

Chapter 516 Mess

Ilea focused on her meditation. She ignored the corpses, the ringing in her ears. Her ash spread in a mist before her, slowly encompassing all the would be sacrifices. The looks were familiar to her by now. Terror, fear, uncertainty, amazement, hope.

People reacted differently but as soon as her healing mana flowed towards them, they all calmed. A little.

Terror changed to fear, fear to apprehension.

Their wounds healed but what they experienced was too extensive for her to erase. The recent physical damage to their mental health could be remedied but their memories couldn't be erased. Not by her at the very least.

She looked only at them now, the bruises and cuts on their naked bodies healing quickly, some of the scars remained while others vanished. There were children, teenagers, adults, men and women alike. Sources of life that meant nothing to those who used them.

A whole city wiped out was a tragedy, the numbers however incomprehensible. Seeing the nearly thirty people before her gave a face to the horrors the Order planned, had already in other cities committed.

Why there were even sacrifices here was a mystery to her but the cart filled with corpses suggested they needed bodies just to prepare the ritual.

Her healing done, she glanced towards the cages. Mages... healers. *How dare they call themselves that, how dare this system categorize them as such.*

Ilea moved her ash towards them, their meaningless efforts turning into frantic and terrified movements. Screams echoed that would reach no ears. *Just like the screams of the sacrifices had reached no one.*

"You promised... please!" the voice sounded out close to her left.

"They're caged and no danger to you or anyone!" Benedict said again, his voice steadier than before.

"You can see what they did," Ilea said without looking at him.

She glanced at the people once more and made her ash vanish, sighing before she looked at the Acolyte.

"Let me interrogate them. We have witnesses, proof. Both to incriminate those who were not present today and those still alive in the cages," he said, tears in his eyes.

Ilea didn't say anything. Instead she walked to the people she had saved, wordlessly summoning food and water, using a few barrels and her water sphere.

She vanished to the laundry room they had been in before, appearing again in the hall before she started handing out robes, pants, and shirts. Everything she had found.

Benedict spoke to himself in the native tongue before he broke down, slamming his fist into the ground, the man soon joined by his guardians and Faith. One of the warriors knelt down next to him, carefully touching his shoulder.

Ilea ignored them, distributing food to the people and gesturing for them to help each other. Some dealt with the situation better than others.

Few of them spoke at all, nobody daring to address her quite yet. She blinked through the hall, storing all the corpses in her bracelet both the soldiers and the sacrifices.

People shouted and scrambled away within the cages when she appeared inside. "Strip their gear," she said and summoned the soldiers, workers, executioners, mages, and healers she had killed when she had arrived.

The ritual was destroyed but she made another round of the hall, cutting through the stone with her ash whenever she discovered another rune. It didn't take long.

The hall itself was large but her sphere reached into the rooms and hallways above. She knew that most everyone had heard the commotion that had taken place. Mostly her use of Heart of Cinder. The thick walls prevented a lot of noise from traveling through but not everything.

It was a welcoming change of pace to see the followers of the Order react, most of them praying to themselves or uncertain. Some talked to others in hushed voices, looking behind themselves and often gesturing downwards. The few warrior types she saw didn't know how to react, carefully listening for more as their distress increased.

Everything she saw looked like another faction had taken this place by force, had silenced every opposition to whatever actions took place down here and promised retribution so harsh the warriors of this very temple refused to storm the underground hall despite the obvious signs of battle.

Benedict had calmed down a little, steeling himself as he approached the cages. He probably welcomed that most of the survivors' attention was focused on the task Ilea had given them, in a hope their cooperation could save their lives.

Meaning they might not be willing to die for whatever cause this ritual and its preparation had, Ilea thought as she glanced towards them.

She went and checked the side room where the soldiers had come from, finding some basic gear, beds, chairs, and tables. Documents and books lay open on the tables but she found them written in the native language.

A limiting factor she found but Ilea didn't plan to learn their language. She would remain in Baralia until the job was done, and no longer.

She grabbed everything and blinked to the cages, the woman talking to Benedict looked harrowed, taking an instinctive step back when Ilea appeared again.

"Might be an insight too," she said and unceremoniously dropped everything on the ground.

Ilea let them talk for a few minutes, sitting on a chunk of rubble she had moved a little closer to the sacrifices, her back towards them and her eyes on Benedict. Her armor and limbs remained.

When she saw that everyone had stopped working, she blinked into the cages and stored both the gear and the corpses, appearing again near her rubble.

"Anyone here speak Standard?" she asked the group.

More than she had expected raised their hands. Over half.

“Good. You’re free now. I’ll figure something out to get you out of the city or to a safe place within. For now, take what you need and want,” she said and summoned all the gear. “Those who can or want to help, I think giving a farewell to those who were killed here seems appropriate. The furniture over in the guard room would surely make for an adequate pyre.”

