

***‘ding’ ‘You hugged an ancient and powerful creature to show emotional support – One Core skill point awarded’***

*Maybe I should try to flirt with it to get more points!*

The meadow rustled as a breeze flowed through.

*“You said that our time was limited before. How long exactly are we talking? If the survivors eat meat, I can supply them with cut off limbs from my own body if need be,”* Ilea said.

*“When the eclipse reaches its most central point, the Daughters of Sephilon may descend. They perceive even through the shroud of my magic and they will come,”* the Meadow said.

*“And when exactly is that?”* Ilea asked.

*“One day from now,”* the Meadow said.

*“Fuck... I don’t know if I can reach meaningful progress in that time. I better get back to fighting instead of wasting time with talks,”* she said.

*“I was merely joking,”* Endless Meadow said.

Ilea blinked her eyes a few times. “What?” she said out loud.

Another rustling went through the area.

*“Michael has supplied me with books. Amusing stories of yours but often built with unlikely scenarios. Do you not think it would be an extraordinary coincidence that the eclipse should reach its central position one day after your arrival?”* it said.

*“Well maybe the portal itself was only possible when that central position was reached,”* Ilea suggested with a shrug.

*“Space Magic doesn’t work that way, young Lilith. And I shall teach you. No. We have three hundred of your days until the Daughters may descend. Though should I show myself, they may appear already,”* it said.

*“So they can come anyway?”* Ilea asked.

*“Should they find suitable magic for their unlimited need. I don’t think too highly of myself but there is a lot of power here. Enough that even the strains of lower mana might be born to feast, if only for a little while,”* the meadow explained.

*“So it’s exactly like one of those stories!”* Ilea said.

*“Only if I show myself!”* the Meadow replied.

Ilea squinted. *Who’s more annoying. This guy, my system voice, or the Fae? I think I preferred that incomprehensible glob of a thousand consciousnesses.*

*At least Meadow is sharing information.*

*“Why is it an issue anyway? Can you not fight them off?”* she asked.

*“I have survived the last time but few Awakened would be able to survive the wake of such a battle,”* it said.

*I would. Probably. Now I kinda want to see it.*

*“I have another question... my third Class. How likely is it to evolve at level two or three hundred?”* she asked.

*“It should not evolve until you pass the levels you were at upon its acquisition,”* Meadow said.

*So past three fifty?*

*“What about core points? Do I get them after three fifty? For the third Class I mean,”* she said.

*“I believe once they are unlocked, you will receive them in the stead of Class specific third tier points, wherever that may be for your species,”* Meadow said.

*First one at two hundred then?* Ilea wondered. This creature really was a well of information. At this point she didn't see a reason to distrust its claims, mostly because it didn't pretend to know all the answers, simply providing assumptions.

It would take time to prove if its assumptions would be worth anything.

*“Is there a Fae in this realm?”* she asked, having thought of the creatures.

*“What's a Fae?”* the Meadow replied as a ripple went through the space around her.

*“Was that you?”* she asked.

Another rustle went through the grass. This time is sounded deceptively like a sigh.

*“You cannot even detect the source of that fracture? And you call yourself a space mage? Perhaps I should have a look at your healing too,”* it said.

*“Why? Are you a healer too?”* she asked.

*“Of course I have a healing Class. How do you think I survived this long? Even true Elementals fall to time and wear,”* it said.

Ilea doubted that. *“Really? Have you seen one die?”*

*“Have you?”* the being asked.

*“I did in fact. Yes,”* she said. *Though I don't know if that was a true Elemental. Maybe there's a difference.*

*“Then that proves my point. You too have surely survived thanks to your healing. Though I hardly feel any life attuned mana from you,”* it said.

*Shithead.*

*“That's because I don't have life based healing,”* Ilea said.

*“You don't? But how would you heal then?”* it asked.

She used her ash to cut into her arm before she healed the wound with Sentinel Reconstruction.

*“Purely arcane... that's. A first,”* Meadow said.

*“Haha... Lilith does it again. Surprising a four mark with my incredible powers,”* she said.

*Stolen from an ancient healing order without any knowledge as to the Class' creation.*

*"Hey how did you not see that before anyway? I was constantly using it," Ilea said.*

*"I'm not all seeing, Lilith. Nor omnipresent. I do want to see that again... if you're willing," it said.*

Ilea shrugged. *"Sure, start with your space magic lessons though. We only have three hundred days after all. Let's put my ten thousand Intelligence to work."*

*"That's not how Intelligence works at all. It simply increases your magic skill damage and some other attributes connected to your skills," it said. "I see... you were joking? I am learning."*

*"Yeah, I'm not, so get on with with," Ilea said.*

"Do you still have them?" Felicia asked. Her smile was gone now, replaced by an air of tension and exhaustion.

It had been about ten to twelve hours since Ilea had last seen her. The woman hadn't used her mark to call for aid which made her focus on her training for most of the day.

Powerful enchantments and physical barriers had been placed within the ritual hall used by the Order. Anything that came out of the gate would face several dozen guards in the level one fifty range.

