

## Chapter 510 Messy Solutions?

“I suggest we fly low too, just in case,” Hector said. “If we get spotted too early we might get in trouble.”

“Was it Nipha that attacked here already?” she asked.

“The southern part... well both Nipha and the Empire but the main forces of the latter are coming from farther east. I doubt Nipha is committing a lot either, they’re probably just stalling until Lys arrives,” he said.

“You don’t think very highly of that,” Ilea said, the two flying over the flat lands. Only single trees dotted the landscape, neither roads, buildings, or rivers breaking the monotone sights.

“You’re either at war or you’re not. Opportunist cowards who don’t want to fight but still take spoils are just the worst,” he spat.

“There are no rules in war,” Ilea said.

“Of course there are. There’s honor for one thing,” Hector said.

Ilea just laughed, slowing down a little as she lost her focus.

“You wouldn’t understand. How many wars have you fought in?” he challenged.

She didn’t respond. This man came from an entirely different world. Perhaps the Generals before the Great War thought the same. Either way, for the common soldier and citizen just trying to survive it was the same here as it was back on Earth.

“Fuck war,” Ilea said.

“See, you don’t understand at all. Though I agree, the challenge just isn’t interesting enough,” he said.

“You could fight the Elves, they even started wars before,” she suggested with a smile.

He waved her off. “Human armies are not made to face those monsters.”

“You could go alone. Or are you so weak you need an entire army?” Ilea asked as they reached more rocky terrain, forests cropping up here and there.

“That is a possibility... but no. I have no interest in Elven affairs, nor in starting a war,” he said.

“Why not?” Ilea asked, honestly interested.

“Why are we slowing down?” Hector asked.

“There’s a village ahead and smoke is rising,” she said.

“We have a city to take, who cares about some random village?” the man asked.

“This girl over here,” Ilea said and pointed at herself as they landed.

She changed into her Baralia uniform, the smell of blood still fresh.

Hector did the same.

“Elves are just no fun. They nearly always try to fight at long range and with a number advantage. As soon as they’re about to lose, they flee. Cowards I tell you,” he said.

“Really?” Ilea asked as she started walking towards the houses in the distance. They were somewhat high up already, the view quite far reaching for the plains. She watched the suns rise on the horizon, marking the beginning of their fourth day on their mission.

*How long did Velamyr think we’d need to clear even just Mophis?*

“Yeah. Only the young attack like frenzied beasts but they’re no fun either. Even stupider than humans, I tell you,” he said.

“Seems like the smart ones fight quite efficiently then. Not engaging you seems like the intelligent thing to do. And you never met any that overwhelmed you?” she asked.

“Oh no I did, there are some brutal ones out there if you go too deep into their forest,” he said.

“Did you win?” she asked.

“No, I was forced to retreat,” he said.

Ilea laughed again.

“Hey, it’s the smart thing to do,” he said with a smile.

“Ever fought an Oracle?” she asked.

“Oracle? What’s that?” Hector asked.

“A monster I hear lives deep in the Navali forest,” Ilea said.

“Oh? Interesting... well no. I try to focus on the Ocean these days. It’s been a few decades since I last faced an elf. They’ve been rather quiet anyway, only destroying a few cities to signal their continued existence.”

“I wouldn’t call that quiet,” Ilea said.

“Well you should read some ancient history then. The human plains haven’t always been as large as they are now. The Elves have continuously retreated farther back over the last nine centuries, longer perhaps but reliable sources are hard to come by,” he said.

*The Taleen probably,* Ilea thought but didn’t mention it.

“Any clue why?” she asked instead.

Hector shrugged. “In fighting? I’m sure their politics is even more fucking annoying than ours, with every bloody citizen being near immortal when it comes to age.”

“Hmm,” she said and focused on the village.

“You’re interested? You could go and visit but they don’t really talk to humans, other than insulting us that is,” he said.

“Maybe I will,” Ilea said, not willing to share that she already made friends with a few Elves. And that she probably knew more about their culture than most humans alive.

“Ever been north?” she asked.

“The real north you mean? With the arcane storms and all?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Ilea said.

“Mhm, but it’s tedious. Traveling through the crevices takes ages and there are no reliable maps. I’ve moved in circles for days on end without finding anything interesting. It’s a bloody wasteland,” he said.

“That’s sad to hear. I planned to explore a little more at some point. I’ve only been to a few dungeons,” Ilea said.

“You’re lucky, I didn’t even find any,” he said.

“Could you not kill Miststalkers quite easily with your water?” she asked.

“A few, yes. Too many and my recovery gets overwhelmed. And there are always too many. The health I get back from their mist magic just isn’t enough,” he said. “You on the other hand could reach four hundred with them, in time.”

“Maybe, would take ages though. I’d rather fight something stronger and more interesting,” Ilea said.

“Agreed,” Hector commented as they reached the two meter high stone wall.

