

Ilea was standing in the large hall where the blood ritual had taken place.

The space around her felt almost alive, twisting and turning, under such tensions that she feared reality could break at any moment.

It was just an illusion of course. She knew that the fluctuations were temporary and minor in the grand scheme of things. It simply required incredible brute force to break through realms with so little finesse, that much she understood just looking at her surroundings.

Ilea was getting somewhere. She could tell that whoever had designed and executed this spell had only little knowledge of the spacial fabric connecting everything. Enough understanding to rip through but not nearly enough to create something stable.

The only impressive thing about this phenomenon was the sheer amount of power it took to create and sustain it. It was less impressive when one knew the cost.

She was juggling Hector around with her space magic, teleporting him through the room with ease and using force to push him into and through the walls. The second tier of Space Awareness had not disappointed.

***‘ding’ ‘Space Awareness reaches lvl 20’***

***‘ding’ ‘Space Awareness reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 1’***

***Passive – Space Awareness – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 1***

***You become more aware of the density and shifts in the fabric of Space itself.***

***2<sup>nd</sup> stage: Further understanding of the spacial 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 had already tested the new abilities for the last twenty minutes.

The most obvious change was the increased power and ease of use for her Space Magic abilities. Even Hector had a hard time resisting Displacement and Force for long. His resistance was admittedly at a low level still.

She could activate the spells far quicker, both their intensity itself and her precision increasing by half, if not more. The distance and cooldowns weren't affected however, nor could she move or stop more objects than before.

It gave her third Class spells a major buff, bringing them into more than just supportive efficiency, at least against lower level opponents. Flare of Creation became stronger too but mostly in how easily she could cover the ashen constructs connected to herself. The strength of the flames were wildly different depending on which monster she used it on anyway.

“Do it again,” she said, watching with full concentration as Hector teleported to the other side of the room.

There were hundreds of ripples she could see in the hall. Hector had just added another one. It was still difficult to discern his spell among all the others, especially within the ritual hall, but Ilea was getting better.

Most teleportation abilities were near instant but with this newfound perception, Ilea could see where people went. The ripples remained for a while too, meaning she could theoretically follow someone who used a few teleportation abilities in a row to get away.

“So you’re saying I’m just condensed into a small pocked space before I’m physically moved somewhere else,” Hector commented.

“That’s my current theory. I only have your spell and the Mantis’ to go on,” Ilea said.

She couldn’t observe herself during her teleportation after all.

From time to time, she would try and peer through the fractures around her. Despite all her resistances and healing, the effort made her nauseous quickly. The feeling went away as soon as she stopped trying.

“There’s trees on the other side,” she said. “More insect creatures are close by and there’s snow in the distance.”

She had to interpret the blurry and fractured images that came to her whenever she used the ability. Her sphere and increased eyesight were anything but helpful, muddling the confusing experience even more so.

“Are they frenzied too? Do you see mountains?” Hector asked after a while.

Ilea shook her head. “I can’t really tell. I’d say no to either.”

“You said this ritual... this fracture, it needs incredible resources to be kept open?” he asked.

“As imperfect as it is, it should’ve collapsed the moment it was created,” Ilea said. She knew it to be the truth. Space was not something one could bend and warp like this. There were rules and limitations. Her own skills showed as much.

“Then why is it still around?” he asked. “There’s no more people around here to sacrifice or supply it and I don’t see or feel any mana flowing towards this place from Nara. Quite the contrary.”

“Exactly,” Ilea said. “Something on the others side is keeping it open. Something so powerful that the mana density in a third of the city is vastly higher than it should be. The trees, grass, and roots growing through everything, I think it’s part of it too.”

“You’re starting to sound a little crazy too,” Hector said as he glanced at her. “You gained all this understanding just from a perception aura?”

“The aura is good but no, it’s just that this place is absolutely incredible. I imagine it’s easier to study lava magic inside an active volcano than anywhere else,” she said.

“I’d think so too, other than the getting burnt up part of course,” Hector confirmed. “So this is like an active volcano but for space magic?”

Ilea nodded.

“Spacecano. Volspace,” the man mused before he was pushed into a nearby wall.

Most of his defenses weren’t active to benefit more from the training. Ilea doubted even her improved space magic could do much against his pressurized sphere of water.

“And it nearly doubled your spell power,” Hector said as he worked his way out of the broken wall.

