

Chapter 520 Rituals

Ilea followed Felicia into a rather spacious factory hall.

None of the forges were currently in use. A few oil lamps lent their warm light to the gathered individuals.

“There she is!” Hector exclaimed with open arms. “Ah, she’s still mad.”

Ilea didn’t comment, only glancing at the dripping man in passing.

“Lilith. It’s good that you came. I expect Major Redleaf has already instructed you?” Velamyr asked.

Ilea nodded.

“Good. Anything new?” the General asked.

“Nothing,” Hector said, eating from a plate. This time with a fork. “Some of their vaults have surprisingly little security though. Had.”

Velamyr ignored the comment.

“I found several blood mages and ritual halls but not the one we’re looking for,” Michael said. Only one of him was here right now.

“We should inform the Order,” Ilea said.

“It’s too much of a risk,” Velamyr said.

Ilea noted that no members of the Dawn Company were present. It was just them.

“It worked in Yinnahall,” she said. “Messengers are on the way anyway. I doubt they’d take more than a day to arrive.”

“Our resources are better spent searching than trying to convince these fanatics to betray their own. Our interrogations proved such. Your suggestion is dismissed,” Velamyr said.

“I’m not one of your soldiers, General,” Ilea said, glaring at the man.

Hector snickered, nearly choking on his food. The others didn’t react much.

Velamyr nodded as he ground his teeth. “I’m aware of that fact. Though I was told you had uncovered the ritual site before the Order was willing to cooperate at a large scale?”

Ilea nodded.

“Do you think your word alone or that of a priest from Yinnahall will mobilize them quickly enough to find the site?” he asked.

“Maybe. Maybe not,” Ilea admitted. Benedict remembering the space magic related letter was kind of a fluke too. Just talking to him in the first place had been a risk. One that could’ve ended in the ritual site being warned.

Though I suppose now they know we’re coming anyway.

“Preventing the ritual is just one thing we can do. If we can’t find it, what about evacuation, or some kind of countermeasure?” Ilea suggested.

“We’re talking about a city wide scale,” Velamyr said. “And evacuation is impossible. Not in a reasonable time frame, not without hard proof. If we could show them the ritual site. But if we find it, an evacuation won’t be necessary in the first place.”

“City wide scale. You’re part of this group, can’t you create a countermeasure against it all? You’re a blood mage, right?” Ilea asked, looking at Michael.

“You think highly of my abilities,” he said, studying her.

Now that she got a better look, the man seemed quite ordinary. Brown hair and eyes, plus a rather plain face. Still he seemed downright regal, his golden armor coupled with his demeanor and the way he held himself painting an illustration of confidence and ability.

“Can you?” she insisted.

Velamyr raised a brow.

“We still haven’t found it. I expected us to be successful within two to three hours. I hoped as much because the ritual would have surely been used by then. It still hasn’t. Maybe there is some merit in trying to save lives,” Velamyr said.

Ilea shared an appreciative glance that he noted.

“I understand large parts of the ritual, however I could only guess at the space magic runes a countermeasure would require, I can’t perceive their effects after all. Nor could I set up something that could span the whole city,” Michael said.

“We’re sure it’s here. Either here or in Baralia. I dabble in space magic, maybe we can figure it out together,” Ilea said.

Michael blinked a few times at that.

“General skills? No, a third Class... I must have missed it. Impressive,” he said with a genuine smile.

Felicia glanced at Ilea but didn’t say anything.

Velamyr gave her a look too but didn’t seem quite as impressed as the others.

“How many of your selves would you have to invest?” the General asked.

“Just me,” Michael said. “That is if Lilith cannot be in five places at the same time?”

“I can’t,” she said.

“Then just me,” Michael said.

“We keep looking. Try to set up your runes without alarming the authorities. You know where the most densely populated areas are?” Velamyr asked.

“The academy and noble district should be our priority,” Michael said.

“Why?” Ilea asked.

He looked at her with confusion. “Because the brightest minds are located there. The most likely in this city to push beyond a mundane life of normalcy.”

“Because they’re nobles?” Ilea asked.

“Because they have the most resources at their disposal,” he said.

“True but why would an already comfortable noble push for more. I’d argue a slave wanting to improve their life would have more of a chance to survive out in the wild,” Ilea said.

Based on her experience, most nobles reached a high level and simply remained there, more preoccupied with trade and politics than fighting deadly monsters.

“I agree with the ash woman,” Hector said and pointed at her with a shrimp.

“We compromise then. We work out the runes and then each of us gets to chose a district. We roll dice for the first one. Does that sound agreeable?” the gold mage asked. “We should not waste time on such discussions.”

Ilea nodded.

“One hour again. If you find the site and can disrupt the ritual, do so. Make sure to blow some things up if you can’t defeat the Order in your teams, the rest will respond,” Velamyr said and vanished.

The rest did the same, Felicia giving Ilea a light nod before she left.

Hector finished his plate before he dissolved into water, flowing out a nearby window.

Shouldn’t he be with one of Michael’s copies?

“I assume you’re unfamiliar with the city layout?” Michael asked as he summoned a single dice, rolling it on a floating golden plate.

