

Chapter 495 Cake and Tea?

Ilea didn't respond, a little confused at the question.

The room was quite large, separated into what looked like an office or lounging area and a kitchen. The various ovens were only part of the picture, three large connected counters were covered in various exotic looking ingredients, dishes, tools, and most curiously, daggers.

The floors were different too, the kitchen tiled while the other part of the room was done in parquet. Everything looked rather impressive but hand made furniture generally did look like that. The high quality was obvious however.

Some of the storage units in the kitchen were enchanted, others were half open with visible potions, monster parts or just plain old flour.

Next to two couches facing each other stood a small round metal table and two garden chairs. On it were two plates and forks. At the very back of the room to the right stood a large office desk, an armchair behind it.

"If you plan to kill me with fire, I'd advise against it," Ilea said, answering the question and perhaps asking one in return.

The woman smiled and looked at her, her face kind and her smile warm, she looked to be in her early thirties. Her brown hair was bound in a messy bun, some flour visible on it. She wore no makeup, her skin a healthy tone. The woman wasn't strikingly beautiful but certainly had her charm, the freckles and deep brown eyes her most prominent features. She wore a black summer dress covered in a pink apron.

[Warrior – lvl 322]

Instead of answering Ilea's threat, the woman started singing. *"No bounds has her power, no bounds has her heart. Her armor stands unbroken, through fire and through steel."*

"If the songs are to be believed, killing you is *quite* the venture," the woman said. "I had my doubts of course, every guard and soldier turning into bards of great renown after a won battle."

"But seeing you in the flesh. I don't know if I could prevail. Perhaps if I had the benefit of surprise on my side," she mused without a hint of malice. "Now!" the woman suddenly called out and opened the oven.

Ilea hadn't perceived magic or an attack, the sudden call out only surprising her a little.

"Your heat resistance is high... that's good to hear. How about Poison? I would assume someone as influential as you has encountered one or the other assassin?" the woman asked as she carefully took out the cake with her bare hands.

Ilea looked at the thing curiously, its color black as the night, veins of pulsing red moving through parts of the cake.

"I have some experience in the matter, yes," she admitted.

The woman seemed delighted with that news. "Wonderful! You might like this then. I have heard that you are quite fond of food. I bet that this is like nothing you have tasted before," she said and

placed the cake onto the large plate sitting on the table. She sat down and motioned for Ilea to join her.

“Welcome to Myrefield, Lilith. Or should I say Ilea? I’m Helena. Come, sit with me and tell me what you think,” Helena said with an excited look on her face.

Ilea was a little apprehensive but so far the woman seemed nice enough. The cake certainly looked interesting.

“Either name is fine, Helena,” she said and stored her leather armor, casually sitting down across from the woman. She wasn’t surprised Helena knew her real name, if anything it led credibility to the people she represented.

“Ilea then, it sounds a little more personal. Your real name too I presume. Now I must warn you. This poison is quite potent and the heat alone would burn through someone’s skull without Resistances in the second tier,” she said as a blade appeared in her hand, a simple design, made for kitchen work. It shimmered with magic, runes etched into each side.

Helena looked entirely absorbed as she cut two pieces, steam rising from the cake.

Ilea wasn’t sure if this was some horrible joke, a test to check her resistances, an actual attempt on her life or just plain craziness. She was too curious either way, and confident that whatever poison was in there didn’t have the capacity to overwhelm her third tier resistance.

As soon as the woman placed the piece on her plate, she identified the poison within to be of medium danger.

Nothing to be concerned about then, she thought, quite aware of the special plates that seemed enchanted to handle the heat.

“How did you even get it to be this hot?” she murmured, unable to stop her curiosity.

Helena smirked in a self satisfied way. “That is a trade secret, my dear.”

The woman looked at her with expectant eyes.

Ilea felt a little uncomfortable. *Shouldn’t she take a bite too? If it’s poisoned... eh, there would be an antidote anyway.*

She smiled at her potentially stupidest move so far and ate a piece of the cake.

Her eyes opened wide as the poison took effect. She didn’t fight it, instead letting it flow through her. The heat was barely noticeable, making her disable her Heat Resistance.

