

Chapter 602 Jobbing

Ilea turned to the terrified soldier. “What about him?”

“I have no clue. He did attack, but given the situation, I would’ve done the same,” Paulson said.

“L... Lilith... please... I surrender,” the man stammered.

“Ah well. Okay, you lead us through this place then. Shout, warn someone, or attack us and I’ll have your head, understood?” she said.

“Yes, of course. I don’t want to die,” he said. “I’m Rorge. Stationed in Mothine before we made our way west here when the imperials breached the walls.”

Shows your bravery, I suppose. Hopefully I’m scarier than the imperial army breaching the walls of Mothine, Ilea thought with a smirk. She had heard and seen enough of Lord Veltan to justify a rather... direct response.

“Show me to the sacrifice hall,” she said. Both the slaves and the few attendants she had ran into painted a rather decrepit picture of this fort and its current inhabitants. Desperate situations did apparently call for desperate blood magic. The good thing was that Veltan and his allies apparently didn’t have access to something quite as intricate as the higher ups in the Order of Truth.

“Of course, this way Lady Lilith,” Rorge said. “Those who didn’t follow the orders were used in the experiments too,” he added.

“Yes Rorge, please keep the sob stories to yourself for now. I’m sure we’ll find someone to listen at a later point in time,” she said, sure that an imperial judge could deal with that instead. Not that she heard much about their benevolent trials, but maybe the man had a chance, considering the war ended months ago. Officially that was.

They freed a few more slaves along the way, Ilea teleporting their whole group through the corridors and to the cellar before going back up with Rorge and Paulson. She noted that none of the prisoners had reacted particularly shocked when they glanced the Baralia soldier. A good sign at least.

When they reached the sacrifice hall, Ilea left Paulson to guard Rorge near the door and simply walked inside. She stepped past the group of soldiers playing cards at a long banquet table and went straight to the hooded man standing near the improvised stone tub carved into the ground. A thin layer of blood still remained at the bottom, the smell quite strong.

She saw the naked and crying slaves in their cages a few meters away and heard the hooded man giggling to himself.

The soldiers had noticed her by now and scrambled up, drawing their weapons and shouting.

“What’s so funny?” Ilea asked, her ashen horns nearly scraping the hooded man’s brow when he turned and stumbled, nearly falling into the tub. She caught him by the throat and held him there. “Now, now, boys and girls.”

The soldiers stopped when they saw her holding the mage, weapons drawn and ready to fight.

He gurgled something before a whip of blood slapped uselessly against the side of her head. "I'm sure you're aware that your king is dead. Lord Veltan is dead too and this fort has fallen. Now I'm going to give you once chance," Ilea said when a blood spike slammed against her head, just as uselessly shattering. "Lay down your weapons and face trial, or die right here and at my hands," she added, activating her third tier Deviant ability.

They immediately took a step back, most dropping their weapons with a few whispers of Lilith.

Only two of the soldiers remained hostile, one of them attacking one of his own. He quickly found himself vanishing and appearing at the top of the rather high reaching hall, falling before he broke a leg on the ground. The last soldier dropped his axe.

Her aura stopped and she nodded to the man she held up, his magic still flung against her head. "I assume this is the man who plans and executes the rituals?"

The soldiers all confirmed quickly.

She pressed her hand together, breaking the man's spine and killing him before she dropped the corpse into the tub. Ilea displaced the soldier who had attacked the others and killed him too.

"Leave your weapons and look for rope or something else to bind each other," she said, going to the cages before she ripped the doors open.

Her ash spread to heal the captives but she found them in good health already. "Paulson," she called out and cut apart a Baralia tapestry, handing each of the captives enough to cover themselves with.

The soldier stepped into the room, his swords held casually as he urged Rorge forward. "Yes?"

Ilea appeared next to him and marked the man. "Use this to call for me if any of them attack you. Wait here."

"What if they kill me in a few seconds?" he asked.

"I'll make sure to avenge you," Ilea replied.

"Wonderful," he said.

She punched his shoulder. "You survived Veltan. I'm sure you'll be fine against this bunch. Rorge is the strongest after all."

Ilea left for the indicated dinner hall upstairs and near the top of the fort. Flames still clung to the entrance and her sphere already told her enough.

"Enjoying yourself?" she asked, finding about fifteen corpses burnt and splattered throughout the hall. The long table in the center was covered with food and drinks, as well as limbs and intestines. Feyrair sat in the largest chair with his armored boots on the table, a human leg in his hand.

He bit into it with glee, ripping through the flesh and muscle with ease. He chewed and swallowed, blood dripping down his chin. "I'm wonderful, thank you."

"Slaves and staff?" she asked.

"Do you think me an animal? I sent them away beforehand," the elf said.

Ilea looked around the room before she glanced at him with a raised eyebrow, revealing her face just to get the gesture across.

"Hey, there are plenty for the both of us. I'm willing to share," he said and pointed the leg at her.

“Anyone left?” Ilea asked, sniffing on a bottle of wine before she displaced a glass from a serving table at the side of the hall, checking it for blood before she filled it.

