

Chapter 527 Species

She finished healing the various guards, ignoring the confusion.

Two healers in guard armor arrived and spoke with the officer who pointed at her.

“We should go soon,” Felicia said.

“I know, I know,” Ilea said and waved to the officer, stepping through the gate as a few people shouted something.

Felicia followed and immediately started breathing more quickly.

“The mana or the cold?” Ilea asked, her healing mana flowing into the woman.

“Both,” Felicia said and activated her magic.

“Can you still talk with that active?” Ilea asked.

The woman had calmed, heat and energy exuding from her. She looked at Ilea and growled.

“Oh no,” Ilea said with a sigh. “Come then, I’ll lead you,” she said and grabbed Felicia’s hand.

The woman started laughing. “I’m kidding... I’m kidding,” she said.

Ilea didn’t let go, dragging her behind her and into the temple. She ignored the various creatures staring at them from behind pillars and half closed stone doors.

“I’ll keep you safe, Felicia, don’t worry,” she said, now clad again in her bone and ash armor.

“I’m being abducted,” Felicia said in a whisper.

Ilea finally let her go.

“Where to?” Felicia asked, her eyes focused, glancing at every movement she could perceive.

“I still don’t think you’re really there,” Ilea said and teleported up the stairs.

Felicia appeared next to her. “I’m more present than normally,” she said and checked the various corpses.

“This one had a storage ring,” she said, letting go of the armored human’s hand.

“Did the pirate take it?” she asked.

“Probably,” Ilea said. “I’m sure we’ll find him wherever there is treasure here.”

“Our idea of wealth might not line up with theirs,” Felicia said, checking the other two humans.

“Notebook,” she called out and waved the little booklet around.

“I really hope they think some random rubble is worthy to be stored in a vault,” Ilea said with a grin. “Written in Standard?”

“No,” Felicia said and handed it to her.

Ilea stored it in her necklace. “From the space mage?”

“Yeah, that was the one,” Felicia said.

“Why didn’t Michael already take it? The information might prove his involvement,” Ilea said.

“What do you mean?” Felicia asked.

She quickly told her about the conversation she had with the man.

“He didn’t look so good either. Maybe he made a mistake,” Felicia suggested.

“But he saved you instead?” Ilea asked. She wondered if she gave him too much credit. Felicia wasn’t much lower in level than him and even Velamyr had nearly been killed. He was probably running on fumes.

“I mean even if you prove his involvement... if anybody would get annoyed it would be Velamyr. Not that it would really be an issue even then. The gate to another realm would be seen favorable by many, even in Lys. Ryse’s views are not shared by all. If anything Michael would benefit in the end,” Felicia said. “They haven’t seen what you have. Nor do they comprehend the danger. Most nobles haven’t fought that kind of threat in their sheltered lives.”

“Really? But they’re nearly all at a high level for humans,” Ilea said.

“The wealth of a nation is not only weighed in gold, Lilith. Control over known dungeons and detailed knowledge on powerful Classes is just as important, if not more so. There are those who try to achieve high levels with their own power but many won’t risk death just to prove something. Not when an easier option exists. The gap between level one and one hundred is often even reached in secured training grounds where captured monsters get slaughtered by young heirs,” Felicia said.

Trian didn’t strike me as that inexperienced. But he said it’s family tradition to join the Hand. Which means they actually care about real experience and not just rare high level Classes.

“Not all families do it that way of course. My late father deemed us so unimportant, he had us join the training regime of the Redleaf monster factory,” Felicia said.

“Monster factory?” Ilea asked.

“Undesirable children, pushed to their limits with downright torturous training methods. Those who survived and showed promise were offered positions in various guilds, or were simply used as assassins, guards, or enforcers,” Felicia said.

“Wouldn’t they kill him or just escape once they’re strong enough?” Ilea asked.

