

Chapter 513 Alchemy

“If you’re asking about my capability of sacrificing an entire city’s population to turn them into monsters, then yes. I could manufacture such a thing, though the knowledge I gained today had no impact on that,” he said.

No wonder Velamyr threads lightly around the man. Despite his level not even reaching three hundred, she thought.

“However neither me nor my original think it wise to sacrifice so much potential. Most humans never reach meaningful levels of power but it would be disastrous if such pointless rituals killed even just one or two who could’ve achieved things far beyond their status,” Michael said.

Felicia wasn’t sure she liked the idea of having blood mages around that could just kill so many people on a whim. *At least he shouldn’t be the norm.*

“Rituals require power and blood magic is quite liberal when it comes to the provided sources. What the original said about using beasts instead was not a lie. It’s both easier and safer. I implore you not to think of blood magic itself as the enemy. The Order of Truth chose deliberately to sacrifice these people, either because of ill informed mages, time constraints, or a foolish hope,” he said.

I’m getting nothing, Felicia thought and stopped her spell. The people were gone without a trace.

In case someone got away, they would first scour the city for more ritual sites before following the trace that would surely be left behind. The loose ends either meant their actions would be reported to the Order or in this case, those responsible had learned about them directly.

“Why do you care about my opinion on blood magic?” she asked, switching into her disguise before they resumed their search in the same teams they had previously employed.

“I didn’t just ask to accompany you because teams were necessary. You’re the new head of House Redleaf, potentially a very influential upcoming noble in Virilya. My efforts to loosen restrictions on various magic schools all over the plains is not a tightly guarded secret. Understanding the rituals that caused this will lead to enchantments and spells that can counter or prevent them entirely,” he said.

“I doubt that will be the opinion of the Empress,” Felicia said honestly. The Empire was rather lax compared to other countries when it came to curse and blood magic, as well as necromancy. Some of it was still restricted or outright forbidden but she assumed it was for good reason.

“If these people understood ritual magic at a higher degree, they could have achieved the same results without sacrificing human lives,” Michael insisted.

“Potentially,” Felicia agreed. He didn’t know their motives however, even if he knew what he was talking about and didn’t lie to her, the Order of Truth could have simply chosen to kill everyone because they believed it to be necessary. Human sacrifice and suffering wasn’t just done for pure pragmatic magical efficiency, there were dozens of other reasons too, often religious or just purely with malicious intent.

Felicia knew as much and had even experienced some of it herself.

She doubted that Michael would refrain from sacrificing humans if circumstances demanded it either. Perhaps the Empire and this war had pushed the Order to do just that, or it was the plan all along. She didn't know.

All she knew was that they prevented one such ritual of taking place in Harchat. Its population would still have to experience a coming siege and the destruction the war would bring with it but it would be spared from being turned into Cursed monsters. How long they would remain untouched was yet to be determined but Felicia definitely preferred this outcome compared to the alternative.

Ilea made sure the doors were locked and enchantments were in place, blinking up to the two slaves who had chosen to arm themselves.

[Warrior – lvl 42]

[Warrior – lvl 38]

Terrifying, she thought and looked at them, their discomfort rising as they stared at the woman in ash.

Ilea walked over to the bodies and stored them within her bracelet. Disappearances were easier to explain than outright corpses after all.

One of the two slaves said something in the native language.

She just displaced them with her, back to the cellar. Or dungeon, whatever it actually was.

They looked around, confused until they realized where they were.

“Make sure everyone is fed and taken care of,” Ilea said to the old man, his eyes still glued to the head on the floor.

She had opened the door at the end of the stairs leading up, the opening providing enough light to see.

The two men rushed to the other slaves, checking for injuries before they found the food and water, confusion apparent in their words.

“To what end?” the old man asked before he looked up. “We will be killed if this is found,” he gestured to the head.

Ilea extended her ash and stored it in her bracelet.

“To what end?” she asked, thinking it over herself. He was right of course, if the guards came into the house now, they'd likely be imprisoned or killed on the spot. Even if the lady had only disappeared.

“The Empire is coming, as are others,” she said. “You said the slaves will starve in the siege to come. Maybe now you have the option to change that fate.”

He looked at her and started to cackle.

“I had hoped for this day once, Lilith,” he said, the others focusing more on them after he said the name. “Maybe you are right. I think I’m too old now but I see the fire in them that I once had. I won’t forsake them,” he said and looked at the other slaves.

“My name is Nadir. I’m glad to have made your acquaintance,” he said and moved to get up, two of the others trying to help him before he hit them and muttered something.

