

Chapter 800 Market

Fania appeared on the platform and teleported aside, nearly buckling as the pain rushed through her. She puked, retching up blood and what felt like bits and pieces of her gut. “Shit gates,” she murmured. Her breathing was fast as she shook off the side effects of the gate and adjusted to the magical light in the underground camp. Dozens of voices spoke and haggled, music coming from a few of the tents. It sounded wrong. Her vision was still slightly blurry.

She watched Kerthin appear next to the control panel before she initiated the self destruction of the gate.

“What are you-” the guard said before the tall woman struck him with a lightning induced slap, throwing him aside.

Kerthin didn’t say a word when the explosion reverberated through the artificial cavern. The tall woman kept her white mask on, still looking towards the now destroyed section of the ground, smoke rising from the rubble. “Kerom, Wayne, reduce the remains to dust.”

Wayne coughed, the sound mage charging his magic before he sent blasts down into the small crater.

Kerom did as he was told, a bit of puke dripping from his chin. His hands moved as the rock was ripped apart, boulders forming above before they smashed downwards.

Most of the merchants, guards, and adventurers in the vicinity looked at the scene with interest, some with fear. Others ignored it entirely.

Fania shook her head and summoned a few rags, cleaning her daggers off the blood. *Sentinels. We killed Sentinels.* She made sure not a speck of blood remained before she summoned an enchanted device, setting the fabric on fire. No blood magic or necromancy would be able to track her. She moved on to get rid of the puke and blood on the ground. “The girl is still alive,” she said, looking to Kerthin for a moment.

“I killed one of them,” Wayne said, wiping at his mouth with a piece of cloth.

“One. Other one alive,” Kerom informed them, the bald man looking to the ground where he had puked as well.

“It was only a matter of time. I’ll have to go talk to a few people,” Kerthin said. “You should’ve killed all of them.”

“Nobody below one hundred should survive the willow’s root,” Fania said, once again checking her daggers for specks of blood, the ground reasonably clean. *And none of this would’ve happened if security hadn’t been so fucking lax in Nara.*

“Resistances and healing,” Kerthin said. “Next time, you make sure. Or I’ll consider your employment.” She walked away with decisive steps, people avoiding her as she passed.

Wayne chuckled as he sent another blast of sound magic into the rubble. “Yeah, next time you make sure.”

“Those were Sentinels,” she said.

“Yeah, what of it? Scared of the Accords?” he asked and chuckled.

Fania shook her head, ignoring the man’s comments. She moved to the side of the cavern and leaned against the wall, activating her shadow magic to hide from everyone before she moved again. *The Accords are just an alliance.* She knew Wayne wouldn’t think the same if they had just killed a few members of the Order of Truth, but then he had never given too much of a shit about anything further away than his immediate vicinity.

She knew it didn’t matter. Kerthin was the one that had hired them, and she knew what this meant. Nobody really gave a shit about a few slaves. Sentinels however. That was different.

Ilea looked into the massive dark corridor. Something was hiding at the back but she couldn’t quite make anything out. “Shadow magic I think,” she said to her companion.

Kyrian nodded. “Let me prepare a curse, then you lure it out.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Ilea murmured, twirling her hammer in one hand.

“*Ilea. Sentinels dead in Nara. Require assistance,*” the message reached her. From the Meadow.

She squinted her eyes, taking a step back before she opened a gate. “*Sentinels dead in Nara. Priority,*” she sent to Kyrian and moved. Rushing through the gate with her spreading wings and covered in her mantle, she deactivated her space magic resistance, moved instantly to the teleportation gate in the Meadow’s domain.

“Hey what is-” an adventurer said before he was teleported away.

Kyrian appeared by her side right when the gate activated.

They appeared in Morhill, several Shadowguards glancing their way.

“*Closest route to Nara. Now,*” she sent to everyone in the vicinity.

“Follow me,” one of them said and moved to the door.

“*Don’t walk. Teleport,*” Ilea sent, attaching herself and Kyrian to the woman’s spells.

“There is no gate from here to Nara. You’ll have to use the one in Yinnahall,” the woman said, gesturing to the entrance of the large stone building.

“Do you know where it is?” Ilea asked.

She shook her head. “No, you’ll have to ask someone in there, or in Yinnahall itself. There are plans-”

Ilea appeared in the building and saw an Executioner.

“With me,” the machine said.

She followed, the three of them appearing in Yinnahall before they rushed past the adventurers and merchants, the city busy despite the late hour. Six seconds later they stood on the gate to Nara, the spell activating before they appeared in the empty tundra around the city.

“What happened?” Ilea asked as they rushed up and above the walls.