She kept her Poison Resistance up, just in case the stuff would paralyze her or something without it active.

Holy bakery, she thought, savoring the combined experience that came from not only her tongue but her whole body. The poison pulsated in a regular interval, faint black veins showing on her arms as the heat intensified the various flavors in the hellish chocolate creation. The pain was subdued, a slight itch to enhance the rest. It felt both confusing and heavenly.

Ilea sat there enjoying the cake, her eyes closed not to distract her from the sensation.

She was woken by Helena’s joyous laughter, the woman holding a hand in front of her face as she looked at her.

“What is it?” Ilea asked.

“You liked it?” the woman asked, smiling wide.

Ilea leaned in and whispered. “What the fuck is this thing? I need the recipe.”

“I would appreciate it if you didn’t curse within my house, young woman,” she said, her eyes turning cold before they warmed up again.

The change was so rapid, Ilea wondered if it was a skill.

“As to the recipe, it’s a secret too. I hope you understand. But do help yourself, there’s plenty left,” she said and started eating too.

Helena summoned two cups and poured a bright blue liquid into it, the air above it cooling visibly.

Ilea took another bite, adding a sip of the blue liquid that felt colder than some ice magic she had been hit with before.

“People of your... power, tend to be focused on the bloodier aspects of life. The potential, enhanced bodies and resistances provide to the art of cooking and baking have always fascinated me. Few ever get past three hundred and even fewer are creators in nature,” Helena said.

“I appreciate you sharing this with me. I certainly haven’t experienced anything quite like it,” Ilea said. She enjoyed Keyla’s dishes more generally speaking but the experience itself was certainly worth her trip here already.

Helena ate another piece of cake and leaned back, chewing softly before she swallowed. “How do you like Myrefield?”

Ilea leaned back too. “It’s peaceful. I’m not the biggest fan of the people I’ve seen. A little too... rich,” she said.

Helena smiled. “It is. I like the quiet here. It’s much calmer than the bustling cities.”

“Though am I wrong to assume that you are the wealthiest among them?” the woman added.

“I have no idea,” Ilea said honestly. “It’s not the wealth that annoys me, it’s the disdain in their eyes.”

“I understand,” the woman said, looking a little thoughtful for a moment before she focused on Ilea again, taking a sip of the blue liquid herself. “So you are Lilith. The legend, the myth.”

Ilea smirked. “Are you disappointed?”

Helena smiled. “Oh no. Quite the contrary. It’s refreshing. When one thinks about the most powerful humans, it may be easy to forget that in the end they are people too.”

They looked at each other for a while, in silence.

“You are an assassin,” Ilea said.

“I am many things, Lilith. Baker, administrator, lover, woman, and yes, I have worked as an assassin. Though that was a long time ago,” Helena said, her eyes a little absent as she seemed to recall a memory.

She focused again and ate a piece of cake. “You too are many things. Quite powerful. Dangerous,” she said and smirked, taking a sip of the blue drink.

“So are you,” Ilea said.

“And yet here we sit, enjoying a piece of poisonous cake,” Helena said and paused. “Your actions, have sent ripples through the human plains and surely beyond. I believe our cooperation could benefit all of humanity.”

“My cooperation with you? Or the Golden Lily?” Ilea asked, trying to figure out more about the organization.

“Both, perhaps. If you can stomach an *assassin*,” Helena said.

“I have killed many people myself. Not for gold or without reason but we are murderers both,” Ilea said and smiled.

“Your views and morality are your own,” Helena said, entirely uncaring. “Accepting this offer would allow you to draw on our extensive network of resources, information, and influence. While offering some of yours in return. All for a price of course.”

“And what would that price be?” Ilea asked. *Gold, blood, loyalty?*

“That depends entirely on what you wish to acquire and from whom. The only goal of the Lily is to provide a network of trade and cooperation, to keep up the fragile order present in the human kingdoms and empires. For the benefit of all.”

That doesn't sound too bad. A rich people black market with contacts for most likely quite wild resources.

“Doesn't look like your order is doing a very good job then, does it?” Ilea said, happy to challenge the woman a little.

