

Chapter 499 Briefing

“I trust them with my life,” Ryse said after he pulled her aside.

Felicia looked at the group behind him, occupying the table and discussing over the spread out maps.

“You’ve proven loyal to both me and the Empire,” he said. “But I won’t appoint you to lead a strike team. Not yet.”

Felicia nodded, unperturbed by the news. She had expected as much, with her short military history and quick rise to the rank of Major.

He had few reasons to fully trust her.

“I knew your father,” he said suddenly, surprising her with the topic. He was usually focused entirely on the war.

“He was a horrible man,” Felicia said honestly.

The General smiled ever so slightly. “A horrible father perhaps,” he said.

“Your question from earlier. As to whom would accompany me. He might have been one of them, though admittedly, he rarely showed up personally. Especially in the last ten years,” he said.

His secret organization? The one Ilea mentioned. If he’s also part of it, this might be a problem. Or an opportunity.

She was already feeling the headache coming. Deciding between her own rise in power and the legitimacy the General would lead to her cause, or helping out an old friend. One that had saved her more than once.

The answer proved easier than she had expected. Her House could wait. It was centuries old. It would mean a small set back but if she couldn’t stay loyal to a friend, how could she lead a House?

“I’m listening,” she said.

The General nodded. “This operation won’t be easy but you have managed the best against the blast of the ritual in Odiah. The Majors speak highly of your combat ability. I will be blunt. I cannot risk them, but I can risk you. Of course I won’t forget your willingness to take part in this strike team,” he said.

“What if I say no?” Felicia asked. She would take part in the war one way or the other. If her capabilities could be brought to a more efficient place, led directly by Ryse, she would prefer that anyway.

“Then you will be assigned to one of the other teams. That would be the end of it,” he said.

Sure, and you wouldn’t forget my refusal. I’m sure, she thought. The man knew she claimed House Redleaf and its assets. She knew that from his perspective, Felicia could hardly refuse this deal.

She wasn’t sure if he understood that this was very much in her best interests. *Or it’s just a test and he honestly wants to see if I’m in it for more than just my House’s name? If he works directly with me he can gauge the risks I take, how far I’m willing to go.*

There were many other possibilities she entertained, including a marriage between them. It would shut up the suitors he surely was tired of meeting and it would make sure his wife wasn't someone to be protected only.

The status of their Houses was like day and night but the Redleafs weren't always as minor as they were now. *Are you really thinking that highly of me?*

There were other options, some of them more sinister but somehow Felicia didn't think him even capable of such.

She knew her father had dealt with some criminal organizations but what noble hasn't? Maria and Edwin were both criminals and the only reason they weren't imprisoned was the influence she had already exerted. The lack of proof helped too but to an imperial investigator, it wouldn't remain a secret for long who had murdered those nobles. Not that they had a realistic chance of catching Maria.

"I accept," she said, deeming the potential gains far higher than the risks. Felicia hated her father with all of her heart but that didn't mean she hated his connections and wealth. If anything it filled her with a morbid joy to use this to her advantage. Plus, she could perhaps find information for Ilea.

"Good. We leave in half an hour," the General said and walked past her, the conversation done.

Ilea sat with closed eyes and a hot chocolate in hands, enjoying the warmth of their little fire.

Admittedly it was a large fire.

Massive perhaps by some people's standards.

Their third bout had taken a few dozen trees down. A part of that was cut apart by her and added to their fire.

"A Basilisk, hmm? That's quite impressive. Lightning is a little annoying with my element," the Destroyer said.

"And they fly. Not exactly your forte," she pointed out.

The two of them were a little removed from the ruins by now. A compromise with the Dawn Company.

Michael didn't seem to care and remained near the ruin.

"True. I can deal with it but the high skies make me shiver, I tell you. Fucking scary up there," he said.

Ilea laughed. "I feel the same way about the deep oceans."

They looked at each other. "Fear Resistance training?" he said first.

She nodded. "Though I'm not sure how beneficial it is. What does the second tier do?"

He shrugged. "I have no idea. I'm not afraid of anything."

"You literally just admitted that you're afraid of the sky," she said.

"Fear and respect are quite different things, Lilith," he said and looked towards the ruins.

"More coming?" Ilea asked.

He nodded and sipped on his drink. "Can't wait for his face."

"The fire?" she asked.

"The fire," the pirate confirmed.

The General didn't take long to appear at their side, a massive lighting strike forming in front of his outstretched palm before the entirety of their fireplace was blasted away.

"Not like that will inform anybody that we're here," the Destroyer said, still sitting in his chair. "It's been a while boy."

Boy?

The General had blue eyes and long black wavy hair. He wore an armored robe with two lines of red going down from his shoulders. A short beard added to his features, the man looking to be around thirty. His demeanor and the way he looked at them didn't quite support that estimate.

