

Chapter 738 Concentrated Power

Navalis stood to the side, her magic at the ready in case anything happened. Not that she expected someone to be quite that stupid.

Two squads of Sentinels protected the main city hall overlooking most of Morhill. Added to that were a group of war machines, fifty Shadowguard, and twenty high level Dark Ones from Hallowfort, all in full plate armor. Neither dwarves nor Dark Ones had been revealed yet to the general public.

She guessed some of the higher leveled adventurers were aware of things being a little strange but they would be distracted by the many available competitions and ludicrous winnings. She might've thought about competing herself if Sulivhaan hadn't asked for their assistance. And she hated tournaments. *Might've even had a chance with the bow one.*

The need for at least a few actual Shadows to be present was obvious. Trusting Ravenhall's teleportation gates was one thing, but to see the Sentinels, war machines, Shadowguard, and Dark Ones painted a quite unfamiliar picture. Most people in the Plains, nobility included, still thought of the Shadow's Hand as the most powerful and prestigious order of paid adventurers and mercenaries. Their presence here brought some stability and trust. *Something to cling to before they truly lose their minds.*

The city hall had certainly been upgraded. Colorful banners, flower arrangements, magical lighting, red carpets. And yet all of it couldn't perfectly hide the utilitarian stone structure itself. Built to govern a frontier town in the southern mountains. A town that didn't benefit from the business and reputation brought by the Shadow's Hand. The builders certainly didn't expect the Empress of Lys to ever set foot into this hall. And yet there she was. In the flesh.

Navalis had seen her about a decade prior, but that was from afar. A few months ago she may have actually been impressed. Now everything here dulled compared to what she had seen in the North. *These people are awed by teleportation gates. And yet it's just a way to lure them in. To show them the truth. Four mark lichs, taleen killing machines, and ancient space trees. Brace yourselves, humans of the Plains.*

A small weight landed on her shoulder. Nothing she could perceive in any other way but she knew it was the tiny creature that had often been close to Ilea. Violence was its name. And it looked quite cute. Navalis however couldn't shake the feeling that the little Fae was more dangerous than everything she had seen, even the Meadow. That didn't mean she minded its presence. On the contrary. Knowing the Fae was on her shoulder calmed her down immensely. None of these rulers, guards, or high level adventurers really mattered in the grand scheme of things. She too was just one Shadow. What had once been thought to be the pinnacle of humanity, but those horizons were expanded too. The masked Empress' Guard alone was not someone Navalis could identify.

They were welcomed by the Accords, the entire hall set up in a ball like setting, gentle music drifting past the many guests. No thrones or platforms. Catelyn and Helwart were probably the main attractions. Rulers and nobility had come from all over to attend these events. The gathered power and the amicable behavior from various very influential individuals made the event quite smooth, though it wasn't hard to spot some who were very much against alliances with Dark Ones, dwarves, and ancient trees.

Navalis couldn't help but smile. *Insignificant nobles who don't understand in whose presence they are.* She glanced at Ilea, the woman wearing a black dress of ash that left her shoulders bare, her blue eyes downright striking as she approached the Empress and her guard.

She alone could wipe out half this hall. She felt a pat on her cheek. *Yes. I shouldn't stress out.*

The royal family of Kroll was present, same as with Asila. Nipha sent nobles and merchants.

Navalis couldn't place most of the people present but many seemed familiar with Lilith, or each other. *I wonder if these people have ever been gathered in a single spot. If anyone wanted to weaken the Plains or start a war, this is the place to do it.*

And yet she knew how foolish that would be. Ilea had destroyed an entire army on her own. The Shadow's Hand had retaken a demon infested Ravenhall. That alone would dissuade most potential perpetrators but Navalis knew there was so, so much more. She had seen the Sentinels, their healing and fighting style similar to that of Lilith but compared to her they worked in teams. She didn't know if killing at team of battle healers was even possible. One would have to overwhelm them entirely. And then there was Aki. Out there somewhere, with that spy. She didn't know who terrified her more. At least the Pursuer didn't pretend to be something it isn't. She shuddered at the thought of its blade fingers.

She focused her magic and listened in on conversations to distract herself a little.

Ilea was glad for everyone else in the hall. They took some of the attention off her. She had already seen Emmanuel Eilhart, Julianna Veyer, and most of the Kroll nobility. Michael had come as well. In the flesh even, if she hadn't lost the intuition she built back in Erendar. Claire had been right. The benefits of this alliance far outweighed any past grievances or even the fact that she had brought back the Meadow. With the teleportation gates alone, they were now a major player. One that couldn't just be dismissed or wiped out.

Representatives of the so called independent cities from the former Baralia were present too, as were high ranking members from the various Healing Orders. Allistair was present of course, as were other important figures from Riverwatch. Dawntree had sent a few officials too, despite their quite young government. As did Stormbreach. Ilea didn't spot the Lady of Benevolence herself but she hadn't exactly expected her to show up in the flesh.

Ilea smiled at the Empress and her guard as they moved on to talk to the council of Hallowfort. She addressed the next group, some of whom she knew personally. "General Ryse. It's good to see you in good health," she said, quickly glancing at Felicia who stood to his side.

