

Chapter 817 Orange Juice

Ilea let the Meadow position her before she shot off into the distance. The arcane storms they passed were irrelevant against her shields and mantle, her fast speed flight kept up until Veisann spoke into her mind.

"We have arrived, wielder of the Flame of Creation," the being sent, Ilea slowing down in turn.

The landscape looked the same as most everywhere in the north, black clouds rolling over cracked and jagged mountains, purple lightning flashing in the distance. Few crevices were visible to her. "Where exactly?" she asked.

The being pointed towards a set of massive boulders, a single thin crack just barely visible nearby. *"We are entering a contaminated area. Be on your guard."*

"I've dealt with corrupted before," she said, giving a side glance to the Dark Ones, leading them down towards the crevice. She slowed when her eyes picked up something strange. Remains of dark blood, bits and pieces of bone, burnt flesh. And barely visible against the sunlight, something orange. Ilea teleported them down to the surface, looking at her surroundings before she summoned a piece of bone. She turned it in her fingers as the others watched.

"That is-" Bromot spoke but Ilea had already touched the slightly orange remains on the bone, the corruption trying to make its way into and past her mantle.

Cute, she thought as white flame burned away the substance. Ash moved out, set alight a moment later as she got rid of the remains. *A futile effort, I suppose, if the corruption is already on the surface of the north.*

"The settlement is down there?" she asked.

"Indeed," Bromot spoke, looking at the dissipating flames all around, nothing left of the corrupted creatures that had died here.

Ilea flew down into the crevice, the others following. The light dimmed, but her eyes saw nonetheless. Corpses, once corrupted. Whatever had fought and killed them either long gone or corrupted themselves. Cuts and craters in the stone suggested an extensive battle. She reclaimed her ash, layering her own mantle now that the danger of the storms had passed.

"Stay at a reasonable distance, then follow me in," she said, her wings touching the high reaching walls before she moved into the darkness. Her eyes didn't need to adjust, she saw well enough. Stone stairs led downwards, down and down for near two hundred meters. Ilea flew past in seconds, seeing no moving creature around, though there was corruption, and there were corpses.

She found two gates of black rock, outcrops of stone and ice keeping them shut. Water dripped from the ice, blood coloring bits of it in a dark shade of red. The trail led upwards, either to one of the dead or someone who had managed to get away.

"The way was shut," Bromot spoke from behind, the group cautiously making their way in.

"Death. Is waiting beyond," Veisann spoke into her mind, and those of the others according to the slight reactions Ilea could see within her sphere.

The hall was large, statues craved into stone remaining untouched, her sphere piecing through the gates where she found nothing but an empty hallway.

“Then let’s summon this death,” she said and raised her arm. Heat charged for a second before a blast of near white energy flared up, the rock, ice, and doors exploding inwards with loud thunderous sound.

“Not a stealthy approach,” Bromot commented.

“You’re an earth mage,” Ilea said as she walked into the tunnel, smoldering rock and white flames providing a slight bit of illumination. “Wall me in for a moment, will you?” Already she heard screeches and grunts from farther down the tunnel, steps coming closer. Hundreds of creatures, probably more.

“Of course, healer of ash,” Bromot spoke before he raised his arms.

Ilea glanced back, her fires the only remaining light in the tunnel. She was both surprised and impressed at the instant compliance of Bromot. *Funny, I’m annoyed at people underestimating me, but when someone things me capable, I’m shocked too.* She smiled to herself, taking slow steps through the darkness whilst avoiding corpses. Her ash spread forward already, smothering what little corruption had survived in the corridor that led out of the northern settlement.

She supposed the location wasn’t the worst for a breakout. The storms and landscape alone would deal with many of the crazed creatures, the corrupted likely not quite intelligent enough to avoid the surface.

Ilea charged Monster Hunter and whistled into the darkness. *Might as well collect everything I can.* Silent Memory appeared in her hand as ashen limbs spread out behind her, heat charging in her core as she prepared her space magic. Ten seconds later, she saw the first corrupted.

A horde. Humanoid mostly. Feynor, Dark Ones, and plenty of beings she couldn’t quite discern. Some of the monsters she had seen before, others she hadn’t. All shared one thing, the orange pus on their bodies. *Hello old friend,* she thought, setting down her hammer for a moment before she summoned her cannon. The long corridor was too much of an opportunity to pass up.

She waited until the first corrupted lunged at her, releasing the heat within her.

The tunnel lit up, the near white beam slashing a hole through more than a hundred meters of bunched up and crazed corrupted. Killed and controlled by the Ascended agent.

Ilea casually put away her wrym focus and raised her hammer using space magic. She grabbed the thing and continued walking, silver threads or ashen limbs finishing whatever creature had avoided the beam, purely accidental. A tide of ash followed behind as her hammer consumed whatever flesh remained.

