

Chapter 523 To the Bone

She reached Hector when he lost his legs, a final swipe of the spear ending the mantis' boosted state.

Ilea instantly deflected its blows, her ash spreading towards Hector as she started to heal the man.

Her help was fleeting, her ash cut through by the warrior who realized what was happening.

"Just keep her busy," Hector growled as the dome of water reformed around him quickly. "That one is mine," he said and intercepted the warrior following Ilea.

Her?

Ilea didn't have time to wonder, her power slowly peaking as she still struggled against the powerful being.

The feeling she got from Veteran put the creature between four hundred and four fifty, not exactly the most useful gauge.

Compared to wild monsters, the mantis was vastly more powerful. It surpassed even the seven fifty vampire she had fought but with added intellect and cunning.

Ilea however had bested even that. If anything she was the more durable of the two.

Its defenses against her mana intrusion were shredded by now, its body lighting up with lines of fire whenever one of Ilea's limbs managed to deliver a dose of Storm of Cinders.

Ilea herself found it less impossible to keep up with the normal state of the warrior, the wounds its spear and magic inflicted lessening with each passing minute.

The creature once again activated its powerful aura but instead of going for her, it rushed to get to Hector.

You fuck!

Ilea blinked towards the man, using her two teleportation skills to keep up with the ridiculously fast moving mantis.

She arrived only to be met with an explosion of devouring blood.

The two mantises had teleported away right before, appearing now again to resume their assault.

"Go up!" she got out and deflected several blows, forced to displace herself when she misread a feint from the heavy warrior.

Her ashen armor had already reformed and she was glad to see Hector's sphere had withstood the explosion of blood magic.

"Stay at range, just go ham and ignore me," Ilea said as she charged the two.

Their coordination was good but their bodies were larger than hers. Using it against them wouldn't be as easy as with the healer but it might still prove effective.

Hector didn't complain, his beams and water flowing in immediately.

The spear mantis accepted her challenge, using the remaining time of her buff to deliver several blows as the two moved through the frozen city.

Ilea grinned when the last two blows were slightly deflected by shields made of pure blood.

She counted down and attacked the moment she didn't feel the pressure anymore, knowing that the creature could simply pretend there was a limit to its skill to lure her into a false sense of security. But Ilea could perceive magic. She felt the difference and it was like a wildfire compared to the crackling flames of a fireplace.

Michael or his copy didn't show himself yet, choosing to remain hidden somewhere within the many stone buildings.

She went for the heavy one again, thinking it impossible to put down the spear wielder without the help of Hector and perhaps even the whole team. Perhaps this time it would keep its focus on her instead of her teammates.

The mantis was close to her own level and its skill definitely showed. Its body was pure muscle, moving fast and precise.

It wielded its tree trunk like tooth with grace and experience, like any high level weapon's master she had faced before. Normally they didn't remain alive for more than a few seconds. This one however had the resilience to stand against her.

The powers it used however were somewhat inconsequential with the enemy it faced.

As long as she didn't get pinned down, Ilea could work on its defenses until her mana intrusion simply flowed into it without anything to stand in its way.

Her own injuries were healed near instantly but she doubted their regeneration was anywhere near close. Even Hector was floating inside of his sphere without his legs. He had stopped the bleeding but if he had to rely on his limbs like these creatures did, he would already be out of the fight.

Ilea fought defensively against the two, blinking and displacing herself between them or behind houses. Occasionally a blow would be deflected by a shield of blood, allowing her to escape or get in a hit uncontested.

They could cut or crash through rock and blood alike, sure, but their weapons would be slowed down. Enough for her to teleport again.

She was sure by now that the larger warrior had some form of precognition too, deflecting entirely too many of her attacks with his comically large weapon and body. He was quick for his size but nowhere near Ilea or the spear wielder.

Hector's beams and waves came in constantly, pushing both her and the mantises aside or forcing them to disengage. None of his attacks managed to be more than an annoying inconvenience but she knew what a difference they made.

Ilea noticed that the spear wielder was not particularly effective right after using her boost. She still used her abilities but acted more conservatively.

She abused it as much as she could, engaging the heavy mantis with everything she could dish out in the span of half a second before she focused on the defensive side again. Hector and Michael understood immediately, focusing their attacks on the spear wielder to distract her for a mere moment.

The distress in her enemy was slowly building up. Not in both. The female remained focused, still looking for the mistake that would bring them victory.

Ilea wouldn't give it to them however. She had extensive experience facing stronger enemies, knew when to take risks and when not to. She had fought monsters twice her level for hours on end.

These creatures were experienced and strong but in a way it even disappointed her how conservatively they fought. The Specters had used feints and deception just as often as the mantises.

They're not even taking risks!

