

Chapter 607 Murders

“Your copies all died,” Ilea said.

“An expected outcome,” Michael replied. “The question remains if they managed to document anything useful.”

“Do you care? As a copy I mean?” Ilea asked, genuinely intrigued. She knew they thought a little differently. And they were somewhat limited in their freedom.

“I am Michael as much as he is. I’m simply aware that I’m merely a construct, doomed to die. Soon. The news of your arrival in Baralia and subsequent travel to Yinnahall made me hope that my existence may be extended beyond this night. Which means that yes, I do care. Perhaps I may learn something more of value in this brief existence,” he explained.

“I’ll be honest, that spell sounds fucking awful,” Ilea said. “My condolences.”

“Magic is rarely achieved without reason. I pride myself knowing that this spell is ours. Perhaps not ours alone in the far reaches of this realm but certainly amongst our species. Were it not to exist, I would not be,” the copy explained.

Rational beyond self preservation, Ilea thought. “I did manage to find the research left behind,” she said and summoned the notebooks.

“Would you like payment in advance?” the man asked.

“I don’t think you’ll betray my trust,” Ilea said. “And I know it’ll be useful, which means it will be worth more after you checked it.”

“What was it about?” Felicia asked from the side.

“The events that transpired during and after the closure of the gate. The reason I know it’s important is because of how the remaining copy protected his notes,” Ilea said.

Michael happily received them. “The value might not be more than what I would’ve agreed on beforehand. I too would protect the documentation of such a colossal event with my life,” he said and made the books vanish. “Is there anything you would like as payment?”

“I’ll let my associates figure out the potential deals that could be made. There is someone I would like to ask you about however,” she said.

“I can’t say for sure that I’ll be able to give you any information outright,” Michael said.

“An assassin,” Ilea started, having thought about her approach in case it came up. “Not one with the Heavenly Sweets. She killed someone dear to me. I got close about two years back but lost her in Virilya. A master mind mage and illusionist above level two hundred. Very good at hiding. I believe she went after high profile targets both noble and otherwise. Coincidentally, one of her hideouts first made me aware of the existence of the Lily,” Ilea explained.

Most of it was close enough to the truth. Eve had indeed been dear to her and if she had been more open and trusting towards her team, she would likely still be alive today. She learned about the Lily from her, it was the reason she initially accepted Helena’s invitation after all.

“She targeted members of the Lily?” Michael asked.

“I believe so. Her last target was in Virilya itself. I did find the place. A mansion with an underground cavern. Overgrown with plants and grass. Plenty of blood, signs of a fight, but no bodies,” Ilea said. “I can point the mansion out on a map of the city. Maybe you can ask your contacts who her target was exactly. Or you could go to Helena directly, I’m sure she has information on this too.”

Michael looked at her for a moment before he spoke. “There is no need. I knew her last target,” he said.

What?

Ilea controlled her breathing. She had expected him to have contacts in the capital but this was more than she had hoped for. Helena was her real golden goose when it came to information on Eve’s killer. Claire just hadn’t managed to get anything substantial so far.

“A girl called Prim. Well,” he said and smiled. “I suppose she was an adult, though... she never really...,” he added and looked at her. “She killed poor folk in the capital, fed them to her plants or did rituals... nothing that had any purpose. I believe she was mad.”

“You were close to her?” Felicia asked him, either noticing that Ilea had tensed up or just curious herself.

“Her father. He was a dear friend for many decades. May he rest in peace. I tried what I could to help her heal, to give her a purpose but she never showed any interest. She even killed a healer who managed to talk to her a few times,” Michael explained. “I can see that this bothers you, but nobody of importance was killed by her. Low level humans, adults, nobody who would’ve achieved anything beyond their low stand.”

“This assassin killed her?” Felicia asked.

Michael smiled lightly. “She did. Perhaps... it was meant to be. And yet I hoped she would change in time. I learned of her death in the same hour, a flower she had left with me when she was merely a child. One that never wilted, until that night. I found the assassin, a young woman with short red hair. She was injured, the fight having taken much out of her. I would’ve not found the hideout if it hadn’t been for her blood.”

“You killed her?” Ilea asked in a surprisingly calm voice, her fists straining now. *He’s just a copy.*

The man smiled lightly. “You knew her, did you not?” he asked and looked at her for a long moment. “I’m the one you’re looking for. I see,” he said calmly.

“Did you kill her?” Ilea asked again, her deviant aura fanning out, only the two people close to her affected by it.

Michael’s smile grew wider. “I’m glad I got to see this. You are a monster like few others. Yes, Lilith, I killed her with my own two hands, her life for that of one I held dear.”

Ilea’s hand rushed out to grab his throat, the man not reacting in any way as she lifted him up slightly.