"I can't say I share the same sentiment," the General spoke, though his words lacked passion. He looked tired. "You brought that dreaded thing back."

"Please don't talk about my good friend in such a manner," Ilea said with a bright smile. "You know I don't exactly care about diplomatic relations." It wasn't exactly true but she assumed beating up a

General wouldn't immediately cause a war. Not after her meeting with Alyris and her guard. Not with the teleportation gates and the Meadow Accords.

He grit his teeth but chose not to provoke her. "I hope for the best, Lilith. I shall mingle," he said instead and walked off.

The other nobles and military leaders had a variety of reactions, likely based on their previous opinion of the man.

Ilea didn't care. "Major Redleaf," she said and walked a little to the side.

The woman had chosen to wear her armor to the event, her black hair propped up with red pins, near yellow eyes taking in the various guests. She grabbed a glass of wine from one of the waiters and joined Ilea.

"You're so very blunt. That dismissal just offended half the Lys nobility, and your favorable treatment of myself will cause me quite a bit of trouble. And opportunities. At least your talk with Ryse will balance things out," Felicia said, the two finding a window sill at the side of the hall, ignoring the chairs and benches. The woman waved her hand. "Apologies. I just spend so much time around nobles."

"Still don't know how you do it," Ilea said. "Just looking at this hall makes me want to go out and punch something."

"Yes. I can tell," the woman said and sipped on her wine. "How have you been?"

"Good, I suppose. Been training a lot. Some interesting new partners," she said.

"Sleeping around, are we?" Felicia asked.

"Hush. You know what I mean," Ilea said.

"I do. I'm just not sure which one would be more intimate to you," she said.

Ilea smiled. "It's really not that simple of a question."

"Maybe you'd indulge an old friend with a spar then, sometime in the future," Felicia said.

Ilea grabbed a glass of wine as well. She sipped on it, avoiding eye contact with the woman. "I will think about it."

"This is really quite an unprecedented event, but then what's new with you. Michael is here too. Are you fine with that?" Felicia asked.

"What am I gonna do? Start a war for his revenge? He saved your life," Ilea said.

"You don't sound convinced. But I agree. You wouldn't like the outcome of a conflict. And I'm sure neither would she," Felicia said.

"I wouldn't exactly know," Ilea answered. Eve hadn't been the most open person she had met. At least the man didn't come and talk to her about the Meadow.

It was definitely a little strange, to see influential humans interact with Catelyn and her crew. If they knew about her cake obsession. *Will have to introduce her to Popi finally. Quite a lot of potential introductions to be made.*

She wasn't particularly interested in the current setting, mostly there as an additional deterrent if anyone decided to do something outrageously stupid. Her name had a certain weight attached to it,

even if Kyrian could likely do just as well dealing with whatever could occur. A part of her did wonder what would happen to the Plains if everyone in this room would be removed in an instant. Half the Lily was there too. The members she knew at least. Nero was talking to a group of nobles and Helena had taken an interest in Elana. *Guess that's the next member.*

Ilea assumed the secret organization would happily bend the rules if the potential benefits were present.

"I have to go talk to some of the others, lest the world starts to think we're an item," Felicia said and stood up, bowing in a respectful manner.

"Do enjoy yourself," Ilea said. She watched the woman go and turned her attention to the window, the bustling town with its massive festival extensions reaching through the valley beyond.

"You look miserable," Kyrian said as he joined her.

Ilea puffed. "Well. Yeah. You never struck me as someone who would enjoy a setting like this either."

The man sat down on the sill and looked at the crowd. He wore clothes for once, instead of his metal armor. He touched the fabric close to his hands constantly. "What do you mean? I had an entire court back on the Krahen Isles."

Ilea checked Heron for a reaction but she was either too late or he hadn't listened in. She assumed everyone was listening to everyone in here. She just didn't want to bother censoring herself. People now knew about the Meadow, at least in theory. Soon those who wished could visit Hallowfort.

"Court of birds?" Ilea asked.

"It's not that different," he suggested.

"I don't even want to hear your reasoning," she said.

"At least I'm not the famed Lilith. I'm surprised at how few of the guests have approached you," he said.

"They're watching each other. Gauging who has what kind of connection. This might as well be a battlefield. Just one where they can't brutally murder their opponents, so they talk, mingle, make deals. Approaching me is a risk, a declaration," Ilea sent.

"A declaration of what?" Kyrian asked.

"I have no clue. Look, I'm not good at it. But I can see some of the patterns. And it's exhausting. That's why I leave these talks and negotiations to Claire and Catelyn. As long as everyone benefits far more than they lose, I'll hope that peace is possible," Ilea said.

"And if it isn't?" Kyrian asked.

"Then it isn't," Ilea answered. *"But I don't see anyone that could stop me. Or you. Let alone the combined forces of the Meadow Accords. It's a good start. Conflict is in nobody's favor, not with long range teleportation on the line."*

"It is quite an asset to have," Kyrian admitted. "When are we going back to Karth?"

Ilea smiled. "You get me."

“I’m just as bored as you are. By the way... I... actually had a reason to talk to you, other than well... your state of misery,” he said.