“Nadir... I suggest you don’t act too brazenly. The city is held by its rulers still,” Ilea said.

“The Empire is coming... and we shall do what we can to welcome them,” he said before speaking to the others.

“I’ll leave you to it then,” Ilea said, watching him bow, the others mirroring the gesture.

She vanished into a nearby alley, her Baralia armor appearing as her ash receded. Ilea wasn’t here to lead a slave rebellion but she could at least give a few people a choice they never had before.

Yinnahall would fall. The question was how exactly that would happen. *A cursed horde fought by Imperial troops, nobles and slaves starving alike in an ongoing siege until the whole city is burnt down? Or perhaps something a little more hopeful.*

Her short time with Nadir hadn’t been unfruitful. He had given her the location of several nearby temples and people that might be willing to talk to her for the right price. People who spoke Standard.

It was enough to start her search.

She walked towards her first target, an alchemy shop a few streets over. Nadir had known the couple, tasked to buy various dubious creations for his owner. He was aware of some of their views, the way they treated the slaves sent to them for errands.

Nadir himself didn’t have the best memory, according to his word. Nor did he have a map of the city with Order temples marked on it.

An established alchemy merchant would hopefully provide a little more.

Ilea kept her eyes and sphere open as she traveled through the streets, trying to avoid more active areas.

There were surprisingly no beggars. Everyone seemed to be going after one errand or the other. There were soldiers too, guards, and adventurers patrolling the streets, trying to keep order in the tense city.

She assumed a large number of people were just waiting for the Empire to attack. The chaos brought by a siege would demand a lot of soldiers to be closer to the walls, a lot of attention not focused where it had been before.

Hector wasn’t the only one seeing this war as an opportune time to make some gold but she assumed not everyone thought quite as big as he did.

Ilea wondered how many people would choose to loot and steal instead of fighting the country’s enemy. She didn’t know how many slaves would rise against their masters as free men and women either. She knew nothing of the local customs, the culture, education, and ways of life.

Nadir had seemed interested enough in making trouble, certainly happy to see his master dead.

Ilea had no qualms about killing a woman who let her slaves rot to death in her cellar, pitting them to fight against each other for her amusement as she watched. She already knew that the woman wasn't the norm however.

Every house she passed, every slave on the street she brushed past, she checked with her sphere or her healing.

She doubted many of them actually wanted to be slaves, nor did she think the ones who did were anything but brainwashed by a society that allowed for this savagery. However when it came to rising up and killing their masters, she assumed most of them just wanted their freedom, fair pay, and a choice. A shoemaker wouldn't become a murderer from one day to the next, not if they received acceptable treatment within their view of the world.

Ilea wasn't about to murder everyone who owned slaves in this forsaken country but those who spoke out for it had to be removed. Those who mistreated their slaves, had to be removed. Those who would refuse the change of law that would be brought by the Empire, had to be removed.

She would leave the headache of enforcing this and the payment of reparations to *employed* slaves to the Empire. *I should let Claire know that this is something I care about. If they just take the city and with it every company, employee, and every piece of gold...*

She didn't like it. Realistically that was however exactly what would happen. The slaves would be left with their freedom but nothing else to show for their lives of work.

An extensive buying program maybe... I'll have to ask for a share in the city's establishments from the General. A large part if we actually manage to prevent the ritual. The rest we could just buy, and then we give it back to the people. For a small share in the profits.

There was no reason to not profit at all. *Maybe Claire is having a bad influence on me*, she thought with a smirk before reminding herself that the profits they made would benefit hundreds if not thousands more. Especially here, the infusion of gold could surely jump start the economy back up after the war. And giving establishments back to those whose work actually made them exist might prevent everyone from setting this city aflame and leaving.

First, prevent the ritual, she thought and stepped into a side street.

The store was easy enough to find, the glass front covered in writing, both things she couldn't read and a name in standard.

Yinnis Alchemy Shop

Ilea stepped inside, a bell near the door ringing as she took in the messy store.

Shelves lined the walls, tables and cupboards filling the rest of the already cramped space to provide a very personal atmosphere. It was stuffy, the hundreds of ingredients sitting about added a sea of smells and impressions, some of them decidedly rotten.

A voice resounded from a room in the back, shouting something in the native tongue.

Ilea couldn't see through the walls with her sphere, glad that at least the enchantments led some credibility to the place.

She didn't have to wait long until an older gentleman of short stature stepped behind the counter. A large bald spot was visible on his head, the man still clinging to the gray strips of hair loosely attached to his scalp.

[Alchemist – lvl 79]

“You must be Yinnis,” she said.

