

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 turned off.

She had first come into contact with the thing 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.

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 to bring her into the right state of mind and soon she felt the energy move closer, or perhaps she herself was moving.

Ilea wondered if this was the closest to a spiritual experience she's ever had. She decided that meeting the Fae still topped whatever this was.

'ding' 'You have learned the General Skill: Soul Perception – lvl 1'

Soul Perception – lvl 1

Through sheer luck and naivete, you have achieved enlightenment. A part of it that is. And perhaps not really enlightenment. Others might call it that but it's really just the ability to perceive your soul or essence. It's a dubious skill that might help philosophers understand a piece of life's puzzle but for you it will be mostly useless. Congratulations regardless. A skill that didn't require killing and blood to unlock. Marvelous.

"Haha!" Ilea called out from within her armor, unable to lift her arms at all. She stored it and spread her wings.

Enough meditation for today, she thought, happy to have surprised even her own subconscious magical text employee.

The insults weren't lost on her but at this point she was beyond caring. If she was relegated to write someone's skill information, she would sure as hell pack it full of insults and jokes. Not that she really thought an actual conscious being was behind it.

The implications were a little too terrifying.

She flew up in the training hall and made sure nobody was present. An eye on her wings, she formed small openings that would allow the wind to travel through.

One might ask why that obvious flaw in flying tech should be implemented but the answer was quite simple.

Intimidation.

Trian had actually joked about it during one of their dungeon runs. With the magic animating her wings, the lack of aerodynamic support didn't matter as much as it really should have, allowing her to work quite a few openings into her appendages.

Right now, she was working on the best possible sound. An unnerving constant whistle or an increasingly loud high pitched screech? She wasn't sure yet but the intricacies of sound manipulation were highly interesting.

Ilea had never learned to play an instrument. Both a lack of opportunity, pressure, and simple talent had led to it never coming to be.

Now perhaps, with all her stats and skills, the prospect didn't sound quite as difficult anymore but seeing her students work themselves to the bone, she herself focused on useful abilities too.

Whistling wings are useful! she said to the uncaring void watching her always. Or perhaps the fae that were hiding in plain sight. If there really were any.

Ilea left the hall, the gates closed behind her before enchantments flared up into place.

Christopher and Iana continued to expand on their defenses. Every new room and hall had to be clad in enchantments before it was approved of usage.

She felt it a little too much but Trian and the faculty approved. Ilea wasn't about to ignore their fears, knowing very well that they were in the middle of a sprawling city. With interested eyes and ears everywhere, powerful groups and mercenaries irking to find every secret they could sell. Or simply to satisfy some peculiar need.

Something or someone like the Ascended would ignore such defenses but that argument didn't invalidate the efforts. She knew as much, even without having another talk with Trian.

She walked past a few more training rooms that had been added in the past weeks, glancing inside with her sphere, the enchantments tuned to allow her mana signature to pass. The perks of 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.

She didn't disturb them, finding two students fighting each other.

Ilea blinked inside, joining the few watching eyes. Other students and Aki, each giving pointers from time to time.

They had tensed a little at her sudden appearance but nobody showed an obvious reaction.

She had to admit that the students were good. Much better fighters than she had been after a month with her class.

Blink and punch. Quite simple, she thought, watching the young man move his staff in an expert manner, striking several times at the woman's legs as she danced backwards.

She jumped and twirled, a whip of fire manifesting and moving in tow, forcing him back as it lashed out.

Both were fighting defensively, probing each other's abilities. A test of endurance between two warriors who knew each other well.

Their skills had been honed and corrected by the experienced trainers Ilea had provided. By now her own capabilities far outshone the young fighters but they got a head start. That much was sure.

She wondered how much progress she would have made with teachers like Sidney or Orthan. Edwin had given her some pointers, as did others, but nothing to the extent of a dedicated teacher.

Her own skills had kept her from forming bad habits, from straying too far from efficient and deadly movements. She had learned herself and with the help of magic. Her student 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, used a variety of weapons and tactics. Who tried to exhaust and used every unfair advantage they could get.

Ilea didn't have to look at Aki to know that he was proud. He, she or it. The machine had filled in the role of combat teacher and protector of the Sentinels perfectly.

He had never complained or failed in any of his tasks. That was what Trian had told her.

Maybe his absence from my side was a good influence, she wondered. Or perhaps she herself would have risen to the task if their positions had been reversed.

How much of herself was in the machine was a mystery. Iana had yet to understand what the dagger truly was but one thing was sure, he was learning, improving.

It didn't matter if he was a soul bound to steel or enchantments and magic creating an artificial intelligence, Aki had become an integral member of the Medic Sentinels.

She left again when the fire whip slashed into the man's face, ending the fight as he admitted defeat. He had shown no pain and the wound had already started healing. She assumed the condition for her victory had been met, nodding once before she vanished.

Ilea had kept her interactions with the students low. After a few talks with Trian he had suggested that approach.

She would be the unreachable goal, the specter of the Sentinels that both protected them and kept them pushing forward. If she became too human, too much of a friend, these illusions would lose impact.

At the same time it protected her from being tied down, and in part from the inevitable deaths that would come. Losing a student was one thing but a friend she had helped train was worse.

That's what she told herself at the very least.

