came to taking in refugees and former slaves, they didn't have a choice.

Many would find their way to Lys in the coming years, she was sure.

The high ranking officers and present nobility had put a high importance on the logistics of feeding and protecting the refugees. Felicia had been surprised.

It really came down to interruptions in their own supply line, thousands of desperate people starting to steal and murder weren't very conducive to their war efforts, especially behind enemy lines.

*How many people from Virilya died when they fled the siege?*

She sipped on her tea, distracting herself from the thought.

*The same people responsible now sit here, allocating resources to keep themselves safe. The same people that hid within their central district.*

It really was quite ironic.

For the common people, this battle here mattered little. Their work was gone, their homes were no more, the walls that had protected them would soon be breached.

*All because of the madness and greed of so few.*

Another sip.

Felicia had made a name for herself in this war. And she wasn't done quite yet. But if she had to choose between the influence and trust she had acquired and the thousands of lives lost in this meaningless conflict, the choice was simple.

She looked at the mark on her hand and smiled. *And how many more would have died without you, I wonder. Stay safe, Ilea.*

A few stone projectiles impacted the ground nearby, sending bits of rock and debris all around.

Felicia pushed a gust of wind against the incoming wave, protecting her tea in the meantime.

*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. *Maybe we can push a little further today.*

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 towards neither group, following orders and suggesting improvements when she saw them.

The siege was just as much about internal military squabbles as it was about actually taking the city. It was tiring, but necessary. She comforted herself with the knowledge that their siege would come to an end eventually. She just hoped it was less than a year.

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Ilea finished off the last mark she had set, the Astral Spirit slowly falling towards the icy desert.

She felt the call.

Meadow had dissolved its mark. Her time was up.

Ilea cracked her neck and casually moved her wings in the air. She let her armor move to her back, a shroud cleaning off the sweat, dirt, and blood that clung to her still.

Her wings charged before she shot off towards the distant temple.

She felt no difference in the mana surrounding her, had experienced no darkening skies.

There had been more Astral Spirits. But the change had been gradual, barely noticeable if she hadn't spent whole days with the fuckers.

***'ding' 'You have defeated [Astral Spirit – lvl 730]'***

...

***'ding' 'You have defeated [Astral Spirit – lvl 782]'***

At this point she could easily overwhelm the creatures. As long as let them separate before engaging.

With her speed and marks, she could kill one of them every fifteen to twenty minutes, most of that time spent on flying between her marks.

The remaining days 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 four hundred 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.

Ilea wasn't sure why her ash class gradually fell behind. Storm of Cinders and Heart of Cinders 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 as fast as expected, the boosts from her third tier Phaseshift and stacked Flare of Creation contributed enough to her battles coupled with all the defensive options and Displacement.

***‘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 or three fifty but by now, Ilea was focused on her main Classes mostly. If anything more came from her third one, she'd take it. By now however, she didn't exactly expect anything.

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.

Ilea had gradually invested her stat points into Vitality, Intelligence, and Wisdom. Fifteen points each went into Endurance and Dexterity to bring them each to four fifty.

By now her status looked at least somewhat like that of an actual mage or healer.

Status:

Vitality: 1250  
Endurance: 450  
Strength: 515  
Dexterity: 450  
Intelligence: 1200  
Wisdom: 1250

Ilea had debated often to invest some of her many Core skill points into her status. Just ten would net her five hundred points or the equivalent of a hundred levels.

She refrained however, knowing that new options would become available. If the upcoming battles demanded it, she would be ready to invest ten to twenty points immediately, just in case she needed the extra push.

Her skills themselves didn't advance quite as much. An expected result with the short amount of training time.

***'ding' 'Storm of Cinders reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 28'***

***'ding' 'Eyes of Ash reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 28'***

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

***'ding' 'Flare of Creation reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 8'***

***'ding' 'Flare of Creation reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 9'***

***'ding' 'Space Shift reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 5'***

***'ding' 'Space Awareness reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 2'***

***'ding' 'Deviant of Humanity reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 6'***

***'ding' 'Oxygen Repository reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 1'***

***Oxygen Repository – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 1***

***Due to unfortunate and/or sexual 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 may store what little you can get for extended periods of time. Apologies for ruining your sex life. 2<sup>nd</sup> 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 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 12'***

***'ding' 'Mana Drain Resistance reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 4'***