“Oh? Do tell,” Ilea said and hugged her dress covered knees.

“Aliana is here. In Morhill. She came through the Virilya gate with Felicia,” he said.

Ilea grinned. *“Good for you. Is that why you want to get out of this hall?”*

He shrugged. *“One of the reasons. But I was wondering... kinda wanted to surprise her. Keyla Aranoth... the cook of the Golden Drake. She’s a good friend of yours right?”*

“Yes,” Ilea said. *“She set up the Golden Goose here in Morhill. I hear it’s quite... popular.”*

“Not just popular. It’s become kind of a competition to get a reservation. I sadly don’t happen to be a rich noble, king of a country, or quite as famous as you,” he said.

“I’ll check with her and come back to you,” Ilea said. *“Today?”*

“That would be best. It’s the premiere of the new menu,” Kyrian said.

“Didn’t know you were that interested in food, let alone high class dining,” Ilea mused.

The man scratched his cheek. *“Well... Aliana does like cooking a lot. And the culture is quite established in Virilya.”*

“Very cute,” Ilea said.

“What do you mean cute?” Kyrian asked, brows rising.

“Very cute, mr level four hundred metal curse man, surprising his love with a thoughtful gift. I approve,” Ilea said.

“Oh, if I have Lilith’s approval, that certainly means something. The famous brawler who happens to be a healer too, obsessed with food and downright suicidal monster hunts,” he said.

Ilea downed her wine. *“Who is this brawler you speak of? She sounds lovely.”*

Navalis stuffed herself at the buffet after the guests had flowed back out into the city. Teleportation gate presentations and visits to the domain of the Meadow had been offered to everyone. She assumed the next few days will be filled with a lot of paperwork, risk assessment, and budgeting. For the smaller nobles that was. Navalis knew that with deals this large, the big players had already signed their deals days or weeks prior.

A few waiters and Shadowguards remained, eating from the buffet and talking to each other. Four dwarves were tasting various leftover wines, commenting on the quality, or lack thereof.

“They’re finally gone, eh,” Ilea said, suddenly there and piling food onto a large plate.

The weight was gone from her shoulder a moment later.

“Hey there,” Ilea murmured. “Didn’t know you came south too. How do you like it, Navalis?”

“The festival you mean?” she asked.

“The festival, the buffet, the previous gathering of the most powerful humanity has to offer,” Ilea said, biting down on a filled pastry.

“It’s strange. Having seen the Meadow. Owl, and Aki,” Navalis said. “You as well.”

Ilea swallowed. “I’m just an afterthought. That’s good,” she said and continued eating. “Are you getting paid for this by the way?”

“We’re helping out Sulivhaan. Pay is not expected, but he’s likely going to do so anyway,” she answered.

“Good. This thing has cost an absolute fortune as far as I understand,” Ilea said.

“The gates will bring that back in a hundred fold,” Navalis suggested.

Ilea smiled. “Maybe. I have no clue. It will be way more convenient to travel, and deal with monster incursions. Or other conflicts.”

“Indeed. Prices for Shadows and adventurers will drop too, with travel times reduced to mere hours, potentially even less. But It will probably take years to set up a large network,” Navalis said.

“Not really,” Ilea said. “They massively reduce logistics too. With the ability to teleport materials, setting up new gates is trivial. Enchanters will have to do extra work, and their guards will have to deal with a bunch of would be thieves. But with everyone that was here today... it’ll be a competition to see who gets the most gates working the fastest. I’d imagine that in a few weeks, you’ll be able to travel from Virilya to Ravenhall, to Halstein, and back in the span of a few minutes.”

“It sounds quite surreal,” Navalis said.

A man wearing a luxurious silver dress joined them. The slightly wild gray hair suited him, deep green eyes taking her in. He piled some food onto a plate before he grabbed a glass of wine. “I don’t think people realize how much of an impact these gates will have on the world.”

“Maro, this is the city hall,” Ilea said.

“Indeed. And the ball is over. This stuff is lukewarm. Better eat it now,” the man said.

“Didn’t you want to meet Elana?” Ilea asked.

He raised his glass and winked at them. “All in due time, my dear savior.” He walked backwards towards the large exit and twirled, his glass raised high. “All in due time.”

“Who was that?” Navalis asked.

“Old friend,” Ilea said. “I think he’s been around Nero for too long. That or this is who he really always was. I wonder.”

“If he’s happy,” Navalis said.

“I suppose,” Lilith said. She ate a piece as they looked out towards the exit, bits of the highest reaching arenas visible with snow covered mountains spreading in the back. “Taking part in any of the tournaments?”

“No,” Navalís said. “The prices are incredibly though.”

“The Meadow Accords flaunting their wealth,” Ilea said.

“What about you?” Navalís asked.

“The tournaments? Probably not. Doubt it would be very interesting. If a worthy competitor shows up, I can always ask them for a bout afterwards,” she said.

“I remember you asked about archery when we initially met,” Navalís said.

“I do have a bow,” Ilea mused.

“There is a bow tournament,” Navalís said and looked over at the smiling woman. “You could join.”