“My death... will... change... nothing,” he said. “He... will... know.”

She felt a soft touch on her arm, the wind picking up yet again. She found Felicia looking at her, her teeth gritted as she slowly shook her head. Ilea deactivated her aura but kept her hand around the gold mage's neck. His copy that was.

"Hundreds will die if you go after him," the woman said.

It didn't matter. *He killed Eve.*

She squeezed, her eyes narrowing before Felicia pushed harder, wind magic moving around her.

"He saved my life," Felicia said.

He did, didn't he? Ilea thought, her hand slowly pushed down by the wind mage. She found only intrigue in the gold mage's eyes, the copy more interested in the circumstances than being afraid. She let go. This wasn't Michael after all. She had to think.

If she let him go, the original would learn of everything. He would hide or strike against those she cared about, kidnap them or worse. Onlookers had gathered by now, looking at the trio with varied expressions.

"I will remain at the ball, no matter your choice," Michael said and bowed deeply, returning inside without saying another word.

Felicia grabbed Ilea's hand and pulled her aside, finding a more secluded spot in the luscious garden. She made Ilea sit on a stone bench and sat down next to her, not letting go of her hand.

"I can't tell if you're about to explode or cry. Can you talk to me?" Felicia asked.

"I'm okay," Ilea said.

Felicia brushed the hair out of Ilea's face. "Good. Then listen to me. I know a thing or two about revenge. It's hollow. Cold. Perhaps satisfying in a way but I'm still not sure if that's true. I killed my own father. Fighting this copy would bring you nothing but problems. You've seen the man, fought alongside him. If you attack here, he will have to act.

"Killing him won't be easy, let alone finding him in the first place if he knows someone like you is coming. He would have no difficulties hiding away for a century, his copies doing his bidding. And he's not powerless. I doubt he could kill you, but he could aim at everything you've built, everyone you care about."

"I know, Felicia. I know. But that doesn't change how I feel," Ilea said, focusing on her Meditation.

"Then I want you to think about it. The copy is still here, ready to negotiate. If he flees we can hunt him down. And if you choose to go after Michael, I will support you however I can. I know a few people who are very good at that kind of work," she said. "But I also want you to remember that he helped us take down the Order of Truth, and that he saved my life. Perhaps all out of self interest but it doesn't change the results. I don't think he lied either."

He could be protecting his original self. But he never struck me as an actor or politician. Eve did go after that woman then, killed her and nearly died herself. If she had been in a better condition, Michael would've never even found her.

She's right. If I attack the copy, Michael would have to act. Maybe even the Lily itself. I doubt my outburst from before would warrant much. If I let him go, he will know about the whole deal but he would also know that I chose not to start hostilities. Would he strike at me or Ravenhall? I doubt it. He knows how it would end for him, no matter how much he would manage to destroy.

She looked at Felicia, the woman's face stricken with worry. The same Felicia who had followed her brother for years, to strike back at their father. Ilea breathed in deeply before she hugged the woman. She pulled her close, quietly sitting there with her eyes closed. She didn't find any tears. *You're gone, aren't you? You've been gone for years, resting after your life of hunting and killing,* she thought, opening her eyes and looking towards the night sky. *I found out who killed you, and why.*

"A life for a life," Ilea whispered, still holding on to her friend. *Would you be angry? Why didn't you ask us to help. You didn't explain what you wanted to do, why you joined the Shadows. I have to protect those I care about. I know you would understand that much.*

"Thank you," Ilea said, trying to let go but Felicia pulled her back.

"It's alright," the woman said.

They remained on the bench for a while, quietly contemplating.

He will prepare in case I come after him but he won't act if I don't. He's not that stupid.

Ilea didn't have to forgive Michael for what he had done but she could end it here. She didn't know what she would've done if Felicia hadn't been here but it may have caused a cascade of issues. She would have to inform Claire, Trian, and Kyrian if he was still alive. She wouldn't forget it.

She quietly let go, Felicia doing the same.

"What will you do?" the woman asked with bated breath.

Ah sure, this could very well change up the political landscape. Relations of the Sentinels, Ravenhall. Michael likely has many alliances as well.

"Did I just nearly start another war?" Ilea whispered.

Felicia smiled lightly. "I wouldn't go that far. Maybe."

"A maybe is quite scary," she said.

"Wars have been started for less," Felicia said.

"I'll try to avoid that," Ilea said and stood up, offering her hand to the Redleaf noble.

"Are you asking me to dance?" Felicia asked.

Ilea smiled lightly. "No. I'm not in the mood for dancing," she said and helped her up, the two returning to the building with looks and whispers coming their way.

The music inside had become louder, pairs of people dancing in the center of the hall.

