

Chapter 496 Assignment

Helena remained in her chair for a little while after Ilea had left.

The meeting had been quite productive.

Maya glanced into the room and quietly closed the door again as soon as she confirmed that Helena was alive.

A ridiculous notion.

Is it? she wondered. Ilea hadn't shown many of her skills. She had ways to detect even the best of her assassins, had an armor like defense hidden under her shirt, and she had the aura of someone with Veteran in the second tier, perhaps even the third.

The sphere she felt around her felt like a perception aura but it could have very well been something else entirely. The way she had moved suggested more than one high level combat skill and the thin lines of fire on her skin suggested body enhancement skills. Likely more than one.

A healer with body enhancement and ash at her side. It could be quite dangerous, perhaps even too much for me. Her level isn't much higher but it might overwhelm my battle experience nonetheless.

Helena assumed she had fought far more than Ilea, the difference in their experience surely quite vast. Especially against human opponents. She had admittedly gotten a little rusty in the last few decades but experience didn't just fade at this level.

The girl was young. Perhaps as young as she looked like. Helena hadn't detected any acting or falsehoods, meaning the character Ilea portrayed was likely her real one. Someone who enjoyed battle for the sheer sake of it, not a noble nor someone interested in political influence.

She had risen in power quickly, perhaps faster than most. She thought it unlikely that the girl had remained hidden and unknown, especially with her erratic and sudden appearance on the board.

It suggested a powerful Class or several of them. Reaching level two hundred was possible with luck alone but three fifty? Helena thought it highly improbable. The girl was dangerous, that much was clear.

She had intervened in Riverwatch and had asked for the slaves to be freed. Perhaps the city's recent involvement with infiltrating the kingdom had something to do with Lilith after all. Helena hadn't been sure if Ilea just went to protect the city and with it her friend in the guard, or if she was there to fight Baralia.

Perhaps it was both in the end. She did feel quite strong about slavery it seemed. *A good addition, if she actually joins.*

The fact that she hadn't actually joined the war herself and only acted to defend Riverwatch suggested she wouldn't intrude on other territories without very good reasons. Her insistence on questioning her assassin's guild was frankly annoying but Helena couldn't fault the young woman.

Ilea was right when she called them both murderers, why she still insisted that an assassin's guild was any worse than slaughtering half an army of soldiers was however ridiculous.

She had her principles and while she seemed uneducated at first, Helena couldn't help but find some of her questioning intriguing. Almost as if the girl had been frustrated, but not for the usual reasons.

Helena had confirmed that Lilith wasn't a monster but instead remained human despite her power. She wasn't a threat to humanity but instead a potentially highly important asset. The lack of initial interest in the war and her high level suggested she had seen more than her fair share of the horrors lurking both within and outside the human plains.

She smiled bitterly. *So full of life and empathy.*

Ilea wasn't yet tired of fighting and neither was she a born leader or administrator. She could trust and delegate, that much was clear by now. Helena judged it impossible for someone like Ilea to manage the wealth and assets attributed to Lilith. Someone else was behind that but nobody that actively controlled her, she wouldn't have been as confrontational and careless in this meeting otherwise.

She judged it useless to question Ilea about Ravenhall's independence and the potential role Alyris had played in that. If anybody knew more, it wasn't Ilea.

The girl had time to enhance her skills and fight battles without risking an insurrection. For Helena, that possibility had long since passed. Nor did she have any interest in facing creatures that would raise her level. Not anymore, not if not absolutely necessary.

Most important of all, Ilea had actually enjoyed the cake. Helena snickered when she remembered her asking if she could take the rest with her.

Nobody had ever done that. It filled her heart with some long forgotten warmth.

She really hoped that Velamyr and the Pirate would support her. *Unlikely that three people would veto her. Michael doesn't care and Elisora will like her. Nero and Elijah might be a problem while Elizabeth is a sure veto.*

In the end she could still trade with Ilea personally, or with the person managing her assets. But without the status and connections she would gain by becoming a member herself, Helena thought it unlikely that Ilea could keep up her speed of expansion. *As secure as Ravenhall is, Riverwatch will be contested.*

She hoped Lilith proved herself in Baralia. Helena couldn't deny that she liked the woman, not just because she liked her baking. *Perhaps it's part of it,* she admitted to herself and took another sip of ice tea.

Ilea dissolved Trian's mark to signal the waiting group that she was safe.

She was already halfway back to Ravenhall, keeping her eyes out for pursuers as she focused on Claire's mark to find her.

Ten minutes later, she joined the flying group of Shadows, some of them unfamiliar.

Claire trusted them and so would she, if only to do the job they'd been asked to do.

She still waited with her report until the three of them were in Claire's office.

"You should really try it, it's fantastic! Sadly some of the heat is gone by now but the poison is marvelous," Ilea said as she ate another piece of Helena's cake.

"Are you sure she didn't just try to murder you with that? She is an assassin after all," Trian said.