Ilea just hoped Meadow's concealment would really keep the spirits away, otherwise a single one would cause a bloodbath here. So far it had worked.

Most of the guards near the actual gate hadn't minded her, the story of her healing the injured must have spread in the meantime. One of them informed her about Felicia's whereabouts but her mark let her find the woman faster than any directions would have allowed.

The officers and nobles in the large and luxurious assembly hall looked at her with the usual mix of skepticism, fear, and arrogance.

While Ilea had trained, Felicia had dealt with the nobles and officials of Gyffold. And the local representatives of the Order of Truth.

It seemed Felicia's assumption had been true and they didn't dare strike directly at a Major of Lys. Not once the evidence had been considered.

Ilea saw a letter with familiar handwriting too. Some of Yinnahall's couriers must have arrived.

She remained covered in ash, stepping a few meters away from the group. "I do," Ilea said before the three corpses appeared on a bed of ash that vanished again as the bodies were slowly lowered to the ground.

A few gasps resounded, mostly from those present wearing the traditional Order robes.

Their whispers had never ceased but neither Felicia nor Ilea spoke the native tongue.

A few people looking like adventurers talked to Felicia, translating what they heard.

*Probably filtering out anything that might suggest betrayal, Ilea thought.*

Only two of the twenty three people present had a level above Felicia's, one being Ilea. And knowing her abilities, Ilea doubted the woman had any difficulties getting away.

*Or calling for me in the absolute worst case.*

She turned to look at the people, her appearance likely crushing any hope for retaliation they might have harbored.

*They knew I was here from the reports, surely. But seeing something in person is always a little different.*

Ilea smiled wickedly under her armor, purposefully swaying her ash a little more than usual. Benedict surely didn't leave out her involvement dealing with a few problematic elements.

*I can feel your distress,* she thought, locking eyes with a few of them.

"Thanks," Felicia said as she joined her, touching her back briefly. "Do you have a moment to talk?"

Ilea nodded, the two vanishing together.

She followed Felicia to the fancy door in one of the large government building's corridors.

"Various enchantments to add privacy," Felicia said as she turned the key.

Ilea looked at the magic woven into the walls, her sphere not enough to make out the detailed structure of it all but enough to supply her with some knowledge on their purpose. It wasn't based on understanding but familiarity.

"How do you know they're not listening to us?" Ilea asked when the door closed behind her.

Felicia sighed, plopping onto a large leather chair. "I had Michael have a look. The translators are independent adventurers I hired. But in the end they could still be listening. If I want to keep the benefits of being seen as a diplomat, I'll have to play by some of their rules however.

"Honestly... I like having a nice room for a change," she said and smiled.

Ilea smiled back, her armor receding now to reveal her casual clothes.

"Gods, you look so different without that thing on," Felicia said. "It's like you really have two people stuck in there."

"I'm just as dangerous," Ilea said as she summoned a meal, choosing to sit in a chair herself.

"Oh I know. You should have heard the questions they asked about you. I was almost offended at the lack of respect they seemed to have for me!" Felicia said.

"Only one guy was higher than you. And honestly, the bunch didn't strike me as veteran combat experts," Ilea said as she dug in. She hadn't eaten for a while.

"YES! I got so close to just ripping them apart. So close, Lilith," Felicia said. "But alas, a diplomatic solution is necessary. The first few hours were chaotic but I think the reality of the situation is setting in," Felicia said.

"Which is them having a gate to another world in the middle of their city?" Ilea asked.

"No. That part they think is highly beneficial somehow. Despite their continued inability to even traverse the lands. One adventurer team even lost a member, pushing too far into the city in the hopes of finding treasure," Felicia said and shook her head. "They even think it a bargaining chip to use for better terms with Lys."

"So they're willing to make peace?" Ilea asked.

Felicia shook her head. “They’re willing to become independent. The reports mentioned various cities already discussing such internally and with our forward forces. They’re in for a rude awakening however, if they think they can come out of this war with complete independence. Lys isn’t known for backing down and they’ve already marched into these lands.”

“I don’t really care. As long as they abolish slavery and the people responsible for the rituals are held accountable,” Ilea said.

Felicia grinned. “The latter might be difficult but trust me, I’m not the only one who will demand justice. Officially, or not.”

“What about the capital?” Ilea asked.

“Likely no ritual. The local nobles and high Order members agree that it’s highly unlikely. The High King himself might have the capacity to unleash an attack on his own city but he wouldn’t risk turning the nobility against himself. However a part of our talks include members of the Order infiltrating Baralia to make sure nothing was even set up. Their connections and knowledge will make sure our chances of preventing another such tragedy are higher than if our group simply charged in again.

“The high king has concentrated all his powerful allies in the capital. It wouldn’t be as simple to infiltrate it, not even for our group. It’s going to be a long siege,” she said and smirked.

“How is that funny?” Ilea asked.

“I just think it’s amusing that his hubris led to the siege of Virilya. And now his country is split into devastated towns, cities seeking independence, and a fortified capital soon to be besieged,” Felicia said.