The Executioner moved at its full speed, leading them into the city and past a set of damaged structures. “Sentinels found out about slave trade, tried to retrieve information and were caught. They called for help but I was too late. Two were dead before I arrived. One is dying.”

Ilea grit her teeth, rushing into the building and teleporting down into the cellar. She found two more Executioners present, a crying Mila sitting against the wall, holding Phoebe. Her healing instantly rushed into them, Phoebe stabbed in her gut and hand, her skull and some of her organs damaged as well. Mila had most of her ribs broken but it seemed the girl had already prioritized her teammate, all her healing still flowing into Phoebe.

She saw the corpses on the ground. One had most of her head missing. Ilea took in a deep breath, trying to exert her healing but failing. She was dead.

Mila still held on to Ember, but she too was gone, her entire chest and abdomen crushed.

Phoebe woke up with a start, coughing blood as she looked around, her aura flaring before she saw the Executioners and Ilea.

She screamed.

“They were connected beyond what we assumed possible,” Aki said.

“Anyone still alive?” Ilea asked.

“Please come with me,” one of the Executioners said.

Ilea followed. “*Can you check on them?*” she sent to Kyrian.

“*Of course,*” he answered, summoning a blanket to put over Willa’s corpse.

The girl from the Rotten Inn. Ilea’s gut twisted as she thought of the dinner she had with the girl’s family. *Willa. And Ember, from Dawntree and the Corinth Order.* Was it her fault? *Not the time.*

Ilea rushed through the facility, finding human remains, bits and pieces of bone, blood covering entire walls. A few dozen enchanted cages stood in the broad stone hall. Most of them contained corpses. Magic still lingered in the air but Ilea couldn’t find a usable trail. *Taken out just out of spite? Or as a way to prevent information from leaking out?*

“Through here,” Aki said, leading her down a set of stairs. A few traps activated, metal spikes glancing off Aki’s shields. He cut through the entire section of the wall with a quick slash. “Thought I got all of them.” His voice sounded different. Tense.

Another cellar, smoke in the air. Fires raged in the side rooms where the remains of furniture was visible in Ilea’s dominion. She checked everything but found nothing remained, some chests and drawers entirely blown out.

Aki pointed at a section of the floor. “Some runes remain. This was a teleportation gate. Not one of ours. Explosive runes destroyed it near entirely.”

Ilea checked the fabric and found a single thread moving out of the cellar.

“Get what you can to the Meadow’s domain,” Ilea said.

“Prepare everyone you have above two hundred. Send them through my gate once I open it.” she sent to the Meadow and latched on to the recent teleportation spell.

Fania saw black wings appear above the smoking rubble of the teleportation gate. She rubbed her eyes, the space magic still causing issues. *The Black Death*. Ever since Virilya she had felt they would meet one day or the other. Nobody really cared back then, but she knew some of the soldiers that had met her. Some others she had killed. Most people she talked to thought the Sentinels different from the older Healing Orders but she knew that Lilith just had her own flavor of morality she imposed upon the world.

The songs and stories had only picked up, the woman by now more myth than anything else. And yet she was real. Everybody claimed as much. It wasn’t the first time now, that she saw hints of black wings, blue eyes in the dark. As if someone was hunting her, for the sins of her past. The choices of her present.

Fania watched as the people near the destroyed gate stepped back, some of them falling as they took in the white flames spreading on the ashen form. *No. She’s not real. Why are you scared?*

Magic flared up from a few dozen mages in the vicinity, others running away screaming. Some simply sat there with wide eyes.

No.

Fania saw the being of fire and ash descend, landing near the rubble as magic impacted her form. The ashen being didn’t flinch, her eyes searching the large cavern.

Kerom and Wayne appeared in front of the winged form, her arm raised towards them. They didn’t move.

Run away. Please.

She saw Wayne’s eyes widen, Kerom’s lips quivering. A beam of white energy flared up, her companions disintegrated in the blink of an eye.

Silver killing machines the size of small buildings appeared out of nowhere, a shimmering space in mid air now visible. Fania saw more and more machines rush out from the space, teams of ash covered healers following behind, Shadows, Dark Ones, and even war machines invading the cavern. A man clad in red lightning flew up to join the Black Death, a hand touching her shoulder as his arm was burnt by the white flames.

She didn’t have time to consider. It was real. And if she stayed there, she would die.

Where are the others? What is this place? Ilea knew they were somewhere in the west. Nipha perhaps. The two men she had killed were the ones that had murdered Willa, and Ember. The magic she had felt around their bodies. It was the same.

“You’re burning me,” a voice spoke to her.