“What are you looking for?” he asked, obviously not happy about having a customer.

“Why so annoyed? Looks like you could need the business,” Ilea said as she grabbed random ingredients, identifying and sniffing on them.

“Stop that, you’ll get poisoned. A war is coming, shouldn’t you be manning the walls?” he asked.

“The war is already here,” she answered. “And my Poison Resistance is quite sufficient for anything you have here I wager. I’d be interested in stronger things however,” she said.

“You’re looking to kill someone? Or to use it in battle? I’m afraid I sold everything to the guard already. You’re not the first to come,” he said. “And you’re a foreigner too. I’m surprised the army is so lax these days. I suppose desperate times call for desperate measures.”

“Maybe I just prefer Standard,” Ilea said and shrugged.

“You’re as native as that herb you’re holding. Everything you touch from now on you’ll have to buy,” he said.

“I was told of your shop by a common acquaintance,” Ilea said before she looked at him. “His name is Nadir.”

His eyes softened a little at the mention of the name before he narrowed them. “Why did he send you? And not one of theirs?”

“Oh he didn’t send me. I’ve come here for my own reasons,” Ilea said.

“You’re with Lady Varrun then?” he asked.

Seems like allegiances are very important to him, Ilea thought and summoned the lady’s head, dumping it onto his counter.

The man looked down but stayed surprisingly calm.

“You mean her?” Ilea asked.

“That’s her, yes,” the man said. “So he finally hired an assassin. I was wondering how long the woman still had to go. I assume you’re here to kill me too?”

He casually grabbed a pouch from his belt and put it next to the head. Silver pieces started spilling out as he pushed it forward a little.

“Keep your silver, I’m neither here to kill you nor was I paid to kill her,” Ilea said.

He looked at her for a while. “That complicates things. Why are you here then? Foreign healer.”

She stored the head again and cleaned away the blood with her ash. “The imperial armies are coming. But it wasn’t them to destroy Mophis and Nara.”

“What do you think of the Order of Truth?” she asked.

The man looked at the counter top and back to her. If he came to any conclusions, he didn’t share them. “The sum of its parts? I doubt they’re much worse than any other Healing Order. Locally, there are some that I would trust with my life. They take care of illnesses spreading through the slums, offer help for free to those who cannot pay.”

“They help without asking anything in return?” Ilea asked. This was the first time she had heard anything good about the order.

“Not many of their members, but a few are enough. You should know yourself how much a healer of your level can change,” he said.

Ilea smiled. “I doubt there are any at my level.”

“What does it matter? Level one hundred, two? Either means salvation for a dying man stabbed by a thief, or a whore dying in childbirth,” he said.

“What if I told you that the Order has wiped out the population of whole cities just to power a blood magic ritual?” she asked.

He gulped, whispering something in his native tongue. “I’m not a member of the Order, nor do I pretend to know their goals or inner workings. It would be a shame if what you say turns out to be true but right now, you’re merely a foreign assassin to me, your word means little.”

She doubted he was lying.

“I’m here to prevent another such ritual to happen. Here in Yinnahall,” she said.

“Why kill the lady then?” he asked. “Forgive me, I meant not to pry. Just tell me what you need. I will gladly trade information for my life.”

Ilea looked at him. “Should we continue in the back? Where your enchantments shield us from listeners?”

He nodded, gesturing her to follow him.

A few people glanced up from their work to look at the passing two, none of them uttering a word, either feeling the tension or told not to engage with people that were allowed into the back rooms.

The man led her into a small workshop at the very back of the long house. She assumed his living quarters were upstairs.

His discomfort grew with their walk before he sat down on a simple chair in the workshop and sighed.

“Were you sent to kill me?” he asked. “If such is the case, do it now and don’t prolong what is inevitable.”

Ilea looked at the potions in his workshop, trying to identify them but not getting anything useful back. She glanced his way and shook her head.

“I told you the truth. I simply chose to kill a woman who let her slaves suffer and die,” she said. “The people in the hallway, are they slaves too?”

“You would risk facing the wrath of Yinnahall just for the lives of a few slaves?” he seemed baffled but focused again quickly. “A few of them are slaves, yet I promise them employment as soon as they have earned my trust and their place. The rest are free people, once in the same position as the slaves.”

“How very generous of you,” Ilea said, not without sarcasm.

“You cannot compete with free labor, not without using some of your own. I see the value in teaching people, gaining trust, and profiting from their innovation. I’ve worked hard but I cannot compare to the larger shops. I’m not a heartless slaver, Lilith,” he said.

“Hey, you figured it out,” Ilea said and laughed.