“Don’t get corrupted,” she said, though she felt no change in the hammer beside the red gem that glowed a little more with every few dozen creatures.

None had been above level three hundred, she noted, scrolling through the long list of notifications. She sent a bit of ash back through the tunnel, formed a wedge and broke through the wall summoned by Bromot. If this was the kind of resistance she was to meet here, there was little need to keep them away.

More corrupted kept coming, from as far as her whistle had traveled. Though she compared their fate to that of ripe fruit entering an industrial blender. Already she was disappointed, the mission out

here likely not about to provide the challenge she had hoped for. Though the corruption had managed to take over a sand elemental. A real one.

If something similarly strong had succumbed to the orange goo, she hoped she would be the one to find it. Behind her ash and Dark Ones followed, the agents of the Dark Protector walking with caution and confidence at the same time. Ilea wasn't sure if her display convinced them, or if it was really just the flame of creation.

She started humming a tune to herself as she continued, corruption fraught bodies throwing themselves at her as she was the only non infected target in the vicinity. *This is even less difficult than dealing with Taleen machines. Demons, corrupted, Taleen. I've literally turned into an exterminator of pests.*

A few minutes later she came into the city proper, another gate separating the tunnel from the stone buildings beyond, though this one was open and monsters still came out to challenge her.

Another whistle echoed into the caverns beyond, light now present from the common crystal growths on the sprawling ceiling. The buildings she could see were similar to those of other northern settlements. Diverse was the word that came to mind. Communities with creatures large and small, floating and crawling. With needs and expectations as differing as their species.

Most of the beings were dead of course, killed by those already corrupted, or by the corruption itself. Little danger to someone like Ilea, a single drop of the orange goo could destroy an entire town of lower leveled beings. For most human cities, it would be absolutely devastating. With teleportation gates leading straight into Morhill, the Meadow would have to be more than a little careful to make sure none of this stuff ever made it into human hands.

Ilea stayed at the entrance, using Monster Hunter to call for the creatures in the former settlement, her ash and white flame clearing out everything that came towards her. In a random dungeon or ruin, she would have likely ran into the fray, but here she considered the buildings and possible survivors. Destroying everything seemed both unnecessary and disrespectful. Burnt away creatures turned into new ash for her to use, hundreds of corrupted creatures cleared out with every passing minute.

The great four mark showdown did not come, despite the build up of more corrupted. If any had been killed and taken over, they were too far away for her Monster Hunter.

Even with the corruption rampant in the North, Kohr remains the far superior hunting ground. She considered for a moment if she should go farther north still, but while she could flee to another realm from anything she stumbled upon in Kohr, she really didn't want to wake up an ancient Dragon or something akin to the true Fae, but hostile. Ilea was ready to fight most things she had come across, but not all of them.

After nearly an hour, she turned to the watching Dark Ones, not a single corrupted having shown in the past few minutes. "I think that's it," she said. "Or do you still sense death?"

The divination mage looked her way with all its eyes. *"Death I sense, yet it is only you."*

Ilea smiled at that. *Funny.* "I'll clear out whatever remains of the corruption," she said, spreading her flames as she formed copies of herself.

"Your task is fulfilled," Devara spoke. "You may leave."

Ilea turned his way and grinned, moving her wings as she approached him, fires and ash parting before she hovered in front of him. "Oh is that so?"

He hesitated for a split second. "I-"

"I said that I will destroy the corruption. Which is what I will do. Or do you object?" she asked, her copies waiting for her orders.

The being gulped and nodded. "Do as you wish, though it is beyond what the Dark Protector has asked."

"Then tell them I'm happy to fulfill my jobs beyond what was expected," she said with a grin and got to work.

She knew the Dark Ones had plenty of corruption at hand, but that didn't mean she had to leave anyone even more of it. Too many were killed already. "*I'm clearing out the rest of the corruption. No major threats.*" She sent to the Meadow.

"*Understood. Aki has found and killed a few dozen corrupted beings. Blood agent unable to corrupt machines,*" the Meadow sent back.

Great. Another benefit to the Taleen creations, she thought. Now, how long to clear an entire city. She frowned, wishing she could just summon a small army of Aki's machines to do the work but showing off that ability to the watching Dark Ones may not be the best idea. Not until that information had spread from Virilya all the way to the north. Though she supposed the teleportation network didn't help in keeping information local for very long.

She spent the good part of three hours to search through the town with her copies, burning every last bit of corruption she could find. "I'm done," she said when she joined back with the group of Dark Ones.

They had moved into one of the buildings, Bromot having closed off the exits in case of more corrupted. A fire burned in the hearth, the large earth mage stirring broth inside of a cauldron. The smell wasn't the worst, though it didn't exactly compare to Ilea's usual dishes.