Claire waved him off. "Eccentric for sure. Perhaps you were lucky to have met her. I'm sure your mutual liking for cake helped sooth out the issues you mentioned."

"You did well, I think," Trian said.

"I agree. The potential for trade deals and expansion could very well catapult Ravenhall to the power of an entire nation. I'll have to try and contact Helena as a representative..." she said, murmuring the last part. "If you are fine with that of course?"

Ilea nodded. "Sure. I didn't intent to deal with that myself anyway. I'd be hilariously taken advantage of if I tried to talk about trade."

"Isn't Ravenhall powerful enough to rival some of the smaller kingdoms already?" she asked in addition.

Claire thought about it for a while, at least giving it some consideration. "Perhaps. It's difficult to say. I would assume you're thinking of military power?"

Ilea nodded.

"While it's true that with all Shadows present, we likely have a force that could stand against an assembled army. Even Lys would have difficulties dealing with that. Adding us three and the Elders to the mix could perhaps overpower them entirely. However, the Shadow's Hand is not an army. The retaking of Ravenhall was an unprecedented event and while I think we could rally many to our cause should the city be under attack, there is little reason for Shadows to join a war of expansion. We ourselves wouldn't join either if this happened, nor do I believe any of the Elders would care much," Claire said.

"If anything they'd fight against us," Trian said with a chuckle.

Ilea agreed. She'd probably try to stop something like that too. The Shadow's she had met cared little for the ambitions of Ravenhall, as long as the city stood and the services both it and Viscera offered remained accessible.

"As for economic power... I believe we compare to some of the weaker kingdoms already, though I doubt anybody quite realizes that yet. Much of our high level goods can't be sold yet but we've invested heavily in extensive production. As soon as the Taleen gates can be replicated and are approved of usage by everyone in the council, even the slowest diplomat and kings will realize that Ravenhall isn't just the Shadow's Hand," Claire said.

"My terrifying world dominating Head Administrator," Ilea said and tapped Claire's shoulder.

Claire just smiled, quite used to Ilea's antics.

How confident she is that Iana and Christopher will figure out the gates. Or is she planning centuries in advance?

Trian looked thoughtful. "I think I might contact them too. Not yet of course but as soon as you two have a deeper understanding of the organization and the extent of their influence."

Ilea nodded. "As a representative of the Sentinels I assume?"

"Exactly. You mentioned it already but as much as you could deal with the Healing Orders by throwing around wealth or by intimidating them, this could smooth things out before they even become a problem."

"What about her being the leader of an Assassin's Guild?" Ilea asked.

"Her arguments are valid, however you see it. Perhaps your world was different but I doubt much can be done about it. The Shadowguard finds corpses quite regularly. I'm quite sure more than a few Shadows agree to kill low level targets for gold. It's much easier than hunting monsters, depending on the level difference, and nearly untraceable within a large city. More people simply vanish however," Claire said.

Ilea hadn't known about that, suddenly feeling a little sick. "Fuck that," she said and focused on her cake. It did make sense of course. Ilea herself could easily slaughter dozens of high ranking nobles or officers without much trouble.

"The people who paid for the assassinations might often be obvious but without further evidence or the actual killer, there's nothing we can do," Claire said.

"Which leads to more assassinations," Trian said. "It was a daily occurrence in Virilya. Now it makes sense to me too how similar the rules were between the various assassins I've met."

"The penalties are quite high in Ravenhall, which at least dissuades many. But some form of control is necessary either way. Sulivhaan keeps necessary contacts to keep it in check," Claire explained.

"Thanks to us owning most of the businesses, there is little competition there but even just between street food vendors or adventurers, it can come to bloody clashes. Especially with their backgrounds, coming from all over the place," Claire explained. "If they can't solve it themselves, they might simply hire someone to finish the job."

"Hmm," Ilea mused but didn't say anything else in regards to the topic.

"What do you think about the war?" she said, changing the subject.

"A good way to deal with the Order of Truth," Trian said. "They were the ones that worried me the most."

"I was unaware of the scale of these rituals. There was information of the Empire running into trouble and reports of bright lights reaching into the sky but nothing definitive. Cursed soldiers came up a few times but I thought it simply the work of a few mages, not the sacrifice of an entire city's population, let alone three," Claire explained.

"No requests from the Empire?" Trian asked.

"Direct assistance for wars between humans is not permitted. I'm sure there are Shadows present as independent mercenaries but no, we haven't received requests for monster subjugation either. It's possible the Empire feels confident in dealing with this alone," Claire said. "Our independence might make them leery of hiring too many Shadows."

“Or the requests simply haven’t arrived yet,” Trian suggested. “They’re not exactly the fastest moving bureaucracy.”

“Either way I think you made the right decision, Ilea. Get as much out of this as possible. If the threat is really present and it’s as dangerous as this Helena thinks it is, why not make a name for yourself,” Claire said. “Or well... add to the name.”

“The cursed are low leveled, might be good for your third Class skills, right?” Trian asked.

