

Her reversed healing continued and she added Storm of Cinders to the mix.

“Mana intrusion... and destructive healing. No wonder you could destroy an army with such ease!” he exclaimed, locking eyes with her. “Don’t worry. Your secrets are safe with me. Not that many could benefit much from knowing what kind of weapons you possess.”

“How is it not affecting you?” Ilea asked after a few more seconds, the water slowly cutting through her as she healed against it. “And how are my limbs not moving?”

As if to demonstrate, the pirate stopped his attack, the water instead flowing free and around her.

Ilea tried to blink but found herself unable to use the spell as soon as his water touched her. Displacement didn’t work either.

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.

The water had closed around her fully and she immediately realized why her ash hadn’t been able to move. The pressure she felt was immense.

She found it impossible to even speak. *Is this how it feels kilometers deep under water?*

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 was quite a bit weaker too.

The pressure increased, threatening to pop her eyes before her ash covered them too.

She first used her reversed healing but stopped after a while, realizing that her magic just seemed to dissipate.

The pirate whistled. “Holy mother of the deep. You are tough!”

Force and Displacement proved entirely too weak to do anything against the water.

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.

“How did you withstand that pressure? I’m intrigued,” the man said as he momentarily stopped his assault.

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.”

He smiled. “It’s not uncommon for creators to have such an ability. Your ash is the same I presume?”

“It is. How did you stop the reversed healing and intrusion spells?” she asked.

“I didn’t. Not all of it. The sphere around me can absorb some of the mana from enemy spells. Healing is a bitch to deal with. I would have had to let you go in another twenty seconds or so but you stopped it yourself,” he said.

“Interesting. I have a similar ability,” Ilea admitted.

“It heals me too, otherwise it would have been a problem nearly immediately,” he explained.

“You’re quite open about your spells,” Ilea said.

He grinned. “I’m confident in them. Just as you are. And I think the secrecy around these things is entirely misplaced. If the clowns of the Lily really wanted to bring humanity ahead, they’d share every secret they had found.”

“You’re not terribly fond of them,” Ilea said.

He just grunted.

“Your fire spell is quite something too... you need to charge it? Or do you pay a price?” he asked.

“I form heat within myself,” Ilea said.

“And release it. Horny bitch,” he said.

“What?” Ilea asked.

“Heat. Horny. It’s a play on words,” he said.

Ilea blinked her eyes before she laughed. “That’s fucking stupid,” she said. This man was so much easier to deal with than Helena.

“I can’t believe you don’t have a third Class though. You’re easily powerful enough to destroy some shit tier seven fifties. And with all the waves you created in the last year, I’d doubt you’ve never faced any four marks,” he said.

Ilea activated Flare of Creation and smiled at him.

He clapped his hands and laughed. “There you go! Is that... oho, interesting. I did believe I felt Space Magic before but it was fleeting at best.”

“It’s quite new. I thought I could use this assignment for some skill training. Are they limited in some way?” she asked.

“That’s a smart decision. I don’t think we’ll face anything particularly interesting for a while. Though it is always fun to deal with Lily associates. They’re so easily irritated,” he said and laughed.

“As to your question, no. They seem to behave the same as normal Class skills do. The third tier needs to be unlocked with Core skill points and they’re supposedly subdued but I had a hard time testing that. They seem really strong anyway,” he added.

“Interesting. I mean we have the bonuses from our main Classes and they’re unique so it makes sense for the skills to be strong,” Ilea said.

“I don’t suppose you found a good use for the Core skill points? The options seem... boring at best,” he said.

Ilea shook her head. “Stat and skill level boosts. Third tier skill upgrade, that’s it.”

“I thought so. Maybe once we hit four hundred,” he said.

“Maybe,” she agreed.

“How can you even create so much pressure?” Ilea asked.

He seemed proud of himself as he answered the question. "It's part of my main Class actually. Plus there isn't a direct resistance to it, just like there isn't anything against healing. We have that much in common."

"I assume you have a dozen other resistances and skills that make your body more resilient though. Otherwise you would have popped like an overripe watermelon," he said and smiled.

"I have some things, yes. Can you use the pressurized water beams again? If it's enough to get a third tier resistance," she said.

"It should be," he commented. "Do attack me with that white flame... there are so few space magic beings out there, my resistance is still in the first tier."

Ilea grinned and approached him, spreading her ash around his sphere of water before it all ignited with the flame of creation.

The fire worked through his water with surprising speed.

"It lowers regeneration too...", he noted before a beam of water punched out of the ashen prison.

Ilea noted that the man was gone, her gaze following the thin stream of water before it reformed into a sphere again, the man forming as if he was born of the water itself.

*He would be so annoying to kill*, she thought. It made sense of course. He was a human like herself.

He gave her a long look. "Level those skills. They're already powerful," he said.

"What's your third Class anyway?" Ilea asked and glanced towards the ruins, noticing a few new faces.

"You'll find out soon enough. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lilith of Ravenhall," he said with a bright smile, the water vanishing as if it had never existed, the small lake that had formed below did the same. Only the wave he stood on remained.

"Same. Do you have a real name by the way?" she asked as the two lazily returned.

"Of course. I wasn't birthed the Destroyer. But I doubt your name is Lilith either, almost comical," he said.

Ilea laughed. "Ridiculous, coming from the *Destroyer*."

"We agree to disagree," he said.

Ilea noticed two new people in the group, each quite distinctive compared to the shrouded warriors.

One was a man who looked to be in his thirties. He looked rather ordinary if it weren't for his gear. Brown hair and brown eyes glanced at her before he seemed to lose interest. He was clad in heavy golden armor that seemed to move or flow slightly.