Helena laughed. “Don't think yourself educated on history and politics just because you can punch level five hundred beings to death.”

Fair enough.

“Do you trade in slaves?” Ilea asked.

Helena quirked up an eyebrow. “No. Not officially. Humans have a right to freedom. Taking that from them or sacrificing them for whatever purpose is against the principles of our order.”

“However. As we are independent ourselves, nobody exactly investigates heavily. The benefits the Lily provides at least forces you to keep your business hidden.”

Ilea looked at her. “If nobody investigates, why would anybody care?”

“Because the principles must be upheld. I would prefer everyone to be as adamant about this as I am but reality is not exactly that simple,” Helena said.

“You might ask yourself why we haven't interfered with Baralia decades ago, or perhaps even centuries. Slavery has been ingrained in their culture for longer than that,” she said.

“The suffering of a direct intervention would have outweighed the benefits?” Ilea said.

Helena nodded. “That was the consensus. Yet if our principles stood above our desires, the kingdom would have long fallen. The suffering their people has endured has long surpassed whatever an open war would have caused. It simply wasn't convenient.”

“Hmm,” Ilea mused. She too hadn't joined the war, only defended Riverwatch, leaving the work to the empire and all the other states that were involved by now.

“I’m sure we both could benefit, not only to prevent potential future tensions between you and yours, and various organizations led by members of the Lily,” Helena said.

Ilea wasn’t disinclined to accept. The principles wouldn’t be upheld by some if not all of the members, she was sure of it. The information and trade she and Claire could access through this would be quite beneficial to have however. Not only because it could let her find Eve’s killer.

Perhaps it was even the woman sitting right across from her. She hoped not.

“What happens if I find out one of the members or one of their organizations is involved with human sacrifice or trafficking?” Ilea asked. “What if I find out and fight them? Kill them?”

Helena smiled. “You could cause a war. Large scale destruction and loss of human life. Your actions and their effect would be judged by all the members. Should your arguments and evidence speak for you, there will be no consequences. Should they be judged as rash, there might be reparations necessary. Only if your offense was unjustified entirely or judged to be a threat to humanity itself, would you be expelled.”

Ilea wondered if and how many times this has happened before. Would they hunt her down or still trade with her in secret? A truce perhaps if she was deemed too powerful. She wondered if killing those responsible for Eve’s death would constitute as an unjustified offense. Or if personal reasons counted too.

Knowing more about Eve and her motivations, she knew that the Golden Lily wasn’t quite as grand as Helena pretended. Ilea thought it improbable that Eve would mention the order without good reason and evidence in her hands.

The fact that Helena didn’t judge her Assassin’s Guild to be against the principles either meant that their interpretation was rather free or that she had rules in place to prevent excessive killings.

“How does your guild not violate the rules?” Ilea couldn’t help but ask.

Helena seemed slightly displeased with the question. “You are not the first to argue this point and neither will you be the last. Assassinations are a tool for control. If I were not to offer it with rules and strict conditions, the murder rate would triple.”

“You deem this an assumption. It isn’t. The more morally questionable services of the Heavenly Sweets were entirely suspended for a period of five years. After that, it was judged necessary to reopen our businesses,” Helena said.

Ilea smirked. “It would be easy for you to manipulate such an investigation. Just send out your assassins to kill random civilians.”

“Ilea. There was no investigation. I had my assumptions but wanted them proven. This process was instigated by me. I intended it to last ten years to allow for all our guild members to advance their baking skills. The Lily, judged it necessary to cut this experiment short after five years. Three actually but I assume the situation was highly beneficial for a few members and their associates, their votes and arguments preventing such an early continuation of my usual business,” Helena explained.

“Don’t act like you are unaware of the reality we live in. I expected more of you,” the woman added.

Ilea didn’t quite agree. There were reasons people hired assassins or murdered each other. Large scale change was necessary to stop this but it wasn’t impossible.

“Apologies. I did not mean to snap at you,” Helena said after a short pause.

Ilea didn't reply, thinking about it a little more. Helena believed her actions to be justified it seemed and if her words could be believed, she even tried to investigate her assumptions herself. Ilea admitted that she hardly understood the complexity of this issue, let alone the practical implications.