They had made a choice to be here and yet she felt a connection with these students that would make her response to one of their deaths uncertain and devastating at best.

Even Eve, who she had not truly known, had made her rage, had made her investigate and look into one of the supposedly most dangerous orders in the human lands.

That title didn't mean much to her anymore but at the time, her rational side should have won out. She could understand reacting that way with a family member but a teammate she had fought with for less than a year?

One that hadn't even entrusted her with her true goals, her true identity?

She sighed and continued up and through the expanding headquarters, whose front above ground hadn't changed in the slightest.

One thing was sure. She would find out who Eve was and who had killed her.

If one of her students got killed however, nothing would protect whatever had caused it. Be it fifty Ascended and an army of Elementals.

Ash danced around the armored healer, her eyes cold as scenarios unknown flashed through her mind.

Students and teachers alike remained in their rooms as a cold and dangerous aura came and went. A familiar sensation to them but not one anybody could get used to.

Helena shifted in her chair. Uncomfortable but necessary.

Impressions were important after all. Just as the eyes were important when eating a perfect cupcake, the chair she sat on was important when conducting business.

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 and stepped past her table and towards the oven.

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. "Aaach," she exclaimed, tapping her foot to the passing of time as she ignored the moans behind her.

"NOW!" she exclaimed in an onset of joy, her hands rushing out in blurry speed as she opened the oven.

She grabbed the heated metal sheet with her bare hands and carefully moved 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. She smiled and twirled, hot plate in hand before she vanished and appeared 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 appeared already sitting in the chair opposite her. Luscious black hair reaching down below her shoulders. A pale and fair face with deep black eyes that showed neither joy nor care but focus alone.

The girl 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, touching her heart as she closed her eyes.

Concern flashed on the girl's face as she gingerly sliced into the cake, taking a piece and starting to eat.

Good.

“You don't have to play the part, Amara. I know very well that not everyone's heart beats in the same tone. And yet it hurts nonetheless, to see one's creation rejected with such lack of care,” Helena said as she cut herself a piece too.

The recipe had originally demanded to let the cake cool down but she 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. Too dominating in experience and taste usually or an incompatibility with the other ingredients.

Poison cakes were an art she had mastered long ago but there was a difference between trying to kill someone and using the 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 have likely taken care of her a long time ago.

“What did you bring me today?” she asked, taking a sip of her cherry tea infused with black vein ivy.

“A Baralia officer who had been 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 concern about the marvelous cake.

“Darling, don’t be shy, eat up. I’m sure your figure can take it,” 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 did not 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 as she occasionally took a sip of tea. The veins on her arms slowly turned black as the poison took effect, the sensation of corruption mixing well with cherry and the scent of fear permeating the room.

“The order of truth have more influence over the high king than we previously anticipated. The destruction of Odiah through an elaborate blood magic sacrifice of most its population wasn’t a last effort to repel the imperial forces but simply the first step in a plan I could not yet unravel,” Amara said, her head lowered.

Helena touched the woman’s cheek carefully, almost scared the skin would break. “My dear, you did not fail me. Not at all. I’m very proud of you!”

The girl had tears in her eyes, nodding weakly as she continued her report.

“The ritual involved curse and blood magic, to 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. Something is foul,” the girl explained.

Helena sat back again and 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 our own.”

She nodded. “Everyone who did not survive was turned, their identification changed to cursed and they attacked everything that had survived.”

“Retaining their abilities and combat sense?” Helena asked.

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 and remained so,” Amara replied.

Helena nodded. “Thank you. For your efforts and for bringing them to me. I’m glad you survived your mission,” she said and smiled before vanishing and carefully hugging the girl from behind.

She was tense, still scared, her trauma haunting her but perhaps a little less so than on the first day they had met.

“I trust you have interrogated the prisoners?” she asked.

The girl nodded, relaxing as the arms around her let go. “The officer had known about a dangerous spell and decided to defect. I’m certain he has nothing left to share.”

[Warrior – lvl 142]

Helena stepped to the shaking man, his body not showing 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 with a casual motion, cleaning off her hands on the appearing apron.

“The priest might know some things but I have failed to pry it 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 for him to 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.

“Do you like chocolate cake, mister...?” Helena asked as she sliced a piece and placed it on a small plate.

A few shrouded individuals appeared in the large open kitchen, one of them taking away the corpse, another one cleaning the floor.

“I will not talk with savages,” the man said before the last visitor slammed a hand into his throat, silencing him for the moment.

“That wasn’t necessary,” Helena said in a disappointed tone. “I wanted him to try,” she said and showed the cake.

“Apologies, mistress,” the man said and went to one knee.

“Hmm, no worries. Maybe you will like it instead,” she said and handed him the plate.

“I’m honored.”

“You darn well should be. Interrogate him. He is part of the order of truth,” she said and stepped back to her small round table. The cake was still hot.

“Understood,” the man clad in light black armor said, carefully holding his piece of cake as he gestured to the cleaning man in the same attire, the latter taking away the prisoner.

This is shaping up to be a dangerous conflict. If the order really infiltrated that deep, I do hope their lunacy has no foundation in magical theory.

She would await the interrogation. Until then, she still had a marvelous lemon cake recipe to perfect. A soft tune filled the room as she summoned flour and a few lemons, humming the melody of the latest hit to find Myrefield’s pubs.