Ilea wasn't sure it if was an illusion or one of his skills.

**[Mage – lvl 275]**

*Not quite as impressive as the pirate.*

"Hey," she said.

He looked at her and nodded in a polite manner, 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 upon the request of the Assassin,” the man said and repeated his polite nod.

The pirate rolled his eyes and ignored him, instead spreading his arms as he approached the other new face in the group.

A woman with piercing black eyes, her long hair as dark as the night. She wore a beautiful skin tight 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 the woman 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 could tell by the incredibly slight twitch of her lip that the woman didn’t succeed entirely.

The Destroyer must have noticed too, laughing out loud as he sat down on a nearby stone.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Lilith of Ravenhall,” Elisora instead said. “As our dear *ally* has already revealed, I’m Elisora Acantha. I’ve not come to personally take part in your endeavors but to both make your acquaintance and more importantly, to make sure this won’t end in a bloodbath,” she said and smiled a perfect and friendly smile.

Ilea nearly shuddered at the feeling she got.

“It seems that my ploy to claim you was already foiled before I even arrived,” she continued, giving Ilea a look.

*Is she disappointed, annoyed? I can’t tell.*

Something brushed against her mind.

“Impressive defenses too,” Elisora said. “How do I fare compared to the beings you faced before?”

Ilea could tell the magic had come from her. Quite powerful too and 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. Thank you,” 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 and winked her way.

“Not amongst us, mind you,” Elisora said. “The rituals the Order of Truth has initiated are not to be taken lightly,” she said and glanced towards the man in golden armor, Michael.

“I do presume it’s the reason he came,” she said and focused back on Ilea.

“It seems however that Helena did not take this lightly either,” she said and glanced westwards. “I will see you around. Do visit me in Virilya if you’re ever in the area,” she added, looking towards Ilea before she vanished.

The Destroyer shuddered and made a few hand gestures. Not a cross but Ilea assumed a religious background.

“Don’t go. Even if it might be a good time. She’s a snake if I’ve ever met one,” he said.

“I guessed as much,” Ilea said. “What do you mean by good time?”

He smiled. “Elisora isn’t just an insanely powerful mind mage, she’s also one of the best alchemists in the human plains. She succeeded in making drugs that have an effect even on me. Though the effects might not be enough for you, after that short bout. You should still try them sometime. It’s quite fun.”

“You’re contradicting yourself,” Ilea said and summoned some wood to build a fire.

“I didn’t say you should visit her. Just trade her for it. Ask for the hardest stuff. It’s the only reason I haven’t murdered her already,” he said.

Ilea assumed there were other reasons but didn’t comment on it.

The man summoned some wood too, neither of them getting wood from the surrounding forest.

“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,” the pirate 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. 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 relaxed.

“Who else is coming again?” she asked after a few minutes of silence.

“Velamyr Ryse. A General of the Lys army and a member of the Golden Lily. I assume he’s the main reason this actually came to be. He’s... a military man,” the Destroyer said.

“Alright,” she said, thinking about having another bout with the man.

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Felicia stood close to General Ryse. The war council wasn't exactly going like 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," one of the Generals said.

Murmurs went through the large tent.

"Our victory is secured. 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," another high ranking officer said.

"I believe there is more to this. The interrogated members of the Order have confirmed as much. If we wait and 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," General Ryse said.

His words caused another round of discussions and talks.

"The interrogations were uncertain. We have nothing to prove their ramblings other than the efficiency of the rituals," one of them said.

"Isn't that enough? Coupled with the tens of thousands that died?" one of the Majors said.

"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 genocide," the first General said.

"I simply suggest we form strike teams of high level soldiers and Shadows, let them scour the lands and cities, fight the creatures in the cursed areas. We must call for more elite individuals from the Empire," Ryse said.

"Shadows," one of them scoffed. "They will refuse to participate in an open war."

"Not if the enemy are monsters and cursed," another one said.

"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," another General said.

In the end, quite a few of them supported the strike team option. The rest would continue their methodical approach. It wouldn't be entirely ineffective but not the decisiveness that Ryse had hoped for.

Felicia followed him 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," the General 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," one of the Majors 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 to take place."

“Shadows?” Felicia asked. Most of the high ranking officers were nobles or simply quite rich. It wasn’t unheard of that they hired or used personal mercenaries during wars. Some didn’t even use Imperial guards to protect their positions.

Lys was quite wealthy in itself, and a lot of that went into its military might. Nobles could rely on the army in most situations but the circumstances had changed.

This endeavor had become as much a monster subjugation quest as it was a war. The lines and priorities were blurred but General Ryse deemed the former far more important.

Felicia agreed after what they had seen in Odiah.

“Possibly. I called in some favors,” he said. “We won’t let our troops die, nor will we let them destroy their whole 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 too,” Felicia offered. She had already garnered enough trust to be amongst the General’s close Majors. This war was full of opportunities after all.

If she had his word, her status as the head of House Redleaf was 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. It was even said that he had quite a bit of pull with the Empress.

The Generals thinking his concerns invalid may very well just disagree for the fact that he was amongst those who brought it up. They knew that Alyris would likely approve the requested resources and Shadow contracts but by delaying it all, they strike directly at him and the success that would be attributed to the man.

Ryse wasn’t unaware of it all, 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 many of them made was thinking that the war was already over. That Baralia was no longer a threat.

She wondered how much of this thinking was responsible for the year long siege. They could have likely broken out after a week or maybe a month.

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 everyone responsible for the sluggishness of the Imperial army. Ryse did the same, she knew, but perhaps for different reasons.