“Some did, sure. But between being hunted as a criminal and getting a well paid job in the employ of an influential noble house, the choice is quite easy. You have to understand that most of those children didn’t chose their fate. They didn’t want to fight, did not necessarily enjoy it, like you do,” she said.

“I see. Sorry for your shit childhood,” Ilea said.

Felicia was quiet for a while.

A few ant creatures approached from one of the nearby stairwells. One of them made a few clicking sounds.

Ilea shook her head, not understanding anything.

The central ant gestured to one of the nearby bodies.

Ilea stored the three humans before she lifted one of the remaining corpses with a few ashen limbs.

The ant took a few steps back, obviously in distress. It seemed to calm down when Ilea carefully moved the corpse closer.

She put the body onto the ground and stepped away, choosing a nearby stairwell that led down.

Felicia followed, giving both the ants and Ilea a few glances.

"I appreciate the notion. It could have been better," she said. "And yet it all forged me into who I am today."

"Fucker could have been removed earlier though," Ilea said.

Felicia giggled but didn't say anything else.

Ilea tried to make contact with the creature again, getting a response immediately.

She blinked a few times and arrived in front of a destroyed stone gate.

"Once my position in Lys is more established, I'll try to push for laws that would prevent what my father did," Felicia said.

"I doubt you'll get much support from the nobility," Ilea said and entered the area.

Everything here looked a little cleaner than upstairs. Statues of various creatures lined the walls in the long corridor. Five massive stone gates lined each side of the hall, an even larger one at the end.

"That remains to be seen," Felicia said with a grin. "The Destroyer is here."

"I know," Ilea said, hearing the man throw around metal or furniture.

Four of the stone gates had been destroyed already, cut apart by beams of water if she could interpret the damage correctly.

"Found the vaults?" she asked.

The man grumbled a few words in a language she didn't speak.

"Unsure," he finally said, popping out from behind a few chests with a large crystal held in his hand.

"Worthless," he said and threw it behind himself.

Ilea couldn't help but laugh. "Did you break the enchantments yourself?"

"No enchantments," Hector said. "Someone is interfering with my activities here. Maybe that thing behind the massive gate at the end of the hall."

"Tried to talk to it?" Ilea asked.

"I'm not a monster whisperer like you," he said.

"You literally summon creatures," Ilea said.

"Of the deep... the ocean, yes. Do you see water around?" he asked, glancing at her for a moment before he opened another chest. "No. Didn't think so," he added and threw a stone statue behind himself, the thing vanishing before it hit the ground. "Now let me go through all this crap... why even store this?" he asked as he looked at another thing before throwing it.

Ilea watched as space itself distorted, catching the thrown marble before it appeared in another section of the room.

Why not just kill him? Or push him away? she wondered. Maybe it can't.

But it can teleport random objects here.

Ilea followed his advice, much more interested to meet the entity than going through more treasure. Especially because she couldn't see any gold or other precious metals in the area.

Hello, she sent again.

Hello, the thought came back but distorted, imitated, and not spoken with understanding of the word itself.

She sent a calm thought to the creature, stepping out into the hall and towards the large round gate at the end of it. A few torches lit the area, flickering from time to time.

Felicia followed in silence.

A thought came back.

She saw a bustling city of stone, thousands of creatures communicating in sounds she couldn't comprehend. She saw the distant mountains, the desert, and the sun burning down from above.

It was accompanied by feelings. Some she couldn't grasp but others felt like pride and love.

"I think it's showing me what this place was," Ilea said.

"Are you talking to it?" Felicia asked.

"No... I don't think it speaks our language," she said.

Her companion slowed down as they approached the gate. "The air is....," she said.

"What's wrong?" Ilea asked and reached out with her ash.

The mana, she thought. "You might want to stay back."

Felicia nodded and teleported towards the other end of the hall.

Ilea touched the gate, feeling power within. She couldn't perceive any enchantments however.

Can I enter? she sent.

The being didn't reply.

Instead she spread her ash and formed a replica of the gate and herself, making the gate open before she walked inside.