It was also abundantly clear that the two lacked any experience fighting a bipedal creature as small and quick as Ilea. Her way of delivering damage might have come as a surprise too.

She saw the spear wielder disappear after her aura had activated.

Ilea ignored it and focused entirely on the heavy warrior, her ash now overwhelming him as she set it ablaze. She blinked to avoid its weapon and spread her ash as far as she could, hoping the building distress would lead it to make a mistake.

This one simply ignored the white flames burning on its carapace, perhaps thinking the damage inconsequential or simply not able to get them off.

Hector used the moment to play his remaining card, Neely slithering out from a wave to her right, her jaw closing around the warrior's body with a sickening crunch of breaking bone and gnawing flesh, most of it her own.

Ilea didn't waste the moment and hit the creature's face with a burst of her offensive skills as it stumbled back, trying to slap her away as she blinked.

She watched as it broke free of the eel and tried to teleport, her smile broadening as she stopped his spell with hers.

Ilea closed the distance at the same time, the quick confusion enough to grab onto it. It was definitely not a smart move if the spear wielder had still been close by.

Ilea poured reverse healing mana into the creature that slammed its tooth backwards before a bright blast of fire and energy surged out with Ilea at its center.

Heart of Cinder had charged long enough to pack a reasonable punch.

The stone house blew apart, most of it scorched or downright turned to ash by the powerful spell.

Ilea let go of the creature and healed the damage to her back, the mantis having delivered a powerful blow despite the awkward position it had been in.

The creature didn't look as good anymore, several beams of water hitting it right then.

It simply held up the tooth and endured.

Ilea turned left to find the spear mantis rush at her.

The creature stopped and looked at the state of its ally before she held out her talons.

Michael was gone, she knew it. Ilea hoped it was just a clone.

The heavy warrior glanced at the spear wielder and dropped its weapon. It looked towards the temple and dropped dead.

Visible strands of blood and energy flowed towards the remaining mantis before a spear of blood slashed through the air, taking with it a chunk of the power before it splattered against a nearby wall.

The mantis screeched and looked for the culprit, only to find Michael.

She seemed confused for a moment before she prepared her spear again. The absorbed energy had healed her but now she stood alone.

Michael smiled and watched her rush towards him.

Her spear was deflected by Ilea, her limbs slashing at the creature with renewed vigor.

“I’m just a copy,” Michael said.

“And just as useful as the original,” Ilea said as she deflected four thrusts, the fifth one punching into her chest. It didn’t dig far and the devouring power of her blood didn’t take much. Not anymore.

She knew she had gotten to the second tier somewhere along the way. If anything, it was proof of their shared status as monsters.

Ilea kept her spells up, as did Hector, and now also Michael.

The latter flew up and provided ranged support just like Hector did.

It was an obvious tactic that would overwhelm the creature at some point but the mantis didn’t seem to mind.

Ilea didn’t know its motivations or the thought processes that lead it into this situation but the being didn’t stop, it wanted them dead, here and now.

She boosted herself again and went for Michael, likely thinking him the easiest target.

Ilea kept pace, teleporting close to the creature and delivering more blows as Michael chained his teleportation and shields to somehow survive.

The creature screeched again when its buff came to an end, rushing to the outskirts of the city as it held up a hand towards the palace.

Ilea once again felt thoughts reach her.

Forgiveness, frustration, hopelessness.

They were not only directed at her. She could now feel the distress in the mantis.

Power came from the palace, red lines of blood rushing into the mantis too quickly for Michael to interfere. Some of its rough state was reversed, its eyes now focused entirely on the blood mage.

Something changed.

Felicia fought to stay awake but she had simply lost too much blood. Some mana was still there and she tried to send wind blades at the remaining two creatures.

One of them was busy with Michael and Velamyr, the other decided to finish her off.

She watched as it came, hesitating when Michael's last remaining copy stepped in its way.

Somehow she knew it was the copy she had worked with back in Harchat.

He looked at her and smirked, very much unlike his original self.

"Sometimes, the orders are exactly what I hoped for," he said and formed a few shields of blood.

His blades failed to cut the creature but he still succeeded in deflecting one of its blows.

Michael took a step back when his chest was pierced by the monster's talons.

No..., Felicia thought as her eyes grew dark once more.

"Go for the neck," Michael said and coughed, his body slowly dissolving as gold and blood alike flowed onto the creature.

It flailed, cutting away at the substances as its auras intensified.

I don't have long, she thought and aimed.

Her mana condensed into a single blade. She trusted him.

There was no finesse in her attack, just brute force. The creatures could see attacks coming but she released her blade nonetheless.

The thin line of air rushed out, brimming with enough power to cut into stone, sharp enough to rival the most prized blades.

She watched on as the gold turned rigid, the creature straining against the hold before a near invisible spell moved past its neck.