“This floor is clear. Only one way up, probably soldiers on the roof,” he informed her before he continued his meal.

“Anyone above two hundred here?” she asked.

He looked up for a moment. “A few, yes. Oh, two forty for one of them. They all immediately attacked though.”

“Ah whatever. Just don’t eat their faces if you can resist. Might be good for the imperials to know who was present,” Ilea said and walked towards the stairs leading up.

“Sure you don’t want any? It’s fresh!” Feyrair called out.

Ilea rolled her eyes. “Yeah, I can smell that,” she said and sipped on her wine. *I really am more of an ale person. But I suppose if it’s here.*

She found a few slaves or employees hiding in the kitchen and told them to go down to the cellar, her armor and the blood still clinging to it enough to prevent an argument. When she reached the roof, she found fifteen more soldiers, some of them mages and the rest armed with crossbows or normal bows.

One of them stared at her, unsure how to react as she stepped onto the roof with a glass of wine in hand, the bottle in the other.

She charged Monster Hunter and whistled, freezing the lot and repeating her offer. This time, they all dropped their weapons and looked around with fearful eyes.

“Alright, come on, down to the square,” she said, picking up everyone else on the way down. The door to the dinner hall remained closed. Feyrair would come when he was done.

About twenty minutes later, every human in the fort had come to the central square where the main gate to the fort remained closed.

“What do you think?” she asked the only imperial in the large group.

Everyone looked at them, the Baralia soldiers bound while the ex slaves exchanged clothing and food they had gathered.

Paulson sighed. “It’s getting pretty late. You don’t suppose we can continue tomorrow?”

“You just want to loot the place,” Ilea said.

He smiled. “Ah well that too, but I meant it. Can you bring us all to Mothine then?”

“It’s better if you get a few soldiers here, I’m sure Lord Veltan should be enough of a name to get Barren moving,” she said.

“In the middle of the night? That promotion is looking grim,” he murmured. “Don’t look at me like that, I’ll go of course. Can you keep some of the wine for me? And that bag of silver in Veltan’s office, doubt someone like you has much use for it.”

Ilea laughed, his behavior downright refreshing compared to everyone else in the vicinity. “Know what, sure. But only if you get them here in less than eight hours.”

“Ten?” he asked.

“Eight, come on, you’re not that slow,” she said.

“Plenty of monsters and bandits in the area,” the man murmured but went to get two horses anyway. “I’ll be here as fast as I can.”

“Do be,” she said and walked to the closed gate. She placed down her glass and bottle before she wedged her hands into the thick wood, pulling hard. The wood groaned as the mechanisms turned and the gate was lifted. She gripped below and moved it further up until it was high enough for the soldier and his horses to pass.

“Yeah, yeah, I get it,” he said with a smile.

Ilea let the gate fall when the man had passed, displacing the glass and bottle back into her hands. *Now let’s see if we can’t gather some evidence in the meantime.*

The sky was pitch black when the sound of riders came closer to the front gate. Ilea saw them with her sphere and went to open the entrance.

She used the same handholds she had created before, finding a group of two dozen imperial riders staring at her on the other side.

“Welcome,” she said, holding up the gate with one arm. “Do come in.”

Paulson was the first to get off his horse, walking past her with a smile on his face.

“What’s so funny?” she asked him.

“Just won a few bets, that’s all,” he mused and started to whistle.

The rest of the group followed quickly, a few of them immediately taking charge of dealing with both the prisoners and the refugees. Others went into the fort to investigate and collect evidence after receiving confirmation that the place should be clear.

Ilea stepped next to Paulson a little while later, sitting down on a crate close by. She wordlessly summoned a bottle of wine and a pouch full of silver.

“You’re lovely, did someone ever tell you that?” the man asked, gratefully receiving the gifts.

“Never. Might just have fallen in love with you,” Ilea replied.

“Ah no, please don’t. I know what I can handle, and you’re very... very far beyond that,” Paulson said.

“The weak bone structure of men,” Ilea sighed. “Well, we should probably report to Barren. Care to join us?”

“It’s not our bone structure that’s the problem,” he mused. “He’s waiting for us to come back, yes. Never seen him that scared before.”

Ilea waved to Feyrair and stood up, grabbing Paulson with her ash. “Then let’s get it over with.”

Ilea said her goodbyes to Paulson a little while later, Barren having been much more accommodating now that he knew who she was. She wondered if she should offer Paulson to join the Sentinels but decided he wasn't exactly the best fit, nor would he be interested in the first place.

"I'll be on my way then, to enjoy the wonders of Mothine with this honest pay," the man said and patted the bulging pouch hanging from his belt.

"Careful with that, plenty of pickpockets running around," Ilea said.

"Why I didn't put it in my pocket," the man said.

Ilea groaned. "Do enjoy yourself, it was good meeting you, Paulson."

Feyrair smiled. "You're not too bad, for a human."

