

Chapter 508 A hunch

Nicholas formed a barrier in front of Carson, leaving a small slit open for him to shoot through.

The mantis focused back on Owen, its frenzied blows deflected before the man vanished, unable to hold back the creature any longer.

Another spell ripped on its leg, further weakening the link.

They were mobile and could teleport but as soon as they lost even one leg, their combat efficiency was drastically reduced. Nicholas just wondered why they were this frenzied.

He could feel that the mana in Seyna had been higher than in its surroundings. The creatures were summoned from somewhere but even then it wasn't a common behavior for insect like monsters. He had fought different mantis species before and they were more often than not hunters, hiding in the shadows before they ambushed their prey.

The abilities of this Pear Mantis Sire suggested that such behavior would be the most efficient too. And yet it charged without regard for its own safety.

Owen used a few blood magic abilities to boost his speed and strength before he rushed the creature, his blows matching it now. The few injuries he sustained healed again quickly, his armor and skin barely standing in the way of the powerful Mantis claws.

He had the technique however and years of experience fighting humans and monsters alike.

Arrows and void magic continued to injure the Mantis, its weak spots more exposed now that it was focused on the sword master.

A few well placed small barriers prevented grave injuries as the two continued their battle.

The mantis would occasionally focus on the others, teleporting through the room and attacking, finding barriers in its way each and every time.

When it appeared next to Carson, an arrow glanced past its head before its attack came.

Nicholas opened his eyes wide as he tried to adjust the barrier, moving it sideways to deflect the sudden change of its angle.

It happened a moment later but his barrier simply wasn't fast enough.

The Mantis dodged the next arrow and again circled the man, only to find Owen appearing in its way. "What's happening!?" he shouted.

Nicholas had no idea. *Almost like its instincts returned.*

The moment passed as fast as it had appeared, the mantis back to its frantic attacks on Owen as they defended together.

No, Nicholas thought when Maria appeared behind the blood mage, a dagger slamming into his neck with precision and speed she hadn't shown before.

His barrier had been too late.

Nicholas took a step back as he watched the Mantis slam into his arcane shield that still protected Owen, the man now grasping for the dagger in his neck.

“What are you doing?!” Carson shouted and shot an arrow at her as he jumped backwards.

The projectile vanished inside the air around her.

She ignored him and instead slammed her second dagger into Owen’s side.

The man managed to deflect the blow slightly, his magic surging before he tried to get to her.

I knew it... she behaved weirdly... why would anyone want to get close to Owen? That fucking idiot!

He didn’t know what to do.

The woman had vanished, entirely out of sight and he had no way to track her other than through his divination. The Pearl Mantis teleported too.

I can’t protect him, he thought as he looked at Carson. She’s going to kill us all, why? Why me?

Owen finally grabbed the dagger in his neck and pulled it out with a wet sound and quite a bit of blood. He moaned in pain and went to one knee, ripping out the other dagger.

“That bitch!” he spat, the word barely comprehensible.

His eyes were bloodshot under his helmet. The strike had been expertly done, right between his helmet and armor.

Carson had his daggers ready now too, running towards Owen as he glanced around nervously.

“You little shit! You planned this with her, didn’t you?!” he shouted, looking at the barrier mage.

Nicholas took a step back as he watched the man with disbelief. “Me?” he simply asked, confusion and fear overtaking him.

“Are you okay?!” Carson shouted before he held his chest. He dodged to his left before a part of his arm vanished.

The Mantis appeared again and charged the two.

Nicholas had seen enough, he turned around and teleported, only to find that his spell didn’t work.

He ran instead.

A few screams and shouts resounded from behind as he entered the hallway, not stopping for anything as he dashed over the corpses.

Need to get out.

Find help.

The army.

He knew their positions were quite far away and something had stopped him from teleporting.
Enchantments, an aura, or spell?

He used his teleportation again and appeared in a random room. He tried to calm himself down, using both meditation and his divination.

His eyes opened and he focused. *Where to?*

A hunch.

He teleported.

Instead of leaving the temple immediately, he went through many of its rooms and hallways before finally appearing in the large open space in front of it.

It wasn't the fastest way out but Maria had the advantage there anyway. What he could do is use his magic.

He looked at the various streets before he finally sighed and chose the middle one. He knew it to be the right way.

The next five minutes went by in a flash, Nicholas teleporting time and time again. He knew that Maria was after him, too many wrong choices presenting themselves. And still, a few right ones remained.

His magic wouldn't protect him forever, not against someone like her, but he would buy as much time as he could.

When he appeared close to one of the temples they had already searched, he felt a powerful pull. Everything behind him turned dark, cold. Dead.

A single thread of golden light appeared in front of him. The third tier had activated. He was about to die.

His last jump brought him into a large hall, two people turning his way.

