

Chapter 509 Revenge

Ilea was impressed how calm and collected Maria stayed. Then again, she's likely seen much worse than Hector.

"I'm done here," Ilea said.

Hector nodded as a dozen beams of water formed around him, the ground cut apart in seconds before the space returned to its normal state.

"They're not going to like that," Maria commented, looking at the deep fissures in the stone floor.

"Good," Hector said. "I'll leave you to it then, come find me when you're done Lilith, don't take too long."

"Sure, sure," Ilea said and joined the group, Hector vanishing a moment later.

Nicholas looked at each of them in turn, his distress mounting according to her sphere.

"Can you wait outside the temple?" Ilea asked the man.

He looked at her for a moment before nodding. "Of course, Lilith."

"Ah... I would have to retreat if monsters attack, I'm not terribly good at fighting," he added and scratched the back of his head.

"I'll find you," Ilea said and watched him leave.

"So," Maria said after the man had left. "Did you meet Felicia already?"

Ilea nodded. "We didn't have a chance to talk sadly but she seemed fine. What got into her? First she wants an end to all the politics and fighting, then she wants to work with Edwin, and now she's taking part in the war?"

Maria smiled. "It seems the girl has finally grown up. She's doing it all herself too. Edwin is being a bit pathetic lately, but he'll get back on his feet. I'm sure."

"Felicia took over?" Ilea asked, a little surprised.

"She did. She's the current head of House Redleaf. And as difficult as it is for me to admit, she's not doing a terrible job of it so far. Already the confidant of a high ranking General, the rank of Major given to her near instantly. Well I helped her along a little, taking out competition here and there," Maria said with a nasty grin.

"Is that why you killed those two?" Ilea asked and gestured to the corpses.

Maria sighed. "He told you then, ah and I thought maybe there was a chance I'd let him go."

"He, who?" Ilea asked.

"Nicholas Walker... why else do you think he ran away? He's easily intimidated but not a coward," Maria said.

"Ah, him. No, he didn't tell us. His story actually fit with yours. I've just fought a bunch of those creatures before and that," she pointed at the bodies. "Is not what they do. Plus with you here, I was even more suspicious."

"I see. You never trusted me, did you?" Maria asked, acting disappointed.

"Of course not. You worked with Edwin after all," Ilea said with a smile.

Maria nodded. "I thought as much. Not that I gave you much of a reason to. I never liked you... but I suppose we had that in common. As to your question, no. These two I killed for myself."

"Why?" Ilea asked.

"Why would you care?" she asked.

Ilea shrugged, thinking about it. "Because you're close to Felicia," she said. Either Maria was putting Felicia in danger by killing people for her own benefit or revenge, or she was working to help Felicia. Both were reason enough for Ilea to inquire about her actions.

"You really care about that girl, don't you? Lovely," Maria said and rolled her eyes. "Don't worry. I consider her an ally, even if she just sees me as a deranged murderer. I know I'm not the easiest person to deal with. But as I said... Felicia isn't exactly the same person anymore."

"She knows what I can do, and she knows what I want to do. And our goals are not entirely incompatible," Maria said.

Ilea let her talk.

"I found documents suggesting that the Walker family was involved in my imprisonment. At least they didn't make a move to stop it. Nor did they care about any of the other prisoners in Arthur's little dungeon," she said and spat.

"So Nicholas was involved?" Ilea asked.

"No. I doubt that, he's too young and as I heard he's usually quite busy with expeditions. He's obsessed with ruins and culture," she said. "But it would be a blow to the Walkers anyway. Did he really not tell you?"

"I didn't lie," Ilea said.

"I see... maybe I can use him then, instead of killing him. His life is more important to him than the two acquaintances I killed, maybe that's true for his family too," Maria said, talking to herself before she looked at Ilea. "Ah don't give me that look. You've killed the Birmingales, slaughtered their members as if they were the ones to kill your friend's family."

"I'm not exactly proud of it," Ilea said. She didn't mention that she had let a few of them go. The woman might just be crazy enough to go after them just to take care of loose ends.

"Well I am proud of this. The world didn't lose anything with these two, nor will it lose anything with the people I still plan to kill," Maria said. "Many of them could cause trouble for Felicia too, hence our cooperation."

"Can you give me a rundown? Just in case there is someone I'd like to stay alive," Ilea said.

"Why? So that you can kill me now?" Maria asked with a grin.

"Exactly," Ilea said and meant it.

"Oh? Maybe I've thought too little of you... perhaps there's still hope. Why not work with me? Your power and my knowledge, we could change the whole Empire," Maria said.

Ilea chuckled to herself. "No. I'm not you Maria. If you want to get revenge, I won't stand in your way but be careful. If I find out that you plunged the Empire into chaos, I'll come for you."

“The righteous warrior. No, Ilea. You have no idea what kind of depravity courses through the veins of human kind,” Maria said. “The deal with Felicia includes her approval too. And I won’t deceive her.”

“If I was that righteous warrior, I’d have killed you already. Didn’t you try to deceive me just now?” Ilea asked, gesturing at the scene around them.