Ilea wondered if he had lost his left arm recently or if it was a permanent thing. She assumed the latter after she inspected the robe. It didn't look cut or damaged.

"I didn't expect anything less from you," the man said, looking at the pirate before glancing at Ilea. "And you must be Lilith."

"I am," she said and lifted her hot chocolate towards him. "Nice to meet you."

"War is not a nice occasion," the man said bluntly. "You were sent here by Helena I presume? To help in the endeavors concerning blood rituals by the Order of Truth and Baralia?"

"I was asked to help, yes. I wasn't sent by anybody but myself," Ilea said.

He looked at her for a moment but didn't say anything. "Good. I'm glad you two have chosen to come. I will be giving a short briefing. With information on the most dangerous cursed areas and targets in Baralia. I'm sure you're interested in that part at least."

The man knew who he was dealing with and he knew how to get them.

"That's our cue," the pirate stood up and stretched.

Ilea did the same, dissolving her ashen chair before she put out the lingering flames and embers with her ash.

When they reached the ruins, Ilea spotted someone she hadn't expected.

Felicia glanced at her, her eyes opening slightly before she looked away.

Ilea assumed the girl was just as surprised to see her here.

"Who's that? She looks nice," the Destroyer said.

Ilea glared at him. "You want to go again?"

"Don't act so superior. I won the last one," he said and rolled his eyes.

“Won? Just because I drowned a little. I hardly died,” Ilea shot back.

“She’s a Major of the Imperial army and you will treat her with the respect that position entails,” the General said before he summoned a table, spreading out a few maps.

The next twenty minutes were spent discussing the various cities, cursed areas and other targets. There were entirely too many for the small group.

“You plan to go in together?” Ilea asked Ryse.

“No. Me and Major Redleaf will infiltrate or break into the few cities we can reach in time. The same goes for Michael and the Dawn Company who will support us. Our goal is to prevent further rituals from taking place,” he said.

“I have heard reports about your prowess, Lilith. And if the conversations I have overheard are to be believed, you can match the Destroyer in... destructive power?” he asked.

Ilea chuckled at the sentence and nodded.

“I wouldn’t say match,” the pirate said.

“I agree. Far exceed would be more descriptive,” she said.

Felicia smiled slightly but schooled her face quickly.

“Either way. The areas and cities marked on your maps hold thousands of cursed beings as well as unknown monstrous entities. The reports on those we encountered are here,” he said and summoned a few more files before spreading them out on the table.

“The primary targets must be dealt with before you start with secondary ones. Dozens of Imperial strike teams will work to do the same, use them if necessary. Should you find a way to prevent further rituals once you’re deeper in the country, don’t hesitate to interfere,” he said.

Ilea nodded, looking at the insect like beings in the reports.

The pirate cracked his neck before stepping away. He looked back to Ilea and gave her a nod. “You coming? We have monsters to kill. General’s orders.”

She couldn’t help but smirk. Velamyr Ryse didn’t seem too offended. Frustrated perhaps and slightly annoyed. He must have known what he got himself into.

“Be swift and without mercy. Thousands of lives depend on it,” Ryse said as Ilea stored the maps and reports.

“Cleanup duty,” she said as they flew towards the first cursed city.

“Don’t act like you would’ve liked the infiltration business,” the pirate said, hanging on to one of her ashen limbs as she flew at her full speed.

“Can’t lie and say I’m not envious of your flight speed. This is quite something. I think you’re the fastest human I’ve met,” he said.

“Just means we might take part in the infiltration too,” she said. “If we deal with this quickly.”

“You want to level your skills. At least use them as much as you can. I’m not exactly stealthy and you don’t strike me as such either,” he said. “Let’s keep to what we do best.”

Ilea didn't exactly agree. "We can both teleport. I'm sure we're more than enough to break into one city or the other. Better than to let them prepare and execute their rituals."

"Can you live with the consequences of failing?" he asked, his voice more serious than before.

"If the ritual activates because of us and thousands die?" she asked.

He nodded.

"I'll deal with that if it happens," she said. "Did you know the girl?" she changed the subject.

"The Redleaf Major? No. Might be Arthur's daughter. He was part of the Lily before. An asshole but his research into the Taleen Gates was deemed important enough to overlook *some* of his missteps. Good riddance if you ask me," he said.

"He's dead?" Ilea asked.

He smiled. "Don't act like you don't know. I saw the way she looked at you and I have a good idea of who killed the old fuck. He wasn't exactly sharing stories about his lovely children."

Ilea didn't say anything.

"Your little comment wasn't missed by anybody either. If you want to protect your friends, you're going to have to do better than that," he said.