The man nodded slowly. "Well. I can't say it was a pleasure. But I suppose it turned out well in the end. Though I do hope I won't ever meet monsters like you again."

"We'll be back then, to hunt you down," Ilea said, turning to Fey. "Right?"

"Of course," the elf said, crouching a little bit as the temperature rose around them.

Paulson just laughed and walked away, waving at them in the process. "You may be strong, but you don't scare me."

"Foolish," Feyrair whispered when the man was too far away to hear.

"I mean he's not wrong," Ilea said. "No reason to fear us, or is there?"

The elf rolled his shoulders. "You're right. I've had my fill already."

Ilea smiled and picked him up, spreading her wings before they ascended over the town and into the night.

The next flight wasn't particularly long, Ilea following the main road northwards until they reached the first village about a day's ride away from Mothine. Barren had directed them to the settlement when she had inquired about the job.

"I doubt it'll be anything particularly challenging," Feyrair remarked when they landed near the low stone wall. "Perhaps if they actually fought the beasts, they wouldn't have to hire someone else to deal with their problems."

"Yes, but then you don't have tailors making comedic outfits for my elf friends," Ilea said.

"That's true, but you know, one can wear monster carcasses. It even sometimes manages to intimidate enemies," Feyrair said.

"Also it stinks, rots, is unsanitary, and just generally kind of disgusting. Show me what you can do, I don't need to see a dead monster you managed to kill to judge your ability," Ilea said when they reached the wall.

The gate was closed, so she just displaced the two of them inside. Sunrise was still a few hours away, but with how much the job paid, she assumed waking someone up about it wouldn't be seen as the worst possible crime.

The village didn't have an inn and it seemed most people were fast asleep at this hour. They did see a few dogs but went past silently, not waking the animals.

Ilea chose the largest house and knocked on the door, seeing the sleeping couple through her sphere. She repeated the process with increasing volume until the woman woke up and rubbed her eyes.

A minute passed until she was down at the door, checking the locks before she opened it just a slit. "Who are you?"

"A Sentinel, here about the monsters," Ilea answered.

"I see... explains the hour. Do you have the contract? And your badge please," the woman said.

Ilea handed her the piece of paper and her emerald adventurer's badge.

"Emerald...", the woman murmured, looking at the thing before she unlocked the door fully and opened it. "Come on in. Can I bring you tea or ale?"

She looked to be in her forties, a kind expression on her face. She had long brown hair coming down over her shoulder and towards her chest.

"A tea would be wonderful. We did come to the right place then?" Ilea asked.

The woman handed her things back and walked towards the kitchen. "Hardly anyone here who doesn't know about this one. We pooled together what little we had to pay for professional help." She touched a rune on her stove and checked the kettle sitting on top, throwing in a few more herbs from a pot sitting on a nearby table.

Feyrair closed the door without a sound.

"My husband is still asleep. We can talk in the living room," the woman said and gestured them towards a closed door to the right of the small hallway. "I'm Kaya," she said and sat down on a large cushioned rocking chair.

"Lilith, nice to meet you," she said and sat down on the couch, Feyrair joining her.

"Like the one in the songs?" Kaya asked with a smile.

"The same, yes," Ilea said.

"I heard stories about you," Kaya said. "But you don't look like a monster to me."

Ilea relaxed into the couch. "Looks can be deceiving."

The woman chuckled. Not a joyous sound. "We know," she said and went to get the tea.

"Will that be a problem? You're not famous for killing their troops, are you?" Feyrair whispered.

Ilea didn't say anything, thanking Kaya as she received her tea.

"The bards sing that you fought an army on your own, that you slayed monsters and freed slaves. Any of that true?" the woman asked as she stirred her tea, taking a sip as she relaxed.

"Does it matter?" Ilea asked.

"I'm just curious. I know you two are powerful. I can tell, even without the badge you showed me. But Lilith? I'm not so sure you are her. I'm not so sure she exists at all," Kaya said.

"Why would she not exist?" Ilea asked in turn, tasting the liquid. A nice combination of herbs, none of which she could place.

“The bards like to sing of heroes and adventurers, but they also like to be paid. A healer that fights armies, frees slaves, fights the Order of Truth... well no offense but if I invaded Baralia lands, I would probably pay the bards to sing of someone similar,” Kaya said.

“You’re brave to say that to our faces,” Feyrair mused, taking a sip from his tea without revealing his teeth.

The woman sighed. “I’ve met my fair share of adventurers and soldiers from both sides. I think I’m not the worst at judging people. You two don’t strike me as easily offended and I don’t think you’re here to rob or kill us either. Far too strong for that. I do wonder why you’re taking a job like this one but you claiming to be Lilith, it fits. No better way to garner approval for the Empire than to send their hero to the rescue.”

Ilea smiled. “I can see the logic in that. But if I’m associated with anyone then it’s the Medic Sentinels and Ravenhall. But I suppose you could find a way to spin it into an Imperial effort either way. In the end it hardly matters, does it?”

“That is true. We just want the problem to be taken care of,” Kaya said.