“I just tried to protect myself. Now that I know you’re aware of it all, I don’t have a reason to lie. Your Alymie friend is not on my list, nor is anyone from Ravenhall or Riverwatch,” she said. “I heard the songs.”

There’s no way she’s telling me everything, Ilea thought with a sigh. “Just make sure to check if they have a connection to me. I suggest you don’t do anything stupid, for both our sakes, and Felicia’s.”

If Felicia confirmed the story, she didn’t want to get involved with Maria or her revenge.

“There are risks involved but they saved my life, Ilea. I have debts that I won’t forget, as I’m sure you have too,” she said. “Your threat, is noted.”

“What happened to Edwin?” Ilea asked, trying to talk about something less depressing. She wouldn’t kill someone she knew just because of what she planned.

Eve had similar plans and executed much of it behind their backs. Ilea wondered how she would have reacted if she found out while the woman was still alive. Would she have been okay with it? Would she have helped? Or condemned her?

What she had learned about Eve suggested it hadn’t been quite as personal as with Trian. She killed systematically but with certain rules in mind. Ilea couldn’t know for sure but she had trusted her enough to think she only killed those deserving. Those untouchable by whatever laws and judges were in place.

Maria didn’t seem quite as concerned about killing. Nicholas was just one example, Ilea was sure. Even now she could change her mind and murder the man.

Did she care?

Should she care?

She didn’t know any of the people the woman was hunting. Ilea would kill her if that turned out to be untrue, if she killed someone close to her.

She knew that Maria had been wronged, Ilea herself would hunt down those responsible if she was in her place. She wouldn’t kill bystanders and those uninvolved however but that didn’t much change how she felt about her.

If anything she pitied her.

A woman so powerful and competent, entirely consumed by revenge and bitterness.

“He’s lost it. Started drinking, constantly. I don’t have to tell you how much alcohol is necessary to even affect someone like him,” Maria said. “He never planned to succeed.”

It gave her some satisfaction to know that the arrogant man had fallen so low. On the other hand she felt bad for Felicia, knowing how much she cared for her brother.

“Do you not care? I thought you were close to him,” Ilea said.

“I would have gladly died on that day, just to get a chance at Arthur’s life. I’m quite happy how it turned out. I was surprised how he reacted but he’s going to be fine. Might take a few years but he’s been through worse,” she said.

“You could help him, you know?” Ilea suggested, thinking about Trian and how he had hidden in his room. She didn’t have the illusion that she had made him recover but at least she tried. In the end it worked out.

“I’m not good at that, Ilea,” Maria said and shook her head. “I’ll just do what I do best. Honestly, I think it’s a little pathetic... and I couldn’t lie to him.”

“Aliana is with him... and Felicia will surely try as well. She was always the loving one. If anyone could do it, then her,” she said.

“Didn’t you say she changed a lot?” Ilea asked.

“For the better. She hasn’t forgotten her dear brother, nor has she forgotten about you, I’m sure. If you were worried about that,” Maria said.

Ilea didn’t comment. She would talk to Felicia herself.

A short awkward silence followed.

“Quite a name you made for yourself,” Maria finally said.

Ilea just nodded.

“You should be proud,” Maria said.

“What are you going to do now?” Ilea asked, starting to walk towards the exit.

“There are a few more people in this brigade I need to get close to. And I’m not entirely uninterested in the war itself. Riches and opportunities,” she said with a grin.

“I see,” Ilea said.

“Why did you come anyway? You were studying the ritual site,” she said.

“To kill monsters, and maybe even to stop more rituals,” Ilea said.

Maria laughed, following her up a flight of stairs. “You and the Destroyer. I should just go north and fight monsters for a few years... if I could survive I’d be unstoppable.”

“There are always things more powerful than you are,” Ilea said.

“Yeah, but not human. Or at least not my enemies. The risks are too high anyway. I’m not a healer and being good at hiding isn’t exactly beneficial against most monsters out there,” Maria said.

“It can be,” Ilea said. “But I doubt you could manage the feat.”

“You’re the monster hunter,” she said as they exited out into the large entrance hall of the temple.

Nicholas was waiting in a meditative pose.

“I won’t kill you,” Maria said. “But I want to make a few deals, to make sure you don’t tell anyone.”

The man opened his eyes and nodded.

“See, I’m not as monstrous as you think,” Maria said.

Ilea rolled her eyes. “Just make sure a letter reaches Lilith in case you mysteriously die.”

“What? Why would you care?” Maria hissed.

Ilea looked at her and smiled below her ashen armor. “Oh? No this is just to annoy you.”

“I’m sure my relatives will be happy to hear that I made acquaintances with Lilith,” the man said, sealing the deal.

“Well at least you’re not stupid. What about the two in there? I thought you knew them,” Maria said.

“I’m not in favor of wanton killings but I won’t miss them either,” he said and stood up. “The ritual site is cleared, our mission fulfilled. If you don’t mind, I’d like to return to my quarters.”

“I’ll add a few more corpses to the hall. If this dunce could figure me out, I’m sure an imperial investigator could do the same,” Maria said and vanished.

