

The slaves had moved up into the house. The same was true for someone else.

Ilea appeared in the dining room and casually joined them.

Hector talked in the native tongue while gesturing wildly. He animated a scene with flowing water in front of him, depicting a large ship with several sets of broad sails, an enormous whale appearing below.

A few of the people gasped.

“It took us two days to finally kill the damn beast but it was worth it... best damn meat I’ve ever eaten,” he said in Standard after finishing his story, nodding to himself as if he was reliving the memory.

Ilea just continued eating, taking a deep breath and closing her eyes for a moment. She checked her notifications quickly, now that she was out of the temple finally.

‘ding’ ‘The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 159 – One stat point awarded’

‘ding’ ‘The Faen Valkyrie has reached lvl 160 – One stat point awarded’

‘ding’ ‘Space Shift reaches 2nd lvl 9’

She focused back on the pirate who was now looking at her.

“And look who’s decided to finally show up,” Hector said with a wide grin. “I’ll have you know that you’re the first to make me wait in at least five years.”

Ilea smiled at him. “That explains why you behave like a spoiled child.”

He just waved her off. “Find anything? I doubt you got far with your lack of tact. At least you took the time to clear this house so we don’t have to meet in a damp cellar.”

She ignored the fact that he was always damp.

“I found the ritual site and destroyed it,” Ilea said.

His expression changed, the man turning serious immediately. He waited for a moment before he nodded. “Good. You’re not joking. Well that solves one issue we had.”

“What other issues were there exactly?” Ilea asked.

“Oh, so many! Two hours can be very productive, you know?” Hector said.

“Can they wait for a few minutes?” she asked, summoning a few documents and books from both Benedict’s study and the ritual hall. “Nadir, can you read to me what’s in there?” she asked the man.

He grinned and grabbed the books. “Sure I can.”

“You know I can read it too,” Hector said.

“Oh I know,” Ilea said and smiled at him, continuing her meal.

Nadir confirmed that Benedict hadn't lied about anything. There were detailed orders about the ritual preparations in one of the books and in several letters. Everything fit neatly with what the Acolyte and his allies had told her.

She almost felt bad. Had he betrayed her, she could've killed him, a man risking death for his beliefs and dying with the thought of doing what had to be done. Now he was just a man who lost every trust in the institution he had been part of, his whole life turned upside down in the span of half an hour.

She breathed out and smiled, glad she had given him a chance.

Ilea wondered what they would do. The evidence was staggering and it didn't seem like this realm of life was enough to die or kill for, if not even a priest was willing to allow human sacrifices to reach it.

She explained what had happened after Nadir had read a few key passages and documents, enough to support Benedict's claims and allegiances.

Hector laughed at a few parts and finally raised both arms with his hands behind his head.

"Wow... you really let them live?" he said finally.

"She made the right choice... I know Benedict. He would never agree to something like this," Nadir said and tapped one of the books.

"Oh, because fanatics can't act nice for a few hours to get their enemy to trust them?" he asked.

"I doubt these letters were forged just for a convoluted plan to deceive me. He spoke the truth and now we have allies within this city. Allies with direct connections to a ton of members of the Order," she said.

Hector rolled his eyes. "You have allies. I don't want to have a part in all that. I'm sure you can live with this whole city dying because you didn't do what was necessary."

"I will," Ilea said and glared at him.

"Velamyr will be happy to hear this ritual was disrupted but waaay more importantly. There are a ton of vaults here and they're heavily enchanted. I'm afraid I need your help."

"You didn't look for the ritual site at all, did you?" she asked.

Hector grinned. "I thought your enthusiasm would surely make up for the both of us. And hey, I was right."

He ate a few prawns off his plate before he pointed at her. "I like that disapproving look, almost like you care for the people of this city."

Ilea didn't engage with his childish banter, not in the mood for such shenanigans.

"The bait is ineffective. The scene must have really shaken you up. Well," he said and stood up, dusting off his damp leather duster. "I've got something that cheers up every girl I know."

Gods, if you are there, smite this man and end his miserable existence.

"Gold!" he said. "Now come on, let them squabble amongst themselves. Quite brilliantly done by the way, now we don't really have to look for anything else here. Let's just get their treasure and fuck off to the next city."

His opinions change by the second, she thought and rolled her eyes.

“I won’t be leaving quite as quickly. Nadir, I need some more translations. With these you can help Hector. It’s a list with corresponding evidence about both nobles and members of the Order in this city Benedict gave me,” she said.

“Forged *evidence* to get rid of political enemies, smart man,” Hector said and nonetheless joined her.

If he just fooled me to sacrifice the city anyway, why would he give me forged documents?

She just shook her head and showed them everything.