“He could just leave with his followers,” Ilea said.

“He won’t. Not according to the locals. A god does not bow to invading heathens,” she said.

“Instead he will die, surprised to find himself not quite as immortal as he made himself out to be.”

“I don’t think I’ll participate in that case,” Ilea said.

“I expected as much. But I still thought it important to inform you at least,” Felicia said.

“I do appreciate it,” Ilea said. “What will you do?”

“I will follow Velamyr’s lead once he returns. I’m sure he’ll be interested in joining the siege himself,” Felicia said.

“Still no word from him?” Ilea asked.

“I doubt there will be anything for a week or longer. Maybe months... he never shared the specifics of his ability with me. It’s quite challenging... balancing my own wishes and anticipating his, while conducting my talks with the local government,” she said.

“Sounds like several migraines, mixed together and infused into one’s brain,” Ilea said.

“It’s not that bad. To me at least. But every mistake could cost my House dearly,” she said. “And the population of Gyffold.”

Ilea chuckled. “Well, I’m glad to be fighting monster hordes instead.”

Felicia summoned a glass of wine, raising it to her. “Monsters that shouldn’t reach this plane. I’m wary of that Meadow.”

“So far I have a good impression. Just because it’s an incredibly powerful entity doesn’t mean it can’t have common interests with us lowly humans,” she said.

“I suppose you’re right but everything in my body screams to run just walking too close to its room. I don’t think humanity should meddle with creatures like that,” she said.

“The world is more expansive than the plains you call your home, Felicia. And there are monsters out there we cannot defeat. Not alone. Not yet,” Ilea said.

Felicia took a sip of wine as she considered.

“I know you’re not the same anymore... but you have to know the consequences. Should that thing come here and decide we’re its enemy,” she said.

“I doubt there there is a way for it to come. I just don’t see a reason for it to lie in the first place. It could have attacked me already. Its thoughts and emotions are genuine,” Ilea said. “And so far it’s the only possible creature that could close the gate. We have no choice but to offer what we can in exchange.”

*I would ask the Fae but its whereabouts are a mystery.* Her mark on the being wasn’t a help, its location somehow eluding her skill.

“Could it not manipulate those thoughts and emotions? Even your mind?” Felicia asked. “It’s a four mark after all.”

“I’ve met powerful mind mages. Endless Meadow is not one of them. It may be able to trap me in a secluded space or eat me alive but it can’t manipulate my thoughts. I trust my defenses to prevent that,” she said.

Felicia didn’t seem convinced.

*Understandable,* Ilea thought. She had met and conversed with creatures most humans thought to be a myth. She even cooperated with Elves, something that would surely antagonize the Lily if it ever became known.

It was easy to dismiss an incomprehensible being as something that could not be trusted but if anything, Ilea trusted it more on the simple fact that it wasn’t human. It had the power to do what it wanted. Deception simply wasn’t necessary.

And if she could somehow find a way to get the creature here and convince it to go along. She would. While surely even Claire would be skeptical, someone like Catelyn might be more open to the thought.

“There will be opposition to closing the gate,” Felicia said.

“Not from Velamyr,” Ilea said. “Not that I really care. Let them try and exploit Erendar somehow. It’s the equivalent of a portal to the north. I doubt many would think favorably of that. I would, but that’s an entirely different story.”

“Just know that I won’t get too involved there. Velamyr will be on your side but it may not be enough,” Felicia said.

“I’ll deal with it if anything comes up,” Ilea said.

*I doubt anybody will even know. Nor would they be able to oppose Meadow. Or me for the matter.*

*It would be an issue if it turned out Meadow was hostile all along. But that in itself would be more of a problem than anything the Empire could cause for me.*

So far it had shown no way to move around and while the threat of the Ascended remained, Ilea didn't see the downside of adding another insane creature to her potential allies.

"Maybe you could use this too," Ilea said and summoned the notebook they had found on the space mage.

"You didn't want to read it first?" Felicia asked.

Ilea shrugged. "Let me know if you find out anything that could be of value for me," she said.

"I will. Coupled with everything in the storage ring, I doubt anyone with some reason left in this place would still doubt the truth," Felicia said.

She summoned the ring and handed it to Ilea. "It's empty now. Here's a list of the contents but I doubt you'd be interested in anything," she said and handed the piece of paper to her.

"You already have a storage item, right?" Ilea asked.

The woman gestured to her earring with a smile.

"I wouldn't accept it either," she said and stood up. "Make sure to check in every other day. Just in case something big comes up."

"I will," Ilea said and stored the ring. "Good luck in your negotiations."

Felicia smiled and stood up, downing the rest of her wine before she made the glass vanish. "There is no luck needed," she said

Ilea rolled her eyes and vanished.

She was back through the portal in less than a minute, nobody standing in her way.

The adventurers currently preparing to enter just stared at her, their thick plate and enchanted cloaks in stark contrast to the sleek ash armor of the healer that passed them.

She smiled to herself, her wings spreading on her back before she ascended up and past the temple.