“Is it true? Are you Lilith?” one of them spoke up.

“Why is an Acolyte of the Order here?” another one said.

“I am. He was the one to lead me here,” she said and went to the deep furrow her spell had left.

She dropped the corpses of her enemies inside and incinerated them. It was enough, after what they had done. What they had supported.

A few of the survivors approached her as she watched the remaining flames dance in the deepened tear.

“Lady Lilith,” one of them said, a man now clad in steel armor, the visor of his helmet open to reveal black eyes and a mustache.

“Ehm... the fumes of a pyre added to what you’ve already created might be too much for some of us to take,” he explained.

She turned around. “Ah.”

“I didn’t consider that, apologies,” she said. “I just doubt we can do it anywhere outside.”

The man looked at her and smiled. “We might find a spot somewhere. If Barrett is still alive that is,” he said.

“You know the priest?” Ilea asked.

“Of course. I’m one of the temple guards,” he said.

Ilea narrowed her eyes at that but really, she had kind of expected it.

[Warrior – lvl 85]

“I believe we’re on the same side,” he said and lifted his hands.

“Oh are we now? Wasn’t it your Order who orchestrated this?” she asked.

He nodded. “I decided to split from this *Order*. Now I understand if you want to strike me down for having been part of it. I’ve thought about doing it myself but perhaps I can do better things with my life,” he chuckled, entirely aware of how easily she could do just that.

“What’s funny?” Ilea asked seriously.

“This is a mess... I’ve had some time to think about my life... my faith... everything was shattered and somehow we were saved by an enemy of Baralia. Perhaps it would help if I told you that everyone who had been killed so far was once a member of the Order. Of this very temple to be exact.”

“It doesn’t,” Ilea said. Though she realized a part of her was glad no slaves had been used, if his words could be trusted. The man struck her as someone who had nothing left to lose. She saw the two who had come with him had distanced themselves a little from the man.

“I’m Eduardo Collins. I’m glad you came here and stopped this, whatever it was,” he said.

“It’s the same ritual that destroyed Nara, Odiah, Mophis, and Seyna,” Ilea said and walked past the man.

He stuttered something in the native tongue, his face paled before he turned to look at her.

She didn’t hold her breath, instead addressing the people she had saved. “You were all part of this temple?”

They looked uncertain, most were obviously afraid.

“Yes,” a woman said as she stood up, wearing a simple robe Ilea had brought.

“And you have given back what was taken,” she added. “Fuck the Order. All we have is this temple.”

A few others nodded at that.

This is messed up, Ilea thought. “Everyone who was sacrificed was a member?”

“Yes,” the woman said. “Those who asked too many questions or spoke out early were the first to die, according to their ranks.”

“Yes... Priest Barrett was never brought down here,” one of them said.

“There were those willing to be sacrificed,” Eduardo said as he approached them again. He got a few angry glances but more of them seemed ashamed.

“Well good job then. The rituals turned the whole population of several cities into Cursed monsters. I hope you’re proud,” Ilea said. “Forget what I said about getting you out.”

She carefully summoned the corpses again and laid them down next to each other. “I suppose you can take care of them too then, according to your customs,” she said.

Benedict joined her then, his face looking like he aged ten years in the last thirty minutes.

“We... we have to talk,” he said.

Ilea nodded. “You’re aware that some of the people here are still willing to go through with this ritual?”

“Yes. But you killed those capable of creating the runes. I swear on my life that that is the truth,” Benedict said. “Let alone the fact that those who ordered it were not in the city in the first place. Key pieces are missing, I have the confirmation of several enchanter. The ritual could not have been activated.”

“How long have they been preparing?” Ilea asked.

“For about eight weeks,” he said. “The priest will know more, he refused to cooperate after a meeting he had with the Acolytes that were sent here.”

“Where is he now?” she asked.

“In his study, where he has been for the last two months,” he said.

Ilea nodded and cracked her neck before she whistled, not using monster hunter. She got their attention regardless. “Don’t leave this hall until we know more. If you do anyway, I’ll hunt you down.”

She would’ve had a headache by now but her healing prevented it.

Benedict visibly deflated when they reached the hallways upstairs, Ilea wearing a normal robe again as they walked towards the local priest's study.

Everyone on the way stopped and looked at the two but nobody dared confront them.

The door was locked and reinforced, enchantments placed on the outside to prevent entry.

She saw the man sitting at his desk.

"You okay?" she asked the man next to her.

He seemed lost in thought before he met her eyes. "Okay?" he asked before he smiled and shook his head. "No. I'm very far from that state of mind."

Ilea knew only a minute had passed since she left the hall but she quickly blinked down to see what the ex members of the order were up to. *Nothing changed.*

If they suddenly remade the ritual and activated it, it was on her. She believed Benedict's words and knew just from seeing the people that it was the truth but even if the chance of betrayal was minimal, the risk remained high.