Ilea checked the temple a few times in the next hour, making sure no new runes would be made, and that nobody ran off.

So far everything seemed fine. The talks were still heated but they had moved into the side room where tables, paper, and writing utensils were present. Plus beds, for those who were likely still exhausted from fearing for their lives or being tortured by the very Order they had called their own.

Hector joined her after they were done going through most of the evidence. His work had been swift and competent. As already shown, the man was certainly annoying but his practical experience and knowledge showed in his actions.

Ilea learned more than she really wanted to know about the practices of some of the officials of Yinnahall. More importantly, she learned a great deal about those who tried to help and bring reform. Many presently incarnated in one or the other dungeon of the city. If anything, Baralia had the documentation thing down. Just sadly in a language she couldn’t read.

Perhaps her high Intelligence would allow her to get the hang of it quickly but she had little interest. Resistances were easier to get and to level.

“You’ve returned?” Benedict asked as he finished the line on a document.

Ilea nodded, all eyes on her.

Barrett didn’t seem the same either, his body language and eyes hinting at a mixture of shame and anger.

“An ally?” Benedict asked, glancing at the pirate walking through the large hall.

“No. Someone whose power can be used and whose goals might intertwine with mine on occasion,” she said. “Perhaps how you view me.”

“Lilith... I know what you must think of our Order... our people. I just implore you to-” Benedict started when Ilea interrupted him.

“Don’t. Maybe we can talk about it in the future but right now we have more pressing issues. I won’t be staying here in Yinnahall for long. Your Order is preparing rituals in other cities, perhaps even more of them here. We have to find and prevent them,” she said.

Benedict nodded.

“I checked the documents, Ben,” Ilea said. “It seems like you’ve been telling the truth at least. Thank you.”

He nodded. “You gave us a chance to redeem ourselves.”

“What about the ones still in the cages?” Ilea asked.

“They were deemed untrustworth-” he said when Hector sent out a spell.

Ilea turned to see the people in the cages fall into pieces.

Ben blinked before he stood up. “Those lives were not yours to take!”

“Careful old man,” Hector said as he walked a few steps closer.

“You just killed prisoners of war,” Ilea said, grinding her teeth as she glared at him, her ash spreading out.

“Members of the Order,” he said and shrugged, ignoring her magic. “You’re really gonna throw a tantrum over that?”

“I will, yes. Ben is right, they were not yours to kill. You can try and get into those vaults yourself,” she said.

“Really? For that? Do you have any idea how many *prisoners of war* get murdered in this conflict? On a daily basis?” Hector asked, sounding slightly irritated.

“Was the evidence damning?” Ilea asked Benedict as she casually stepped between him and Hector.

“Yes,” he admitted.

“Really, you’re gonna side with the crazy Order instead of me?” Hector said and laughed.

Ilea sighed. She would have done the same to the prisoners then. Or she would have let them do it. That didn’t change the fact that Hector murdered those people with barely any confirmation. His actions finally caught up with the reputation he so prided himself with.

“I’m siding with not killing prisoners without at least some pieces of evidence,” she said.

“He gave the confirmation. Plus didn’t you kill all the soldiers and mages here when you arrived? I believe you mentioned something like that,” he said.

She shook her head, not engaging with the ridiculous comparison. “You heard me.”

“You’re being stupid. Do you really want me to go out there and force those nobles to open their vaults? I’d have to threaten and torture them,” Hector said.

“Careful with your threats. If this city turns into a battlefield between the two of us, you’re not the one to come out on top. Remember why we’re here,” she said, disappointed that he would go this far.

Ilea started charging Heart of Cinder, the people around her already retreating a few steps with obvious uncertainty painted on their faces.

She had to make sure this idiot understood that she wasn’t joking.

He sighed and closed his eyes, squeezing the bridge of his nose.

“I suppose it was just a matter of time,” he said. “You really are just as boring and naive as I had feared. Though I admit, I did enjoy myself for a while. Are you sure you don’t want to get those vaults? If we don’t use this chance, the Empire will get it all.”

“I’m sure I’ll find a few of them myself,” Ilea said.

She eyed him and absorbed the heat again, her ash moving back towards her body. Ilea had her stance but engaging him right now would end with a lot of suffering. Everyone present was lucky that the prisoners hadn’t been slaves.

If they fought here, a lot of people would die. And Ilea feared he wouldn’t be among them.

Luckily the man didn't push it any further, for his own sake and hers.

He laughed and spread his arms. "Maybe you're not entirely lost as a pirate."

The murder was one thing but what bothered her much more was the fact that he immediately threatened her with the torture of nobles. She feared that if he thought he could get away with it, he would have followed through.

You don't want me as your enemy.