“Possibly. Yeah, why not. I would have liked to let them deal with the war themselves,” Ilea said and sighed.

“Not really a war amongst humans anymore if they create monsters,” Trian said.

“That’s the only reason I’m even considering this. If it turns out the rituals are of a smaller scale than Helena told me, I’ll leave again quite quickly,” she said. It was a foolish hope. Ilea was quite sure the woman hadn’t lied but she didn’t want to accept it as truth until she saw it with her own eyes. She would have to kill everyone willing to undertake such rituals.

“She gave you two days,” Claire said. “Which means she knows how fast you can fly.”

Ilea raised her eyebrows. “No she doesn’t. I can get there in four or five hours I think. Maybe faster.”

Trian just laughed. “Ridiculous.” He wasn’t questioning her.

Claire had an evil grin on her face.

Oh no.

“Then this is a perfect time to get you a little more familiar with the high ranking officers of the Imperial army, the political structure and geography of Baralia as well as the major cities present in its lands. I’m sure you’ll represent us well in the coming weeks,” Claire said.

Oh no.

Ilea thought about displacing herself out of the enchanted office.

“Representing whom?” she asked seriously. “I’m not gonna play the envoy of Ravenhall.”

“I didn’t expect that much from you. Though you are a member of the Council, just reminding you of that. However to balance out everything you’ve already done for the city, you’d pretty much have to destroy it entirely... not that I would pressure you in the first place. No, what I meant was a representative of us. Your Sentinels, me as your wealth administrator,” Claire said and smiled in a wicked way.

“Show them the power of Lilith,” she added.

Ilea frowned. “I’ll do that anyway. I’m just not very excited in joining this conflict.”

“Might not be so bad,” Trian said. “If the monsters are as impressive as Helena said.”

I’d rather explore the Caverns of Rot. Izacan might be out of my reach for a while... let alone getting back. she thought, not regretting the destruction of the teleportation gate in the slightest. Those things were hot on her tail.

“You two don’t plan to join me I suppose?” Ilea asked.

“You were the one who was invited,” Trian said with a slight smirk.

“Oh sure, not like you couldn’t join a country wide battlefield. What if someone connects the dots?” Ilea said, her words dripping in sarcasm.

“We won’t join because we’re busy,” Claire said, in a matter of fact way.

“I know. I know,” Ilea said and stood up.

“I didn’t forget about those lessons,” Claire said and poured mana into the enchantments of her office.

“You can’t hold me,” Ilea warned.

“Secure her,” Claire said to Trian, a smirk on her face.

The man just shook his head, remaining in his seat before he switched to a set of his armor, lightning sparking around him. He was obviously not entirely committed to the joke.

The next day was spent with lessons on the various landscapes of Baralia and the usual creatures that lived there. Trian and Ilea continued their training sessions and each took a team of Sentinels into a nearby dungeon again. The mage accompanied by Claire of course.

Ilea had a hard time remembering all the names Claire and Trian talked about, both city names and influential people, nobles, and Generals. Not for a lack of brain power of course but simply because she hardly cared.

Claire wasn’t oblivious to her antics, insisting that Ilea’s high Wisdom and Intelligence made it impossible for her to not keep a bunch of names and places memorized.

Ilea knew of course that these things were important. Rationally speaking. However Baralia was far away and soon most of its high level nobles and the king himself would be defeated, one way or the other. Discovering their powers and abilities during a fight would be much more interesting than hearing about them beforehand.

The same was true for the Imperials and all the other parties involved. Ilea would treat them the same way she treated most everyone.

Claire didn’t expect any different and tried to focus on the most important parties. She did whine about the headaches she would get after Lilith’s likely offensive behavior.

Ilea countered that she could heal headaches quite well.

“You told me yourself that I should show off my power,” Ilea said.

“In a reasonable way,” Claire countered, pinching the bridge of her nose.

“Do you think I’ll just murder a bunch of high level officers?” Ilea asked.

Claire looked at her for a moment. “If it turns out they’re torturing people, abuse slaves, kill civilians... yes. Yes I think you would.”

Ilea huffed. “You wouldn’t?”

“I’d pulverize them. But that’s beside the point. You’re pretty much famous at this point and your actions will reflect at least somewhat back onto Ravenhall... if anything, think of me and Trian,” Claire said.

“I won’t stand by if they do what you described. I expect more of the Imperial army,” Ilea said.

“I do too. But war remains war. They lost a lot of people and a lot of them have been trapped in Virilya for the better part of a year. Many will be frustrated and angry,” Claire said.

“Then I just take a few legs, what’s the big deal?” Ilea asked.

“Already much better,” Claire said and smiled.

Ilea was a little surprised at that.

“Or kill them where nobody sees you. Saved slaves or soldiers will spread the tales fast. Just consider that,” Claire said.

Ilea nodded. “I will. Okay. I hope there won’t be too much confrontation with humans anyway,” she said.

Claire didn’t comment on that, both of them knowing that it won’t be so simple.