Ilea found her target near the entrance, looking at the dancing pairs with his arms crossed in front of him. She stepped next to him and followed his gaze, finding the bard she had met a day prior dancing with a beautiful red haired woman. "I won't pursue this," she said.

"I appreciate your rationality. The circumstances will surely be considered in any future dealings," Michael said.

"I didn't just do it out of rationality. I did it because you saved Felicia. And because I want to avoid a conflict. We can both imagine the destruction," Ilea said and walked away.

The gold mage remained, drinking from a glass of wine as he continued to watch the dancing pairs. The fact that his existence would soon come to an end gave her little pleasure.

She felt chills when she went outside again, Felicia still by her side. The decision to attack a single noble could cause so much chaos. *Don't force my hand, Michael.*

Her marks were there and she could respond to any hostilities quickly but she assumed he would be smarter than others. He would prepare but he wouldn't go so far as to invade Ravenhall. Claire will need to know either way. A counter for blood rituals of the scale she had seen here would have to be implemented. Hopefully they would just make their little deals and nobody would have to die.

Should I have asked him how it happened? If it was quick?

She looked up at the stars out in the courtyard. *Did he take anything from her hideout? Any possessions on her or evidence that could be used against him or the Lily?*

Ilea decided that she would have others look into his activities in the future. Eve had her reasons for going after her targets. This Prim wouldn't be missed, not by anyone but Michael. The members of the Lily had their fair share of shady businesses but Helena had been right. Simply removing them all would cause even more chaos. Preventing conflicts like that was kind of the whole point of the organization. There were other options however, ones that weren't quite as direct.

"I don't assume you're staying any longer?" Felicia asked.

"No. I don't particularly care anymore," she said. "Thanks again, Felicia."

"Nothing to thank me for. I know you'd do the same," she said and hugged her again. "Stop by in Virilya when you're in the area."

Ilea patted her back. "I will. It was good to see you."

The woman let go and smiled. "Just wish we'd meet under less strained circumstances for once."

"That would be nice," Ilea said, spreading her wings as she switched to her ashen armor. She was done with the ball. "Stay safe, and don't hesitate to call for me."

"I will. Farewell, Lilith," Felicia said and watched her ascend.

Ilea displaced herself into the inn, finding Feyrair at the bar. "We're leaving," she said.

The elf grabbed his glass. "Immediately?"

"Yes," Ilea answered.

"I'm afraid we'll have to cut it short then. A pleasure to have met you," Feyrair said to the barkeeper and appeared at her side. "You seem unwell."

Ilea didn't reply, teleporting them outside and grabbing onto him with ashen limbs, her wings charging before they shot off southward. She only slowed down when they reached the southern mountain chain, letting go of the elf as she looked for the teleportation gate location.

"I've not seen you like this before. Is there someone we're hunting?" Feyrair asked with a smirk.

"No," Ilea replied. "I decided not to pursue it."

“You’re backing down? I don’t know what this is about but it doesn’t seem like you,” Fey commented, the two appearing in the hidden facility.

“The situation and circumstances are a little more complicated than that. I do think it would help to hunt *something*. Let’s go,” Ilea said and pushed mana into the platform.

They appeared far in the north a moment later, finding the enchanters, Neiphato, and Meadow.

“*Someone steal your food?*” the being asked.

“*Not the time,*” Ilea replied. “How far are you?”

Iana smiled briefly but turned serious when she noticed the tone. “The locator is done. And we found a way to manipulate the Gate keys to breach their security. We don’t think it will work indefinitely but it should go unnoticed for a while at least.”

“That’s our hope,” Christopher said. “If the Taleen adapt to our interference, you could be stranded wherever you appear.”

The enchantress handed her both the Gate key and a sphere of metal covered in runes. Ilea activated the latter by pushing mana inside, the piece opening up at the top before a small arrow made of arcane energy manifested. “The closest key?”

“That should be the target, yes,” Iana confirmed.

“*They figured it out nearly on their own,*” Meadow said proudly.

“Good job,” Ilea said. “How does the gate key work?”

“You’ll have to find a working gate and insert it. Their network should then be visible, or at least all the nodes accessible from whatever gate you use it on,” she said.

“I have a specific one in mind. I’d like you to come as well. I have to find out where Kyrian was sent,” Ilea said.

“We can try. The key should allow us to look at the last used coordinates,” Christopher said.

“*I do hope you intend to bring them back. Your requests have occupied most of their time,*” the Meadow told her.

“Of course. I’ll bring them back when I’m confident to use the items on my own,” Ilea said. “I have to meet with a friend first. Prepare to leave in an hour. You too Neiphato.”

The elf looked up from his meditation and nodded.

“Going alone?” Fey asked.

“Yes,” Ilea replied.

He smashed his fists together and burst into flame. “Then I will face the tree.”