"Who the fuck's this?" the man asked, his leathers, demeanor, the water around him, and his high level made Nicholas shiver.

He had heard stories about a pirate sailing the most dangerous known parts of the eastern ocean. He felt like the painting he had seen had come to life before him. The Destroyer, a title earned with centuries of bloodshed, long past by now. His death had never been confirmed and Nicholas had doubted the man had died at all.

The woman next to him was clad in ash, wings and tendrils moving lazily as she inspected him with curious eyes. *That must be Lilith*, he thought, the songs and stories not doing her justice. She wasn't grand and spectacular, she felt more subdued to him. A monster skilled in battle, lethal and unstoppable.

He felt great danger, from both of them. And yet his thread of fate had led him here. The only way out.

"I was separated from my group," he said finally, trying to catch his breath. His heart was pounding but somehow he was less afraid of these two monsters than he had been when Owen approached him for this mission.

Childhood memories triumphed over newfound dangers. He nearly smiled.

"We were a strike team sent to find the ritual site," he added hastily.

"Did you succeed?" Lilith asked. She extended an ashen limb to him, the thing brushing against his chest before it retreated. It felt surprisingly warm.

A comforting feeling. He found himself grasping for the retreating ash.

Nicholas shook his head, his cheeks growing red from embarrassment as the pirate started laughing. "Yes... yes, we found it but the monsters that appeared were too much for us. One of my companions was stabbed in the neck, I don't know what happened to the others."

Sprinkle in the truth or they might know.

“Quite stupid to be stabbed in the neck,” the pirate said.

“They can teleport... the Mantis Sire,” he said, trying not to look back.

He knew Maria was close. She was listening. He hoped she was.

Nicholas had never interacted with the woman. He had no reason to believe she would want him dead. It could mean many things but right now, he was reasonably sure she simply wanted him dead because he was a witness.

Owen and Carson had many enemies. He assumed she was hired by them or one herself.

Not revealing what had happened was his only lifeline. Even if he could convince the two monsters before him, they couldn't hunt her down. She was a void mage.

He had to convince Maria that he was no danger to her and even then, there was a high chance she would still kill him. *Now I know it's coming though. I have to find a void magic user to get a resistance, or I could vanish entirely. My family could help but if she's determined enough to kill members of the Karrick family, she won't hold back against us either. I don't want anyone dead, damn it.*

“You fought level four hundred creatures with your puny ass magic?” the pirate asked.

“Leave him alone, he's obviously terrified,” Lilith said and rolled her eyes as she approached. “Can you get us there? We're looking for the ritual site too.”

He nodded quickly. *It's the reasonable thing. Anything else they'd think suspicious.*

His heart had calmed down a little, his mind focused as he continued to use his divination to try and predict what they wanted to hear, what they would do.

“How did you even find us? This isn't exactly an army position,” the pirate said.

“Why are you so suspicious?” Lilith asked.

“A hunch,” the man said and shrugged. He glanced at him with a smirk on his face.

He knows. Shit!

“We had already cleared this temple,” Nicholas said honestly. It was lucky that there had been no Mantis Sire here, otherwise why would they now lose to them?

“It felt like the monster behaved differently in the end... as if its instincts returned,” he shared the weird realization with them, hoping it would somehow lead credibility to his plea.

“Interesting,” Lilith said. “Come on, let's go. Maybe they survived.”

No they didn't, Nicholas thought and ran out of the temple.

Ilea and Hector followed the man through the streets. It wasn't long until they found another temple.

"What's your name anyway?" she asked him.

'ding' 'Divination Magic Resistance reaches lvl 7'

Huh? Not now Cless!

"Nicholas Walker," the man replied. He had black hair and eyes. A mage at level two hundred and ten, quite small and thin compared to herself. He wore a gray robe with an imperial insignia near his heart, the thing had a lot of blood on it.

"Walker family, why would they send someone like you to the front?" Hector asked.

Why is he so suspicious? Ilea wondered.

"I've funded and taken part in a lot of expeditions over the last decade. Someone had to go and I was chosen because of my experience. You likely know about our usual lack of interest in these affairs, Captain Destroyer," the man said.

What? He knows who Hector is? Maybe he was right all along.

Hector downright dripped with smugness. It was just water of course but his smile already annoyed her.

"I'm glad to hear my name is not entirely lost within the plains," he said.

Ilea rolled her eyes as they teleported through the temple.

"I did not expect to meet you here, together with Lilith out of everyone," Nicholas said and glanced at her shyly.

"You know me too?" Ilea asked.

"The man knows a lot more than he's letting on. He's using divination spells," Hector said.

"OH. That was you!" Ilea said and laughed. "You can get names with magic?"

"No he can't, don't you know anything about other magic schools?" Hector asked.

"Fuck off pirate, I didn't ask you," Ilea said.

Nicholas looked between them like a scared deer. "I can guess some things about people... not their names however. No, you two are rather famous."