It was damaged in parts, broken in entirely where the gate should have been.

“Disguise on or off?” Ilea asked.

“Keep it on. If we can get the help of a few locals, it’s gonna be even easier,” he said.

They found a dejected crowd in the village square, a few soldiers standing around lazily. A wooden platform had been erected in the middle, a few corpses stacked on top of each other at one end.

At the other end stood a man with broad shoulders, a large axe in one hand and the head of another man in his left.

Ilea and Hector were mostly ignored when they joined the watching crowd of a hundred people or so, many of the villagers making space as they approached. She noted that everyone avoided looking directly at them.

“I’m really getting tired of butchering one of you every day. You know what I’m looking for. Tomorrow it’s two,” the man said before throwing the head onto the pile and stepping away.

He entered the large main building in the square with a few soldiers in tow. The house towered over the rest, quite old by the looks of it but mostly built with wood.

A few whispers went through the crowd, all in the local language Ilea didn’t speak.

“What are they saying?” she asked Hector.

Some of the people turned slightly towards her but still didn’t look.

“Food’s been stolen. Just a few loafs of bread apparently,” Hector said. “Why did we come here again? Let’s just move on.”

“Really? He’s so obviously a shithead and what, level one hundred?” Ilea said.

“They’re going to kick you out if you leave the village without protection,” he said and chuckled.

“Are you really going to play hero?”

“I just want to kill that guy,” Ilea said and walked towards the house.

A shout to her left stopped her, one of the guards now standing in an offensive stance and a fireball at the ready.

“You don’t want to do that, mate,” Ilea said. “Drop it now and I’ll let you live.”

He took another look at her before taking a step back, the magic dissipating. “Who are you?”

“None of your fucking business,” Ilea said and walked towards the house. Nobody had come out because of the shout.

She could already see a few people tied up on the first floor, some likely just tortured while others served a more basic need.

“Lovely,” she said and entered the building, Hector following with a slight smirk on his face.

“Hello,” Ilea said as ash near instantly covered her entire body, the door closing behind her as she focused on the group of men that had found seats near the inn’s bar.

“Who are you?” the executioner said, his bald head bulging with veins as he grabbed his weapon, the rest of his five men group following suit.

“An inquisitor, and the one asking the questions,” Ilea said.

He got angry but realized that this wasn’t your everyday situation.

“You’re talking to an officer of Baralia. I hope you know the penalty if you offend me,” he said, looking at her as he seemed to seize them up. The rest spread out in the large hall while the barkeeper made himself small.

“What’s the penalty if I kill you?” she asked.

“The same,” he said, slow torture until death.

“That what’s happening upstairs? Or are they the suspected bread thieves?” she asked.

“They’re slaves, and none of your concern. I take good enough care of them,” he said.

Ilea looked up. “One of them is crying, she’s saying one word over and over... like a prayer. I don’t think you’re true to your word.”

“Crying,” one of the men whispered and snickered to himself. He said another few words to himself and smiled.

“What does that mean?” Ilea asked Hector, looking at the man who seemed surprised she heard him.

“Foreign cunt, I think. And something about making you a slave himself. Pretty creative word choice but it’d be lost in translation,” Hector said and gave the man a thumbs up.

The soldier seemed confused, starting to talk before he was displaced right in front of Ilea.

She pierced through him with a dozen ashen limbs and moved him to the side, the corpse hanging in the air with blood dripping down.

“I don’t think that’s very funny,” she said.

Two of them vanished, leaving the building to get away.

Ilea glanced towards Hector but found him already gone. “I just made them my concern. You killed those villagers out there, why?”

The man was focused on the corpse held up by ashen limbs. “T... They’re thieves. Our supply... the war has made it difficult to get food.”

“Did those you murdered steal the bread?” she asked.

“We don’t know but they acted suspiciously,” he explained.

“You’re not making a very good case here,” Ilea said when Hector appeared again.

He dropped two heads onto the floor unceremoniously and walked towards the bar, ordering something in the native tongue.

“You took six lives... if I counted correctly. And there are six people here. Don’t you think it would be appropriate if I do the same?” she asked.

He gulped again.

“You can have the slaves, and all the gold we have,” he said.

“And how much is that?” Ilea asked, joining Hector at the bar. “Do you have ale?” she asked the terrified older man.

He nodded quickly and grabbed a mug, shaking so hard he nearly dropped it.

The soldiers pooled their gold together and added whatever other valuables they had. “Just let us go, my name is Oban, I have two wives, five sons and three daughters... please.”

*What would they think I wonder? Ilea thought. Nothing maybe? It was normal to do that here after all. The slaves that is. The murders were something else, and obviously just a power move to keep the village under control. A thankless job either given to him or perhaps taken, without knowing about the inevitable imperial advance.*

“Is it normal to tie up slaves, leaving them to hunger, in pain, beaten and cut?” she asked the innkeeper, a man in his sixties by the looks, thin and shaky.