“I admit that I know jack shit about the assassination field but I still disagree,” Ilea said.

Helena seemed happy with her words. “As you are entitled to do. I do have to ask you to stop swearing though.”

“Apologies,” Ilea said and meant it. She didn't really get why swearing was a problem but it seemed to nearly physically hurt the woman. She could at least respect something like that in her own house. Allowing assassination but not swearing was another discussion she really did not want to start with the woman.

Helena nodded lightly. “You came at an opportune time. Three members must vouch for you in order to make you a full fledged member of the Golden Lily. Now, if you are not entirely disinclined to cooperate with an assassin, I would like to talk to you about war.”

“Baralia?” Ilea asked.

“Precisely. The High King's recent decisions have left more than just me bewildered. It seems he really is nothing more than a power hungry barbarian. The siege of Virilya could mean many things but with all the information I have at my disposal, it really was just an entirely misplaced sense of superiority,” Helena said and shook her head lightly, as if she still couldn't quite believe it.

“The Empire would have dealt with it. Lys is ancient and whatever weakness had come to it, it now stands stronger than ever.”

“Baralia lost this war when they marched on Virilya. It just took a little longer than anticipated for their actions to warrant consequences. What's your current knowledge of the war?” Helena asked.

“Most countries around are involved by now, each happy to get their piece of the wealth and land I assume will soon be up for grabs,” Ilea said.

“That applied until about two weeks ago, when Odiah, one of the larger cities in the eastern part of the kingdom, was made the stage of a large scale blood magic ritual that wiped out nearly all of its inhabitants and a high number of empire soldiers besieging it,” she explained.

“That does change things,” Ilea remarked, not particularly shocked at the news.

Helena nodded. “Affected people are turned to cursed monsters, much like the demons your order has foolishly released upon the world. Luckily they cannot infect others, making the problem much more contained. Other issues have cropped up however but my information isn't conclusive.”

“Rather than sheer lunacy, it seems the Order of Truth has a concrete goal in relation to these sacrifices. While I'm sure the present forces can deal with the cursed beings, they cannot survive the rituals themselves nor effectively fight the creatures that have emerged from whatever depths of magic the order has conjured up,” Helena explained.

“You want me to help clean up? For your vote I assume?” Ilea asked.

“You enjoy battle, do you not? And killing monsters is a specialty of both you and the Shadows of the Hand. Three cities have already been sacrificed, each home to tens of thousands of people. The Lily has decided a more direct intervention is necessary. All members who are interested to join the conflict are asked to do so.”

“You already have my vote, Ilea. This, I would count as a personal favor, and not a small one, knowing of some of your exploits. Dealing with this would be seen favorably not just by me and I’m sure the Empire will make it simpler for a war hero to acquire land and resources in the newly conquered lands. Perhaps it might even allow an allied Baralia general to keep power within his lands, his debts to Lilith only growing.”

Ilea didn’t have to think about it for very long. Helena must have thought her release of Harken a deliberate political play but she had really just thought it the wiser decision. A war amongst humans was one thing but with thousands getting sacrificed for nothing, she could spare a few days or weeks to help out.

Getting favors and an entry into the Lily would just be the cherry on top. Ilea was starting to think that it was perhaps wiser to clean up the order from within than to challenge them openly. She couldn’t deny the benefits of such an alliance, if they really cared so much for the greater good of humanity.

It wasn’t a surprise to hear that the Order of Truth was behind the sacrifices. It would mean that one healing order could already be dealt with. The Lily could surely reduce or entirely silence any opposition the other influential orders could have against the Sentinels.

“What’s the level of the cursed and the new creatures?” Ilea asked. It could give her an idea about her personal benefits but also about what kind of allies she would meet. So far it seemed to her that Helena was one of the higher ranked members but perhaps she was wrong.

“The cursed have a similar level to that of whomever they had been before they died. Most everyone below two hundred. The new creatures? Three hundred and above. The highest reported so far was close to five hundred,” Helena said.

Which means they have people who can kill those kinds of beasts, Ilea thought and smirked. She was very much interested in meeting them.

“I’ll help out,” she said.