And she didn't want him as hers. But neither did she want him as her ally. The world could keep on spinning without them ever interacting again. As unlikely as that was.

"Keep the pirating to your seas," she said.

Hector rolled his eyes. "A truce... alright. No animosity. You keep out of my shit and I keep out of yours."

Ilea gave him a nod.

"I'll leave this city to you, though I suppose it's inevitable for us to meet again quite soon," Hector said and laughed.

He vanished a moment later.

She really didn't look forward to it.

"You did the right thing," Ben said.

Ilea looked up and breathed out, her ash fanning out in a threatening way.

The man winced. "I didn't mean to offend, I'm sorry."

"Forget about it. We need to figure out what to do now. Did you guys come to some sort of conclusion?" she asked.

She focused on her meditation a little more, aware that she was very much on edge. The people around her felt it too, according to her sphere.

Good.

"We... yes. We decided to split from the Order of Truth and form a new one. Based on providing healer education to anyone who seeks it and providing services to those who can afford it and free of charge to those who can't. The facilities, connections, temples, and Classes are already here so it's more a statement of independence from the Order than founding a new one entirely," Ben explained very quickly. "It's simplified... I can go into more detail if you wish."

Barrett didn't seem annoyed by his stammering, just nodding along as he looked at Ilea with an uncertain look in his eyes.

Finally realized who I am? she wondered.

"You can explain your plans to the Empire once they arrive. I'm just here to prevent more rituals. If you could add a thing or two about slavery being abolished, that'd be good too," she said.

Two of the healers looked at each other, one of them raising an eyebrow.

"It works in the Empire, I'm sure you'll figure it out," Ilea said, specifically looking at the two.

They quickly turned red and looked down, figuratively shitting their pants according to her sphere.

“I believe that would be in our interest too,” Ben said, him being the designated speaker to commune with Lilith.

“Now let’s talk more practical. Lys is coming, no matter how you look at it. How can we prevent this city from going through a siege?” Ilea asked. While she was here, she could at least try and prevent some of the coming misery. Preventing the ritual didn’t mean shit if the city got razed anyway.

“I... believe the evidence. I agreed to the separation but this... I won’t stand here while you discuss treason,” Barrett said, glaring at her.

“And you call yourself a healer,” Ilea said and spat on the floor.

“You’re blessed with power. You can do whatever you want, forcing others to your will. Kill me if you must but I won’t forsake my country,” the man said and raised his chin.

He was ready to die.

Ilea took another deep breath.

“What about your people? You’re aware that any kind of siege would cost thousands of lives. The High King doesn’t seem to give a shit, ready to have your Order sacrifice entire cities for some personal gain or salvation,” she said.

“Do as you must,” he said.

Ilea grabbed him and displaced the man into one of the cages.

“He will change his mind once this is all over,” she said. “I do hope you’ll continue your investigations into your Order’s members?”

Ben nodded, glancing at Barrett for a moment before he looked at her.

“Previous Order... of course. It’s been a long day... and there is yet much to do,” he said and scratched his neck before he slapped his own cheek a few times.

“If we want to prevent this city from burning to the ground, we’ll need more than your name and power,” Ben said and went back to the desk. “Considering the presentation of your battle prowess earlier, I think we can skip a few administrative hindrances on the way.”

He rubbed his brow and took a piece of paper and a pen.

“Sure you’re up for this?” Ilea asked, extending an ashen limb to heal him.

“I’m a healer my-” he said before he smiled lightly. “Arcane... fascinating. You said you’re not part of an Order?”

“I’m not, though one of my Classes along the way was taken from a temple,” she said.

“I see. If you even think about sharing more information on that, I’d be very interested. There are many ailments that nature and life based healing cannot alleviate. As you are doing to my mind at this very moment,” he said and took a deep breath, closing his eyes for a moment.

“Maybe. But we should focus on the task at hand,” Ilea said.

The man nodded, visibly more awake.

He started writing as he explained the plans he had come up with.

Namely, they needed allies. In addition to her name and power.

The other members were soon copying letters dictated by Benedict that would be delivered to all the temples in the city, many of its nobles, and important business people. Ilea brought Nadir and a few of the other former slaves over to check some of the letters.

She mostly trusted Benedict himself but there were dozens of people working with them.

Ilea's name and her actions from earlier had already reached the temple by now. Slaves and soldiers alike were looking for her with different hopes in their minds.

With everyone present, they quickly got together a list of people that would be willing to help or at least prevent the meaningless conflict to come. Some of them still argued that the city could hold against the Empire but they soon shut up when Ilea made it clear that she would personally intervene should that actually become the case.

She knew that Velamyr wanted to be done with it. Ilea very much felt the same way.