Nicholas smiled and bowed deeply to Ilea.

“You saved my life today and I won’t forget that,” he said.

Ilea waved him off. “Don’t worry about it. I meant it when I said I just wanted to annoy her.”

“That doesn’t matter, if anything it means more to me. That woman is not someone I want to associate myself with. There will be headaches,” he said and sighed. “I have to ask... I don’t suppose you’d be interested in joining a few expeditions of mine?”

Ilea quirked up an eyebrow, surprised at his sudden courage.

“What kind?” she asked.

“The kind even Shadows would refuse. There are more than a few cursed ruins, endless caverns, and monster infested areas in the plains we call our own and far beyond. I’m an adventurer by heart and a scholar by trade and ability,” the man said.

“You don’t sound like you need adventurers, if even Shadows refuse your offers,” Ilea said.

“I need something more, yes. Someone monstrous enough to face the creatures who guard ancient secrets and treasures. I need Lilith,” he said, his heartbeat increasing. It seemed like his courage wasn’t endless after all.

“Sure, just send your requests to the Hand and mention me. We’ll see if I’m interested or not,” she said.

[Mage – lvl 210]

Quite and adventurer to call himself a scholar. This is probably not the first time his divinations have saved his life.

“Thank you. I’ll make sure to find something worth your while,” he said and smiled genuinely for the first time.

Ilea nodded. “Should I give you a lift back to your camp?”

He fiddled with his hands and looked down. “Eh... I mean...,”

“Come on, who knows if she changes her mind again,” Ilea said and spread her wings, ash flowing towards him.

"I suppose... I could," he said and held on to the ashen limbs moving around him.

The flight was quite quick, Ilea dropping the man off near the camp.

He needed a moment to catch his breath and balance but smiled and waved as soon as he recovered.
"Thanks again, Lilith!"

"Sure, a good rest of the war to you, Nicholas. Don't get murdered," Ilea said.

"You too!" he said and immediately turned red.

She chuckled and blinked away, flying back towards the city to find Hector.

Ilea noted that only a few trees had grown here, the grass barely spreading out of the city at all.

A quick flight brought her past the bunker positions they had helped out before but the soldiers had it under control, reorganized and reinforced. She wondered how long it would take for them to clean out the city and left them to it.

She found a more active battle far away from the military positions, a furious eel moving through the city streets with fluid motions, dozens of Cursed crushed with each turn and twist of her long and massive body.

Hector was riding the eel as he laughed and steered her into the largest groups of enemies.

Bored of looting?

She whistled with a charged monster hunter.

The eel vanished before he flowed towards her on a mighty wave.

"You're done?" he asked.

Ilea nodded. "Where to?"

"The closest and richest city we can think of," he said with a wide grin.

"And that is?" Ilea asked.

"Yinnahall. It's so fucking huge they won't even notice us slipping in, I'm pretty sure. Do you have any Baralia armor?" he asked.

"No, why would I have Baralia armor?" she asked.

"Because we'll pretend to be fleeing soldiers!" the man exclaimed.

"That's your great plan to get into a large city?" Ilea asked.

"What? You think it could fail? It's perfect! We'll be at a higher level than anybody could reasonably identify, we're wearing their armor and come together. Just two people. Who would think we're a threat or spies?" he asked.

"Anybody with just a hint of suspicion?" she suggested.

"Ilea... I've literally gone into a dozen cities during wars, nobody ever even suspected me. You just hand out a few silver here and there, pretend to be proud of the army, yadayada, and you're in," Hector explained and summoned a set of armor.

"Should be your size," he said and threw it her way.

Ilea caught and stored the set, rolling her eyes.

“Don’t act like that. You’ll be the hero, saving a city of a hundred thousand!” he said.

“That’s a lot of people,” Ilea said.

“More so than even Nara, at least to my knowledge. Let’s hope it’s not too late and the nobles are still there,” Hector said.

“Including their gold?” she asked.

“Just the gold would be better but that’s just not realistic, is it,” he commented.

“What if they realize we’re spies?” she asked.

“Again, just two people. Trust me, people don’t have an understanding of how powerful someone at level three fifty actually is. They’ll try to hunt us but we’re not going to intimidate them enough to use their little ritual ahead of schedule. If there is a schedule. No, they’ll just try to hunt us. Just make sure not to mention the name Lililth, or using your abilities... I’ll do the same,” he said.

“I can’t guarantee that,” Ilea said.

The man laughed. “Perfect, it’ll be more fun with a bit of chaos. Oh and they’ll know you’re a foreigner if you talk Standard. Most should speak it too but generally just for trade purposes. Best to just shut up... but that’ll be difficult for you.”

“I can pretend to be a pirate, people will just think I’m a little deranged,” she said.

“We already settled on being soldiers, it’s the best way. Best act like the terrors of war really got to you,” he said.

“Don’t pretend war is anything but horrific,” Ilea said.

He pointed at her and smiled. “That! Exactly, just act like that.”

She rolled her eyes again and sighed. “Where do we go?”

“West,” he said. “West for gold and glory!”