“How much stronger is your water because of your manipulation skill?” Ilea asked, thinking of her own ash. There were so many skills working together to make it the honed weapon and near perfect defense that it was.

“Fair enough. Just wish I had something like that for my summoned creatures,” he said. “Neely with twice the power.”

“Can we collapse it now?” Hector asked as another being came out from a fissure.

A wildflower ant that was immediately cut apart by a thin beam of water.

Ilea nodded slowly. She had gotten her second tier and while she would have liked to study this place for longer, it was a risk to keep the ritual as it was. They had work to do.

“Do it,” she said, watching the man as a sphere of water formed around him, a dozen beams 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 watched with fascination as the space stabilized, the wisps returning to normal near instantly, as if a vacuum was filled once more with air.

***‘ding’ ‘Space Awareness reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 2’***

*A nice farewell gift, she thought before turning to Hector.*

He had an apologetic smile on his face.

“What?” Ilea asked.

“I might have cut a little m-” he started as a loud groan echoed through the hall, the whole room suddenly turning before it crumbled to the side.

Ilea blinked outside, watching as the whole top third of the large stone tower slid off, falling with an almost perfect quiet before hundreds of tons of stone crashed onto the city below.

Hector had appeared next to her. “Also a way to do it.”

“No,” Ilea said. “No, it isn’t.”

The man snickered, dodging the ashen spheres she shot his way, not that they would penetrate far into his sphere anyway.

A wave of air brushed past them as the dust below expanded through the streets. *The damage this guy alone can do in seconds.*

“That’s why you don’t build high,” he said and shook his head in a sagely manner.

Ilea understood the appeal at least. A good view was certainly desirable. She herself had chosen the spot for her house mainly because of that.

“Looks like my little mistake didn’t go unseen,” Hector said and pointed towards a distant hill outside of the city.

Ilea spotted the tiny specks of fast moving people. “You think they’re with Baralia?”

“I have no clue. Maybe that’s the first strike team who reached us. It’s been over a day since our briefing after all,” he said. “I’ll get back to work. Let me know if you uncover anything new.”

Ilea nodded, taking a last glance at the people who moved on the ground. She had a hard time making out any details in the rainy weather. The distance didn't help either. *His eyes are as good as mine or better*, she noted.

*As long as the newcomers don't get in the way*, she thought and blinked down. Much of the city was still very much crawling with monsters and they had stalled for long enough.

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Felicia hadn't been terribly joyous about the prospect of working with the Dawn Company. She had heard quite a few things about the elite order from Asila, few of them reassuring.

The fact that she had never heard of the gold mage in the group didn't exactly help her trust him either.

They had reached Harchat after around seven hours of traveling. Both herself and General Ryse could have made the journey in less than four but they lacked the means to carry the nine others.

**[Mage – lvl ??]**

The gold mage and Ryse were the only people she couldn't identify in the group, making her effectively the third highest level participant in their little raid group.

*If we don't count the two monsters who left on their own*, she thought to herself. Ilea was, well, she was Ilea. Felicia had watched her fight and grow, quickly knowing that that woman would reach heights she herself would never see.

And she wasn't disappointed. Felicia had looked into some of Lilith's exploits and if anything, she thought them downplayed.

She chastised herself often for her indecisive ways, how she followed after Edwin with little will nor passion. Only when their father became an actual target they could get to did she feel involved again.

For her brother it seemed to be the opposite. He had accomplished the goal that had driven him for years on end. And now he was lost.

Felicia on the other hand, her world had opened up.

For all her wavering and uncertainty, it had resonated with Ilea, the woman young, full of life and adventure. She had made a friend then. The aspiring adventurer and the lost noble child. Now they were Lilith and the head of a powerful noble House.

Admittedly, she was falling behind. Felicia doubted she could ever truly repay what Ilea had done for them, not that her brother would ever admit she was much of a help in the first place.

Then again, she knew that Ilea didn't really care. As long as they stayed friends. She really did like her, the healer somehow remaining untainted in this horrible world. Felicia knew her views were biased, that she liked Ilea for the ideals she represented in her mind and not for what she really did.

The woman was a monster, obsessed with battle and magic, always on the lookout for more dangerous missions and monsters to challenge. Her heart was in the right place and Lilith did what she could but in the end, the stories she had read as a child remained just that. Simple fantasies with simple problems.