He got a three.

“Higher wins?” she asked and took the six sided dice.

He nodded.

Ilea rolled a five. She hadn’t manipulated the result and couldn’t see anything fishy on his side either. “I don’t know the city.”

“Follow me then,” Michael said and vanished.

They teleported deep into the island town until Michael stopped in a dark alley.

A thin man with a rusty knife stood up nearby, murmuring something in the native tongue.

“Leave,” Ilea said.

His eyes cleared a little before he murmured a curse and ran.

Michael was already working, gold cutting into his arms before a large amount of blood rushed out, splashing to the ground and forming runes she neither knew nor understood.

“How did you track them here anyway?” she asked.

“Lady Redleaf has a nearly divination like tracking ability,” he said. “You can perceive space?”

Ilea nodded.

“Tell me if this is stable,” Michael said as power rushed into the runes.

Something flared up, a short ripple going through space.

“Came and went,” Ilea said.

He adjusted the runes without talking.

They spent twenty minutes with trial and error until Michael stopped. “That’s good enough.”

“What exactly does this do?” Ilea asked, looking around at the complicated layout.

“The ritual seeks out life energy to consume as fuel. It’s not a continued effect but a one time surge. The runes placed here are fueled by a tiny amount of my life. There are sections in their ritual that prioritize higher quality energy. I can fool it into taking only what I have provided here,” Michael explained.

And your word is all I have for that, Ilea thought.

At least she doubted he was creating a copy of the ritual or something similarly sinister.

“We have a lot of ground to cover. Make sure to check if the runes act stable each time. I’m not versed in space magic. It’s volatile and without the associated sight only testing will bring results,” he said.

He messed up a few times but in the end the district was done in less than half an hour.

Michael chose the academy district as the next target, continuing his work with focus.

They mostly remained silent.

“What do you think the ritual does? I know you said you can’t perceive space but you understand the runes well enough to create them,” Ilea said after he finished with the academy district.

They continued with one of the poorer areas.

Michael looked at her as he worked. “The blood magic part is rather simple. Just a way to collect life energy and force it into the space related runes. Don’t understand me wrong, there are perhaps three blood mages I know who would be capable of creating something of this extent. And even they would need time to both work out the spell and actually execute it.”

“None would have a reason to do so. The space aspect is confusing to me. I haven’t seen any of the executed rituals but the base seemed unstable,” he said.

“The results were unstable. It seemed like a forced tear in space itself. All ritual sites had the same monsters coming out of it,” she said.

He smirked ever so slightly. “A connection to an unknown realm then?”

“Probably,” Ilea said. “I had hoped you knew more.”

“It’s a shame I had to disappoint,” the man said but he didn’t sound sorry at all.

He finished up the current runes when Ilea saw a ripple in space.

“Did you just test it again?” she asked.

Michael shook his head. “No, the runes are stable.”

“I just felt something,” Ilea said, trying to make out the epicenter. “A ripple in space.”

He opened his eyes wide and used a few spells. "I can't detect anything. The runes here haven't been affected either."

"I'll check it out," she said.

"Are you sure?" he immediately said. "We shouldn't waste time on a random phenomenon."

"This isn't random," Ilea said. "Something strange just happened and I want to know what it was."

She blinked a few times, focusing on her Space Awareness to make out the source of the ripple.

Maybe just a long range teleport? she wondered but found no trace of the person who would have used it.

The wisps were disturbed, she noted, following the signs until she reached a dead end. She retracted her steps and found another set of wisps.

She finally reached an alley deep within the city and close to the lake beyond. Nothing showed up within her sphere but the wisps were more disturbed here.

Michael found her a moment later, appearing next to her.

"Behind that wall?" he asked.

Ilea nodded.

He extended his hands before a glob of gold materialized, forming small fragments that launched into the wall itself, digging inside as if they had fallen into water.

"You're right," he said. "There are powerful enchantments here," he said.

"Can you get the others?" Ilea asked.

He glanced at her, deep in thought for a moment before he blinked his eyes. "Yes," he said, his gold armor cutting into his arms before a pool of blood formed in front of him.

He murmured an incantation before the blood formed loose runes in the air.

"Blood magic is fucking ominous, tell you what," Ilea said.

"The more you understand," Michael said as the runes started glowing. "The less you fear."

A pulse of mana rushed out, only noticeable within her sphere because she saw him use the spell right there. The pulse quickly lessened in intensity, nearly imperceptible when it reached the other side of her sphere.

She kept her focus on the wisps of space, still slightly bent in a weird way.

"I only commented on the looks. I know magic is just a tool," she said. "We should go. Maybe this is the first step of the ritual."

He looked at her. "There are anti teleportation runes in place."

"Anti space magic?" she asked.

"I don't see any," he said.

"What levels were we talking about?" Ilea asked.

"The members we faced were below my own," Michael said.

[Mage – lvl 275]

Should be manageable, she thought and charged Heart of Cinder.

Ilea didn't wait any longer and displaced herself behind the wall.