"I see," Ilea said.

"Probably how he found us too," Hector said.

The mage didn't comment on that when they entered the hall where the ritual had taken place.

Ilea had seen the cracks already but this one was much more subdued than the one in Nara. *Killing tens of thousands just to TEST a spell. Fucking motherfuckers.*

"One of them is alive," Ilea said and blinked, finding a familiar face between the mangled corpses and a dead Pearl Mantis. She extended her ash and started healing the nasty wound on the woman's side. "Maria. Didn't expect to meet you here."

“L... Lilith, right? A healer is exactly what I hoped for,” the woman said with a slight smile, closing her eyes as she relaxed.

Ilea didn't know how much she should mention, knowing that Hector and the unknown noble were close by. Already it was clear that she knew Maria.

“You're part of the strike teams?” she asked and continued healing the woman.

Maria opened her eyes and sat up, completely ignoring the gore around her.

Ilea saw two human corpses and one Pale Mantis, all of them fucked up beyond recognition. *These things really go wild*, she thought and glanced at Maria. *Or she did*, she smirked.

“I am, yes. We were sent to kill monsters and Cursed here. They were quite a bit stronger than expected,” she said and gestured to the carnage around her. “Major Redleaf had me join.”

So she's still working with Felicia. That's good at least. Though I'm sure she has her own reasons to be here. Maria likely had more enemies in the Empire than Felicia and Edwin combined, Ilea thought, knowing a few things about the woman.

Ilea had seen hundreds of Cursed killed by Pearl Mantis Sires and this scene was a little weird in comparison to what she'd seen. The creatures killed, yes, but they didn't make a mess like this. Maybe it was different when there weren't any other things around to kill but Maria survived, which meant the thing did this before killing her.

Maria being here provided a simple enough explanation. Maybe she just wanted to kill these people.

“We'll have to talk later, alone,” Ilea just said. With anybody else, she wouldn't even have thought about it but Maria? Maria was a killer if she's ever seen one.

The woman nodded, giving her an apprehensive look.

She was always a little bothered about her inability to injure me too, Ilea remembered.

[Mage – lvl 253]

That is quite satisfying, she thought with a smirk.

“What's so funny?” Hector asked, stepping up to them. “I feel like I'm being left out of something.”

“We know each other. That's all,” she said and saw Nicholas tense up within her sphere.

He doesn't like that.

“You want to study the area again or can we just fuck it up and move on?” Hector asked.

Eager to get more gold and treasure? Ilea thought, unsure if it was wise to invade a non Cursed city with just the two of them. Then again, other than the team with the General, she doubted there were many others who could just flat out overwhelm a group of high level fanatics.

“For a few minutes, you can go loot if you like,” Ilea said and let the people be. She wanted to talk to Maria quickly to catch up on some things but not while the others were around.

“Oh thank you for your permission, oh great Lilith,” Hector said and bowed before turning towards Maria, the woman glancing at the two men in turn.

“You're interesting, why the murderous look?” Hector asked and leaned in.

He has someone else to annoy, very nice, Ilea thought and focused on the ripples around her, using her space awareness to glance through the veil. What she saw was much more blurred than back in Nara, and still the colors and impressions fit perfectly with the scenes she had already seen.

Probably not random then... a targeted fissure in space, and the other side is in on it? Or are they just trying to summon some high level being to end the world or something? That would be unoriginal. Maybe Hector is right and I'll at least get an interesting fight out of it.

"I always look like that," Maria said and rolled her eyes at the man. She was healed again and collected her daggers.

"I'm... I'm glad that you survived," Nicholas spoke up but didn't approach. He was obviously in distress but the way he acted in front of Ilea and Hector before, it was clear this situation just overwhelmed him in general.

"I thought you didn't exactly like me," Maria said and smirked.

"You're part of the team. I thought that monster got you," he said.

"You ran away," Maria said. "Your barriers could have helped quite a bit."

Nicholas looked dejected. "I'm... sorry," he said and looked down.

"More experience for you," Hector said. "You don't look like you give a shit that he left so stop acting like a little shit," he said.

"And who might you be exactly?" Maria asked.

"I'm the Destroyer, who the fuck are You?" Hector said.

"I'm Maria Acantha... I believe I have heard that name. A pirate, yeah that fits. Did Lilith become one too?" she asked.

"Acantha," Hector spat. "You're one of Elisora's little cunts? Figures."

Maria didn't react visibly.

Ilea glanced over. *Hmm. Would have expected more there. Maybe she knows just how outclassed she is.*

"I'm not my mother," Maria said.

Ah, so that's it.

Hector laughed. "Yeah but you damn sure act like her. I can't say I'm not interested. Do you care for a bout or maybe something a little more personal?"

Maria smiled. "I've been humiliated enough today, thank you."