The being sent a wave of emotions that amounted to *danger*.

To me or it?

She didn't know but she really wanted to see the creature. If anybody in this place had answers, it was this being. And Ilea didn't want to wait for the spirits to reach the fissure.

Instead of opening the gate, she blinked inside. Or tried to.

The spell didn't work and she appeared in front of the area.

She used displacement instead, appearing in a dim hallway that led deeper into the structure.

Her sphere had been able to pierce the gate but now that she appeared, she understood the warning.

The mana here was damn near physical, if such a thing was possible.

She could feel it around her.

And she could feel the presence ahead. Clearer now.

Lilith.

The thought came to her. *A question? A thought?*

She pointed at herself. "Lilith," she said out loud and sent the thought at the same time.

Ilea pointed forward.

The being didn't send anything.

Another gate blocked the way about five meters ahead.

Ilea once again displaced herself through.

The mana grew denser still. She could see space itself distorting here, more wisps visible than normal.

Her resistance to arcane magic was far into the third tier, making this place only slightly uncomfortable.

A rug with detailed symbols sewn in lay on the ground.

She pointed at it.

A thought reached her. The image of a mantis. Not just any but the one she had faced in battle. The Queen.

Zaiked, Ilea sent.

The being sent a set of emotions. Hard to discern. There was anger, fear, uncertainty, and pride. A different pride than the one she had felt before.

Ilea teleported through the last gate.

She took a deep breath and steadied herself, feeling the full extent of the being's power.

It was, manageable.

Is it the being? Or is this simply the required density of mana for it to survive?

Hello, the creature sent, clearer yet again. Its voice sounded similar to her own, an imitation perhaps.

Hello, Ilea sent back.

Who are you? she asked.

Unsure.

She stepped forward.

The rounded tunnel opened up into a large space. A meadow of pitch black grass spread before her, broken up by a thin creek with clear flowing water. Golden fireflies lent their warm light to the surroundings, a gentle breeze brushing through the grass and past her ash.

Atop a small hill about fifty meters in stood a large tree made entirely of crystal. From its trunk to the many leaves hanging from its branches, everything shimmered in a pale blue light.

Ilea stepped closer to the tree, seeing the grass part below her ash covered boots. The fireflies were within her sphere's range but she couldn't see them. Not with the spell.

She stopped before crossing the creek, holding out her hand to one of the flying creatures.

It landed on her outstretched fingers and flattered its wings but she neither felt nor perceived it.

An illusion?

The wisps suggested something else entirely, something she could not comprehend.

Maybe I just stepped into the world devouring equivalent of a carnivorous plant.

Her instincts told her she was safe but who was to say the creature didn't have a way to influence her towards that decision?

No. Fear, the creature said.

Safe.

"That's exactly what a flesh eating plant would say," Ilea said.

Unsure.

"No, I'm pretty sure about that," she said and smirked.

She tried to identify the little firefly, pretty sure that the tree was the creature that was speaking to her. Though the high mana density made it difficult to pin point its location.

~~[*понимание* - lvl ????~~]

Of course, she thought and squinted at the fly.

Veteran had a hard time grasping at this creature's true power but she knew it was above even level two thousand.

Ilea wasn't particularly scared. She respected its power but she had felt no animosity so far. If it really was just a murder plant, it would have eaten her minutes ago. Or tried to.

Who's stronger? A Fae or this thing? That would be an interesting fight, she thought with a smile.

"Are you at least learning my language?" Ilea asked. "I don't know if we can have a detailed conversation with images and emotions alone."

She sat down on the grass and summoned a meal, seeing the grass move away.

Hmm, she tried to pluck a blade off the ground and found herself unable to accomplish the task.

Ilea squinted and identified the ground.

~~[*понимание* - lvl ????~~]

Oh.

"Am I sitting on you?" she asked and displaced herself back and beyond the grassy meadow.

An amused thought reached her.

No fear. You are safe here.