She appeared at Benedict's side again and kicked in the door, the enchantments flaring up before the stone around the entrance cracked and broke.

Ilea cleared away the debris with ash and stepped inside. She was very much aware of the people close to their doors in the hallway, listening for whatever they could pick up.

"Hey," she said and waved at the man. He looked to be in his sixties, a full head of medium length gray hair accented by a carefully groomed mustache added to his stern impression, his piercing black eyes looking at the invaders with scrutiny. The man wore black pants and shoes, a white shirt covered in part by a dark red vest. Despite his age, the man looked more than just fit, the definition of his muscles visible through the clothes.

Ilea wondered how Benedict would look in the set of clothes. *Probably more impressive than the boring robes,* she thought.

He didn't say anything for a long moment before he sighed. "Would you explain the situation to me Acolyte?"

Benedict looked at Ilea, receiving a nod as she sat down on a nearby chair.

"You're familiar with the ritual that was under way in your own temple?" Benedict asked.

"I couldn't stop it, Benedict," the man said.

[Healer – lvl 104]

"Nara fell to this same ritual, its people killed and cursed. Odiah, Mophis, Seyna," Benedict said.

Barrett showed the first genuine reaction at this. His eye twitched as he stood up.

"No... that's impossible. The goal was to make a connection to the realm of life. Has that woman poisoned your mind?" he asked.

"I've seen it myself, priest," Ilea said. "Or are you calling me a liar? Why would I risk invading a city on high alert? Preparing for war? I came to prevent another ritual to take place, to stop your Order," she said.

He ground his teeth.

“They confirmed it... enchanters of the Order. The sacrifices required are immense, a thousand times more than the people caged up down below,” Benedict said with a heavy tone.

“I can’t accept that, not from you, Benedict. I refused to cooperate due to the sacrifices but to break in here and claim such nonsen-”

Ilea displaced both of them down into the hall. She walked through the hallway and did the same to everyone else who had heard a part of the conversation. A quick search of the temple let her move around thirty more people down into the hall.

She appeared herself afterwards.

“Your High King and Elders have sacrificed four major cities of your kingdom for these rituals. Whatever this realm of life is, it’s not worth killing hundreds of thousands,” Ilea said.

“Lilith is right,” Benedict said before anybody else could speak. “The proof is overwhelming and I won’t stand by this Order if this is what they’re willing to do,” he said and gestured around himself. “I believe in balance, order, life, and healing but as of now, I am no longer a member of this Order,” he said.

Ten people started talking at the same time, heated discussions breaking out between the members.

Ilea shook her head slightly and stepped back.

“This is horrific,” one of Benedict’s warriors said. “I’m Mya by the way, haven’t felt the need to make myself a target of your wrath,” she said and chuckled slightly.

Ilea nodded and sat back down on her piece of rubble.

The discussions went on.

“He’s a good man,” Mya said after a while. “Give him a chance to fix it.”

Ilea pushed some air out of her nose. “Did he tell the truth?”

“Every word of his was the truth,” Mya said. “Though I can see how you’re doubtful. If this ritual can really kill everyone in such a large city, we have to make sure it can’t ever be rebuilt.”

“They’re probably preparing one of these in every city of your kingdom, maybe even beyond,” Ilea said.

Mya gulped and glanced at her.

“What if there are more here? In Yinnahall?” the woman asked.

Ilea smiled. “I suppose you better start looking then,” she said.

The woman nodded and joined the discussions, quickly garnering a lot of attention. All of them were speaking in the local tongue.

Way to drive a spike into a major healing Order, she thought with a sigh. She could just kill everyone right here, right now. It would make sure this site wouldn’t be used anymore, all the knowledge these people had about the ritual, gone.

She smiled, looking at the passionate speaking of Mya, Benedict, and those she had freed. Even Faith was taking part. It was simple to dismiss the thought. These people could perhaps create some real change.

Ilea counted them, noting down how many people were in the cages, how many guards remained, how many healers. She couldn't risk them setting up another ritual but she thought it impossible for them to do so in the span of a day, or even a week. But she couldn't fully trust them either. Not after what she had seen.

She appeared next to Benedict. "I'll be back. Remain in this hall until you've figured out what to do. Try to find out if there are more rituals being prepared in Yinnahall or anything related to rituals in other cities."

The man looked at her and nodded. "Of course... if... maybe if you're willing. We could use your help cleaning up. Even on the list I've given you, many are untouchable for me."

"Gladly," Ilea said and vanished.

It didn't feel right to leave them behind but she was getting a little sick of it all. A sigh left her as she blinked through the city, summoning one of Keyla's meals before she appeared again in the initial cellar they had arrived in.