If she wanted change, she would have to make it, through work, gold, and blood. Lilith was trying a different approach but in the end, the price they paid would be similar.

She hadn't seen Ilea for a while and when she had spotted her, the first thing she wanted to do is run her down with a hug. They had so much to talk about after all. Maybe the woman could even take Maria out on a monster hunt to calm her down a little.

Neither of them approached one another however, simply exchanging a glance. Felicia was sure that nothing had changed between them. They themselves might not be the same anymore but something more connected them. From a time when everything seemed a little less complicated.

*I should really talk to her, otherwise I'll idolize her even more,* she thought and rolled her eyes at herself.

Lilith was one thing but the man she had been with felt just as dangerous to her. The way they joked with each other, entirely uncaring for the dangerous mission they'd been sent to accomplish. One could dismiss it as bravado or foolishness but Felicia knew enough of the world to know that these two had dealt with threats that made this war seem like a children's play.

And still they had come.

Ryse had been surprised too apparently, expecting the Dawn Company but nobody else.

Ilea's demeanor didn't fit with a covert operation, a large fire informing everyone about their whereabouts for kilometers. The Destroyer might even be worse.

She assumed Ilea had done it because she was bored but the man had done it just to annoy Ryse.

Thus they were sent on a task everyone else would deem suicidal or perhaps even impossible. To clear out the Cursed and unknown monsters within and around the cities taken by the Order's blood ritual.

It was a task for the imperial army, not two people. And still, either had fought armies on their own before. Each had won in their own way. Perhaps his order had not been a dismissal but an appropriate use of their abilities.

Velamyr Ryse was known to be easily irritated but he always had good reasons to be and he openly confronted those who caused it. He was a General of the imperial army and demanded his peers and subordinates to act accordingly.

That meant swift, smart, and decisive actions with favorable results for the Empire. Those weren't always words associated with the army however, thus his reputation.

Maybe an old feud would cause him to send the two to their deaths but Felicia didn't take it that way.

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, Felicia could at least appreciate their professionalism.

*Working with those two would have been a major headache*, she thought, glad about their separate mission. There would have been no time to talk to Ilea anyway.

Plus, it should likely stay a secret that they knew each other as well as they did.

“They burned down all the surrounding forests and shut 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.

They had expected as much. No settlement in Baralia would be easy to approach, let alone infiltrate.

Their group hid deep within the forest, a few kilometers away from the plains leading to the city of Harchat.

The town wasn’t the largest or most defensible settlement in Baralia. It however housed one of the largest populations in the country.

“There were fires recently,” the hooded man added.

“Perhaps news have spread from the east and south,” Velamyr suggested.

“There would be chaos, if the true extent of the Order’s rituals was known in the general populace,” the mage said.

“Don’t underestimate the power of fear and century old oppression,” Felicia said.

The mage didn’t react but the meaning was surely not lost on him. Asila wasn’t exactly known to be a safe heaven for the poor and unfortunate.

“The Order of Truth is well regarded, often the only healers who can take care of ailments within these parts,” Velamyr said. “A revolt would not necessarily help us. We need to get in and find the ritual site.”

“The old information we have 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.

*And you know exactly what the norm is?*

“The tunnel seems like the best option we have,” one of the warriors said.

“I agree. Do we have suitable spots already?” Ryse asked.

They moved silently through the forest, a little dejected at the prospect of digging a tunnel.

Even with one earth manipulator and several powerful elemental mages present, it would take the better part of a day to get to the walls. And they had no knowledge on below ground defensive measures. It could very well be that they had to retreat again.

The confidence Ryse had in the plan made her think that he knew something she didn’t.

A few silencing and illusion enchantments had been placed between a few trees and bushes, hopefully enough to prevent an early discovery by one of the patrols that regularly searched through the surrounding lands.

Most of the soldiers and mercenaries they had seen didn’t seem too keen on discovering anything. They’d be the first ones to go, thus thinking of self preservation above all.

It wasn't a surprise that Velamyr talked extensively about honor and duty as soon as this was discovered.

Felicia didn't disagree with him but the man really couldn't read a crowd. Either that or he simply spent too much time with military officers and people who tried to get in his good graces.

She did feel a little bad about being one of those people. *I'll tell him when the war is over*, she thought. Right now was not the time to explain to a General why some powerful Gold mage and a few high level assassins or mercenaries might not care too much about the national duty and self sacrifice.