"Faster than expected," Bromot spoke as he started serving bowls, raising an empty one towards Ilea.

She gave him a nod and formed an ashen chair, looking at the simple home made of stone. A piece of art depicting a meadow stood out to her. To the resident it would've likely been something strange. An image they had never seen. There were of course some underground meadows in the North, mostly those cultivated by Lucas, but the chance of Dark Ones traveling that far was small. Based at least on the situations she had seen in the various settlements she had been in. *Maybe they were adventurers, maybe even high level humans that chose to settle here, after fighting their way up through the North.*

She liked the idea, though found little indication in the room that would support her imagined narrative. "Thank you," she said when Bromot handed her the bowl, a steaming dark brown broth with both meat and vegetables bubbling inside. It tasted hearty, more spicy than she had expected. She deactivated her Pain Tolerance and found the sting it left on her tongue quite satisfying.

Bromot grinned. "Didn't expect a human to like my cooking."

Nitolsh chuckled, their face tentacles wiggling lightly.

"I'm not exactly a normal human," Ilea said.

"Deviant, yes," Bromot said.

“And I feel like I was a little overqualified for this job,” she said. She suspected one or two groups of Sentinels would’ve sufficed, though the battle would’ve likely taken longer, and some parts of town could’ve been destroyed.

“We were sent on this mission with the expectation to return in no less than a month,” Bromot said. “You’ve left us with a difficult decision.”

“We will return immediately,” Devara spoke.

“Of course we will,” Bromot said with a slight smile. “Others could benefit from our presence.” He sat down and started eating himself. “I am honored,” he said after a while, looking at Ilea. “To have met the one they call Lilith, the bearer of the Flame of Creation.”

“I’m not that special,” Ilea said, though rationally she knew that was a lie. She just didn’t like the attention. People being honored to meet her, or going as far as worshiping her, it was creepy. And usually didn’t lead to the kind of relaxed conversation she enjoyed.

He nodded. “I understand. But my words remain. You have done us a great service today. To the four of us, and to the Dark Protector.”

Ilea didn’t reply and kept eating her stew, looking at the being as she ate. Finishing up, she stood and cracked her neck. “I’ll be on my way then. I suspect you’ll be able to find your own way back?”

“Of course,” Bromot spoke. “Be well, Lilith.”

“You too. Thanks for the stew, it was nice to meet the four of you,” she said and teleported out, flying into the tunnel before she opened a gate.

“Done with the mission. They weren’t particularly happy that I destroyed all of the corruption,” Ilea sent.

“As expected. You took longer than I thought you would. Any challenges?” the Meadow asked.

“Searching through the city took the longest. Let me know when everyone knows about my gates and ability to summon Aki’s armies. Then I’ll have him do those kinds of jobs,” she sent.

“I’m sorry you didn’t find anything interesting to fight. The corruption remains a dangerous prospect for the Plains. If you agree to it, we’ll involve you on clear out missions if we’re asked to help again or find dungeons taken over by the agent,” it spoke.

“You know me and my abilities. Happy to help out whenever something comes up. Send in the Sentinels too, if you think they can handle it,” she said.

“Of course. Though a settlement of corrupted beings is not yet something they should take on alone, even the high level Hunters,” the Meadow spoke.

“Really? The fight was ridiculously easy,” she said.

“Ilea. You are fighting beings nearing my own level. The Sentinels are far from that. Very, very far. As are all other forces in the Accords, besides very few individuals, including myself,” the Meadow spoke.

Ilea waved it off. *“Yeah, yeah. Don’t give me the honor and special bullshit too. Promise me that, no matter how strong I ever get, you’ll treat me as a friend.”*

“I promise, even if you merge with the fabric itself,” the Meadow spoke. *“Except of course your existence doesn’t allow for it to be treated as a friend.”*

“What do you mean?” Ilea asked.

“Well, if you keep finding higher leveled monsters, evolving in the process... even I cannot foresee what kind of being you will become. It is possible that the very concept of your existence will not allow for me to fulfill my promise,” the Meadow said.

Ilea rolled her eyes. *“Whatever. You know what I mean.”*

“I wouldn’t want to anger the being you become.”

“Is that a mocking tone I hear?” Ilea asked, a smirk on her face.

“Oh no, great goddess Lilith, I would not dare!” the ancient godlike tree answered.

She summoned her hammer as a golden barrier formed around her.

“Have at you, fiend!” Ilea spoke as she saw several metric tons of stone materializing in front of her, the velocity and weight enough to perhaps squash a lesser being. A gate sent the thing right back at the Meadow, a large barrier thrumming to life as their bout began. A welcome change after she had dealt with the boring slew of corrupted.