“So you are learning... what about the others? Are they not safe here?” Ilea asked. She pointed behind herself and asked again. “Safe?”

No safe. Danger.

“Danger... why?” she asked.

Unsure.

This is getting kind of taxing, Ilea thought and sighed. The food was good at least and it felt nice to talk to something that wasn't human for a change.

Zaiked is death?

“She's dead, yes,” Ilea said. “I'm sorry.”

I'm... regret.

“Did she imprison you here?” Ilea asked.

Unsure.

Ilea asked a bunch of questions, using visual aides from her ash to clarify words and meanings.

It had already been clear that this creature was insanely powerful and intelligent but she didn't really see a reason why she shouldn't teach it Standard.

If anything it would help clear up if the creature was a monstrous devourer, an uninterested third party, a prisoner, or something entirely different. So far it was clear that the being had some connection to the queen. It was unclear as of yet if that was a good thing for Ilea, or the opposite.

Prison, the being said into her mind fifteen minutes later.

No prison. My... home, it said.

“You live here? Why the gates?” Ilea asked.

Protection against... mana?

“The ambient mana here is pretty dense, yes. It's like that in the whole realm,” she said.

Damaging to... organism. You... survive. Can stay here... surprise.

“I'm pretty durable,” Ilea said with a smile.

Survived... battle with... Zaiked. Yes, durable. Amusement, the being said.

“Are you that tree?” Ilea asked, forming an ashen tree and pointing towards the pale blue thing.

Body? No. Am here, the being said.

“Here, where?” Ilea asked before she understood. “Aha... you're this whole room?”

Hmm.

“Did you open the space gate to our realm?” she asked, trying to illustrate with her ash.

One... option. Yes. Queen Zaiked disliked. Did not believe... enemy. Pride too much. Survival not priority. She... refused flight.

“So you opened the gate to flee? Because of the Spirits out there?” Ilea asked.

I can survive. Awakened here cannot. Protected here but starving... soon. Cold permeate and Spirits will... come.

“Awakened?” Ilea asked.

You. Awakened. Zaiked. Awakened.

“I see... so sapient creatures. Beings that can think?” Ilea asked. *Or just really high level sapients?*

Eyes. Yes.

“Freaky way to put it but I guess. So the barriers that protect this place, that’s your doing?” she asked.

Yes. Straining but... possible.

“It’s hard to keep the cold out?” she asked.

Spirits.

“But you’re a much higher level... even than the Astral Spirits I’ve seen. Couldn’t you just slaughter them?” Ilea asked.

The Spirits... devour... mana. Too many are... impossible to defeat. And you have met... mundane creatures only. Daughters of Sephilon shall devour even... I

“Pretty scary if they can even defeat a creature like you,” Ilea said. “Can they go through the gate?”

Yes, but they will die. Or return. Your realm cannot sustain... them.

“It can’t sustain the beings here either. Many came and turned into monsters... they lost their awakening if you will,” Ilea said.

It was impossible... to tell. I needed cooperation from Awakened. Your... species replied.

“They thought this was the Realm of Life... what did you promise them?” she asked.

Awakening, the being said.

“But we are already awakened... or am I wrong?” Ilea asked.

Not they. Other beings, lost in their natural way, seeking light but treading in the dark.

“You know how to awaken monsters? To make them sapient?” Ilea asked. That would be interesting but scary at the same time. Humanity had plenty of enemies already. *The north however, could flourish with civilization once more,* she thought.

Only through one’s own efforts can one awaken. Few ever find awakening themselves but my guidance can influence the odds.

“How?” Ilea asked.

I warn them of danger, lead them to food and water. I nudge them towards Wisdom and Intelligence until they can make decisions on their own.

“So you helped every creature here awaken?” Ilea asked.

No. Reproduction does not cease but Awakening changes a species. The benefits are often hereditary. Sometimes they’re not, the being explained.

“Why do all that in the first place?” Ilea asked.

Why do you eat?

“I love food,” Ilea replied.