"If that little reaction was enough, I'm sure they know everyone dear to me already," she said.

"That bad huh?" he asked and chuckled. "Well, better not make enemies then. Don't worry though. I've been annoying them for decades and nobody moved openly against me. Just make sure they know how powerful you are. They're real pansies when their intimidation games don't work out."

"I didn't have a bad impression of Helena. Michael seems reserved but polite enough. Elisora sounded like bad news but I'm sure if the contracts are fair, she wouldn't try to worsen relationships. Velamyr... well, I can't say I fault the way he acted. This IS serious shit," Ilea said.

"There's more to each of them. Helena you can trust. As much as you can trust me and my word. The same is true for Velamyr, if you don't go against the interests of Lys. Don't discount Michael as a threat but I agree on Elisora. She's more bark than bite but don't offend her too badly," the man said, sounding like he spoke from experience.

Ilea didn't trust him yet either but she didn't see a reason for all of this to be set up just to test her. A test wasn't necessary. She had influence and power and the Lily had reached out.

Trade deals could be set up even without personal trust, not that she liked that kind of deal.

What she could see was that the pirate was a high ranking member who played a role to get to know her. That much wouldn't be difficult and with time he could gauge who she was and what her goals were.

Ilea didn't plan to entirely destroy the Lily quite yet and felt like discussing openly with the pirate would be beneficial either way. As long as she kept some of her information and contacts under wraps. Right now, she did in fact not have a reliable way to kill the man. An open conflict would thus not make much sense.

Gain information, help out with the monster problem, get skill levels, that was still her plan of action. The Destroyer was talkative at least. It remained a mystery if his information could be trusted but so far she had a good feeling about him.

They reached the closest city rather quickly. Scouts had reached it when the ritual activated and killed most of them. Only three got away with their lives, mostly because nobody else was close enough to kill them once cursed.

“This city wasn’t even besieged,” she commented as they floated a few kilometers away. She could already see the greenery spreading out over the walls.

“Just means the Order is entirely nuts. The rituals could deal heavy damage to the imperial army. Why not use them as a weapon?” he said, letting go as water formed below to keep him in the air.

“Because they have their own goal?” Ilea commented.

“Possible. I’ve dealt with my fair share of fanatics and nine times out of ten, they’re just crazy,” he said.

“What about that last one?” Ilea asked.

“Mind fucked by a monster or they peered too deeply into the void. If they succeed, they might unleash some creature or summon a demon. Nothing to be scared of,” he said.

“Even if it’s fueled by several city wide sacrifices of tens of thousands of humans?” Ilea asked.

He shrugged as they approached together. “Humans are quite weak. The life force you get for a blood ritual is laughable, especially using low level civilians. If they were really powerful blood mages, they’d be using powerful monsters.”

“You know a surprising amount about blood magic. Your third Class?” Ilea asked.

He laughed. “I suck at it, no. Plus I don’t like sacrificing my health and blood for spells. I’ll use it to deal with the cursed. You’ll see it soon enough,” he said and snickered.

What are you planning?

“If you want Blood Magic knowledge you can talk to Michael. He’s not exactly open about his knowledge however,” the pirate said.

“Good to know. Elisora made a comment about that. You think he’s here just to study the rituals?” Ilea asked.

“I don’t see another reason for him to care. Maybe they even stole something from him,” he said, obviously amused by the thought.

Ilea quieted down as they closed in. The walls were overgrown with green moss and ivy. Roots and trees had overtaken many of the buildings inside. Grass grew on the streets and out through the broken gates.

“I don’t suppose Baralia *really* likes their gardens?” Ilea asked.

“No. That’s magic. I smell poison too,” the man said.

Ilea spotted more than a few creatures within.

“They’re fighting each other,” the Destroyer said and pointed towards one of the buildings.

Ilea looked and indeed there were a few brown ants the size of dogs spitting and clawing into what looked like crazed humans. There were dozens of humans but they quite literally melted away under the assault.

She spotted thin spider like beings with dozens of legs using wood magic to pierce and cut into the humans. The shrieks and growls were audible far outside the walls.

“Should we join the fun? Doesn’t seem like anybody has reached this city yet,” the pirate said as water pooled below him.

Ilea nodded, looking at the growing lake below him. She wondered how much water he could control, feeling a little inadequate with her ash. *Probably has two or even three water related Classes.*

“Any strategic suggestions?” she asked, knowing that he had far more experience.

The man however just laughed. “Strategic? We’re two people. Go nuts,” he said and moved towards the city, his growing lake changing into a rolling tsunami.

Ilea took another look at the city and steeled herself. *They’re lost. All you can do is put them to rest.*

She checked her skills and blinked into the fray.