A ding resounded in her mind as she turned her eyes to the other two. Several more dings followed, informing her of levels to her Classes and skills.

Michael was missing an arm, several cuts showing in his armor. No blood seeped out.

Huh, being a blood mage is nice.

Velamyr wasn't in a much better shape, his armor mere shreds of steel.

He released a powerful surge of lightning against the last remaining enemy.

The mantis had lost its rope somewhere along the way, its left arm scorched beyond recognition.

And still it stood, still it fought.

Felicia couldn't believe what kind of monsters both her allies and her enemies turned out to be.

I have a long way to go still.

She could hardly believe it when the mantis glanced to the opening in the temple for a moment and then charged Velamyr.

It simply ran through the lightning and ignored the spikes of gold it had so delicately avoided during the entirety of their battle.

The mantis reached Velamyr and teleported at the same time as the man, both appearing in the same spot.

Its talons rushed out and slashed into the man, both of them coming down in a crash of dust and lightning.

Large spikes of gold and blood slammed into it but the creature didn't stop. It was in a frenzy, using its last breaths to take its enemy with it.

Felicia couldn't see what happened anymore.

She just heard another ding and saw something red flow out into the cold.

Michael stepped over to her and knelt down before vanished.

"Is... dead?" she got out, coughing a few times. Her magic was fading and the winds were calling for her to sleep. Pain rushed into her like the tide.

"I've heard about that ability before but I've never seen it," Michael said as he approached her again. "It's fortunate the mantis chose Velamyr as its final target. You would have not survived."

She felt something flow into her mouth and coughed a few times.

"Drink it. It will lessen the pain as you recover," Michael said and lifted her up with both arms.

"Velamyr is alive. His body reached a critical condition and his spell activated. It's good that this place had no enchantments against teleportation or time magic," he said as he moved her down the stairs.

"L... eaving?" she asked, a warm feeling spreading through her as the medicine started to take effect, lulling her thoughts.

"My last copy has perished. It's too much of a risk for me to remain here, as is the case for you," he said. "Try not to speak."

Ilea.

She tried to move out of his grasp.

"The remaining monsters are beyond us. It's not our hand that will decide their fate," Michael said. "Now sleep."

He carried her out into the freezing courtyard, past the watching creatures and through the gate.

Ilea and Hector were alone.

The remaining copy of Michael had been dispatched with the second use of the mantis' powerful aura.

She knew that the creature was running out of time.

Her attempts to take down Hector failed with Ilea's interference. Her direct attacks on Ilea were in turn made difficult with Hector's constant barrage.

Neely moved in from time to time but received devastating cuts and devouring damage from the mantis creature.

The battle had turned from two unknowns testing each other to a team of experienced hunters fighting a powerful beast.

Her tactics failed, her attempts at their lives resulting in injuries but never death.

And it turned out that despite her high level, the mantis had neglected her recovery.

A ridiculous notion to be sure. She could steal the health of any beast she fought, large chunks even. Her burst of power and speed would allow her to flee even in the most dangerous of situations while her devouring power could take down monsters over the span of hours.

Perhaps she could have killed Ilea or Hector. One lucky blow might have been enough but her experience in battle was matched by her opponents. When they struggled on their own, now they fought together.

Both were humans above level three fifty, both were humans with a third Class and enough power to rival high level creatures in the wild.

Ilea didn't understand why the mantis had acted they way it had.

They had tried to negotiate but it hadn't accepted, they had fought and overwhelmed her allies but she had not given up, had never even tried to run.

Until now.

The mantis still attacked them whenever her powerful body enhancement ability became available. Between the short scuffles, it rushed out of the city, through the snowy mountain pass and into the frozen desert beyond.

Ilea and Hector followed, too invested in the fight to let the creature go.

She knew it could wreak havoc on her allies or even just Gyffold itself, should it reach the other side.

Hector likely had other reasons, perhaps just trying to get revenge for his removed legs.

Ilea had taken the time to heal him between the mantis attacks but she could tell he was majorly pissed off.

Ilea finally came to a stop, Heart of Cinder eating away at her health after the long flight but she didn't dare not use it at this point.

The eclipse remained as a constant in the sky above, the air still and freezing as it settled around them.

Ilea knew this is where the creature would make its last stand.

It was ready to die, its eyes focused on the distant moon and the dim sunlight burning at its edges.

Hector charged an attack when the beast screeched, the deafening sound rolling through the even terrain for kilometers as it readied its spear and turned towards them.

“She’s calling for monsters. This place is fucking desolate, whatever can survive here is tough,” Hector said.

“Let them come,” Ilea said and floated down to the ground.

The man grinned, water flowing out around him, a part of it freezing instantly.

Ilea didn’t understand why the mantis had acted in this way but if it wanted to have one last battle here, she wouldn’t deny it.