She appeared in a spacious hall, about a dozen bodies strewn about. All were clad in the same Order robes, glowing runes on the ground fizzling out as she spread out her ash and cut through them with all the speed and strength she could muster.

Nobody stopped her.

Nobody was even in the hall.

Ilea already destroyed most of the runes when she released Heart of Cinder near the wall she had come from. It didn't break through entirely but successfully destroyed the enchantments placed within.

She slowed down and focused on the one major thing in the near featureless hall placed within the city walls.

A fissure in space.

Perfectly stable and very much unlike any of the previous ritual sites she had seen before.

It was odd.

The destruction of the runes didn't have an influence on the fissure at all.

She stepped towards the thing, a round shape without a discernible edge that showed a snow covered stone palace on the other side.

The view wasn't perfectly clear, not even to her enhanced perception. Her sphere couldn't pierce to the other side either.

It almost looked like viewing something through water. Either from below while being submerged, or watching on from the outside.

'ding' 'Space Awareness reaches 2nd lvl 3'

Michael appeared close by with floating gold around him and blood blades in hand.

He looked at the destroyed floor and to Ilea, joining her side as his weapons disintegrated.

"You should have waited," he said, obviously irritated.

"And risk the whole city?" Ilea asked as she kept her eyes on the manifestation that should not exist and was there nonetheless.

"This is a stable gate to another world... do you have any idea what this means in regards to magic theory, resources, and-" he stopped himself, taking a deep breath as he closed his eyes.

"It's stable," Ilea said, ignoring his outburst. Going to another realm wasn't exactly something novel to her anymore. Everything she knew about these rituals was that dangerous insect creatures spilled out from the other side. Here however, that hadn't happened so far.

He nodded. "That it is."

"How?" she asked.

Michael stepped a little closer, walking around the fissure.

“Do you not feel the mana?” he asked.

Ilea shook her head slightly. “What do you mean?”

“The density... it’s rapidly increasing,” he whispered.

She deactivated her Arcane Magic Resistance and immediately felt the change.

“It’s overflowing from the other side. Most of it seems to be taken by the gate itself,” he said.

“You’re saying it’s keeping itself active based on the mana it receives from the other side?” she asked.

“It’s my current theory,” he said.

More people arrived now. More Michaels, then Velamyr and Felicia. And finally Hector.

“Oh fuck, they did it!” the pirate exclaimed. “Who’s the first to step through? I vote Me.”

“Do you have any idea how dangerous that is?” Velamyr asked. “Good job on finding it,” he added with a look towards Ilea and Michael.

“They executed the ritual?” Felicia asked, looking around.

“Did it with these ten people instead of sacrificing a whole city?” Hector asked. “Must have learned quite a bit from their tests,” he added with a smirk.

What is he implying?

“Can you collapse it?” Velamyr asked.

“No...,” Michael said.

“No you can’t, or no you don’t want to?” the General said.

“No to both,” Michael said. “It’s not part of the ritual anymore but a stable gate. This is truly incredible.”

“Yeah, but not if we just look at it from here,” Hector said.

“Something is coming,” Ilea said.

They all watched as a Pearl Mantis Sire stepped out from the other side.

[Warrior – lvl 248]

The creature arrived and started shaking, stepping back its limbs started shaking, its eyes bulging out.

Nobody had engaged yet, the being vanishing back into the fissure.

“A dark one?” Ilea asked.

Michael glanced at her.

“The enemy,” Velamyr said. “We have to close this portal or risk an invasion by hostile monsters.”

“Didn’t look very hostile to me,” Ilea said.

“They’re the same we fought before, what are you talking about?” Hector asked.

“Did you not identify it?” she asked.

“No,” he admitted.

“That thing was a warrior. Likely a sapient being. A dark one,” Ilea said.

“Ah, I see,” Hector said.

“That is even worse,” Velamyr said. “Why did it not attack?”

“Because the mana here is not sufficient to supply its need,” Michael said.

“Huh. But they never went back before,” Hector said.

“They couldn’t,” Ilea suggested.

“And more kept coming anyway? If they’re sapient then they’re pretty fucking stupid,” Hector said and laughed.

Michael looked at them. “Excess mana is leaking into the surroundings. Sooner or later, they will be able to pass.”

Ilea noticed a blade of grass sprouting from the stone floor, seemingly out of nowhere.

“Michael, I need you to understand the danger we’re in. No matter what we gain out of this, I won’t risk letting an army of foreign sapient creatures invade these lands. Whatever you want, I’ll give it to you if you close this fissure. Now,” the General said.

“Not before I go through. I want to at least see what that place looks like. Been a while since I’ve been to another realm,” Hector said.

Ilea quirked up her eyebrows at that. *He has a way to go back then?*

“You will be stranded on the other side,” Velamyr said.

“Eh,” Hector said and waved his hand sideways.

Michael shook his head. “I cannot close this gate. It’s embedded into our reality and theirs. Lilith destroyed the ritual already. It’s no longer fueled by the runes.”

Velamyr ground his teeth audibly before he stepped closer to the thing. “Then we destroy what’s on the other side before they can do the same to us.”