The man glanced at the soldiers and back to her, a glint in his eyes showing before he shook his head ever so slightly.

“No?” she asked again.

“No...,” he whispered.

“No,” Ilea repeated, her limbs rushing out behind her to rip apart the remaining soldiers and their officer in swift but decisive motions as she took the ale from the man, steadying his hands with hers.

Her ash armor receded and she took a sip. *Passable.*

“Thank you,” she said.

The man gulped, glancing behind her as the last of the soldiers fell apart with a wet noise, his remains falling to the wooden floor.

“Sorry for the mess,” she added.

“You’re with the army?” the man asked hesitantly.

“I am,” Ilea said, not mentioning which one, nor knowing which one he meant. “The Empire is coming and you should probably either flee southwards or stay here and hope whoever arrives next is better than those shits.”

“Leave the coins for them,” she told Hector who was sneaking a bit of water towards the strewn about money.

“But my loot?!”

“Take their heads if you want,” she said.

“What about the other soldiers?” he asked.

“I’ll talk to them in a minute. Old man, any of the others as bad as these?” she asked.

He shook his head. “No... most have been here before. Oban came here only a few weeks past. He took the slaves and made them his, took the food and gold too.”

She walked up the stairs and kicked open the door. Whimpers and cries resounded in the room before her ash spread and healed everyone.

Ilea removed their shackles and opened the windows out into the town square.

“Some fresh air. I suggest you listen to what I will tell everyone,” she said and blinked down into the main room.

Hector sat there with two mugs in his hands.

“Can you clean this shit out?” she asked and pushed the door open with Force.

One of the hinges ripped off.

“Ah, sorry,” she said to the man and walked out, her ash armor appearing again.

The people had started dispersing again, as did the soldiers but the sudden and loud door opening had gotten most of their attention.

Ilea whistling with monster hunter got the rest. She didn’t think of her name as the translated intent this time, just using the spell normally.

“Ah hello, yes. I’m Lilith. Some might have heard of me, or not. Doesn’t matter. Your country is fucked and I just killed that shit Oban. I suggest you either leave southward or stay and hope the next people who come here are better than him,” she said.

Her wings spread before she ascended. “All the slaves you own belong to me now and may do as they please. If you hurt them or treat them badly I’ll find and kill you,” she said.

Most of them had recovered from her call and now remained silent.

“She killed Oban, take he-” one of the soldiers called out before an ashen spear slammed through his chest, pinning him down to the ground before the spear dissipated, his lifeless corpse falling down with a thud.

“There’s always one,” Hector said as he flowed to her side. “This is how you start a cult by the way.”

“You have experience with that?” she asked with a smile.

“Accidentally. Mostly. Hey it’s good money and if people are too stupid to fall for it,” he shrugged.

She rolled her eyes and checked all the soldiers.

Ilea landed next to the guard who had spoken up before. “Can I trust you to protect my slaves?”

He gulped and nodded.

“Make sure people understand that I will hunt down every single one of them if any of the slaves die or get mistreated,” she said, her ash moving lazily around her. “I care deeply for the lives I make mine.”

She really didn't have a better story right now. Ilea didn't want any slaves nor did she want to deal with the issue of introducing them into a life of freedom. The Empire or Riverwatch would surely do that for her. Right now she didn't have more time to waste on protecting a few people and she thought the best way to assure a bunch of people growing up with slavery don't harm her freed slaves was to pretend they were her property.

They might attack free people but they wouldn't dare touch Lilith's slaves.

The man nodded slowly.

“The Empire,” he asked as she turned away. “Is it really inevitable? Is the war lost? Tell us, bringer of death, our own have forsaken us.”

“Yeah buddy, you're fucked. I suggest you get out of that armor as soon as possible,” Ilea said.

“You're wearing it too,” Hector said with a whisper.

“You don't think we could take the Empire?” Ilea asked with a smirk.

He thought about it for a moment. “Take and hold? No... plunder and destroy... maybe. With your indestructible body? It might be possible. Not if they're prepared though. I'd have to refuse sadly, too many favors I owe to people that would throw a hissy.”

Ilea pushed some air out of her nose before flying off, dropping a bunch of food from her necklace before they continued on their way.

“Not very elegant if I may say so. Now everyone will think Lilith has slaves,” he said.

“Not if they're freed in a huge ceremony, my name shouted in cries of victory and salvation,” Ilea said in a bored tone.

More towns and villages appeared in the distance, her wings dissipating before she landed, continuing on foot.

“Wow... I underestimated your ambitions. It's not a cult you want, it's a full blown religion!” Hector said and laughed, running next to her.

The man looked surprisingly normal with his soldier armor on, no wonder he could so easily enter cities without suspicion. Just a high level soldier on the run. She herself might have more issues with her healer tag. Or the opposite, who fucking knows?