She looked to her left, seeing the familiar face of Trian. Her fires vanished. “Sorry, I.” Instead she healed him, watching through a slightly blurred vision as Sentinels and Guardians moved through the strange camp of merchants and adventurers. Many fought back and they were killed, others simply apprehended.

“What happened?”

“I found two and killed them. There were more,” Ilea said. “Poison and blood magic.”

“We’ll find them,” Trian said.

“Lilith, where are we?” one of the Executioners asked as he stepped up through the air towards her.

“In the west... somewhere, I’m not sure,” she said.

“This could be an issue. We’ll get everyone here out and to Iz. Do you have a way to get us there?” Aki said.

“Yes,” Ilea said. “Is Kyrian with them?”

“He is,” Aki said. “As am I. Ilea... I wasn’t fast enough. I’m sorry.”

She shook her head.

“Stop,” Trian said, his voice firm. “Both of you. You can help but the Sentinels are not children. They know what they sign up for, and they’re prepared to face dangers most others would never even see.”

“*They weren’t even Hunters,*” Ilea sent to him.

“*They weren’t. But even you face dangers far beyond your power. We can’t always protect or save them, Ilea. What we do is prepare them for the world out there. We give them tools and power. For them to use.*” He shook his head and continued aloud. “Don’t make them victims. They were battle healers of the Medic Sentinel Corps, and they were killed in battle.”

Ilea nodded. She knew this would happen one day, though the two being at such a low level and fighting against humans of all creatures, it was worse. Trian was right, and they were dead. Nothing could change that anymore. But she could feel the knot in her stomach. Sure, Sentinels would delve into the depths of dungeons, and one day or the other some would not come back out. But this, this felt preventable. She forced herself not to lash out.

Ilea had known the two healers, but she knew both Trian and Aki knew them better, had spent far more time with them, had taught them, seen them grow in power. A part of her wanted to wipe out this entire camp, wanted to find the people responsible for its existence, and rip them apart. But she

knew her allies felt the same. Her rash actions wouldn't get them anywhere. Already she had killed the two people who would've known the most, but even so, she didn't regret it.

"We are in Nipha, and there are scouts in the area," Aki said.

"They're the ones who run this place?" Ilea asked.

"I'm afraid it seems more complicated than that," Aki said. "Let us move the prisoners before this ignites a war."

"They already mimicked the gates," Trian murmured.

"It was only a matter of time, though I'm surprised at how fast they did it. Too many people are involved and the gates widely available to study. We're collecting all the evidence that we can before we move out of here," Aki said. "Ilea. I know you want to find the perpetrators, but there were more gates here, destroyed now but you might find where they lead through the same manner."

"Show me where they are," Ilea said. "And bring an Executioner each." She changed her Riverwatch gate location to the camp.

Aki led her through the underground base, all the gates already destroyed. Some of them had no recent mark in the fabric, meaning nobody had used them since her arrival. Those that did however, she could latch on with Reality Warp.

Ilea appeared in a forest of firs, accompanied by Aki. She checked her marks. "Somewhere in the west of Kroll."

"I will investigate as long as I can," Aki said.

The destination gate had been destroyed too. *Meticulous*, Ilea thought. Had it not been for her ability to see and connect to recent teleports, all they would've found in Nara would've been a destroyed gate. *Kroll is involved too. Of course.*

She noted the line in the fabric left behind by the gates. It didn't seem right. Not focused enough.

"Good luck," she said and stepped through her portal, back into the base where the forces of the Accords were gathering the present people. Many were protesting, but she didn't much care at the moment. Two Sentinels had died, and someone was trading people. In a country where the law didn't allow for such. Of course they didn't have jurisdiction, but teleportation gates complicated things by quite a bit.

Ilea was ready to leave this to the diplomats of the Accords, once they had gathered all the possible information about who else was involved in this.

She brought Executioners to a few more destinations, working faster as the remaining lines in the fabric were fading. Four led to underground facilities in the former Baralia, one even in its capital. Three locations were in the west, likely just hideouts in the wilderness. Ilea ignored the scared and confused people upon her arrival. Aki was there. She didn't want to waste her time.

Two gates led into the Empire, one to Asila, two to the northern Plains. Four of them had not been recently used.

Nothing in Myrefield. Surprising, she thought, checking the gates once more before she had a look around the base. There were no obvious slaves present, no enchanted cages or anything of the like.

And nobody could find them with the self destructing gates, let alone get proof. “Absolute plague,” she murmured as she passed into the main hall. She opened a large gate to Iz. “*There you go, Aki.*”

“*Thank you. The Nipha scouts are staying at a distance,*” he informed her.

“*Throwing their own people to the slaughter,*” she said.

“*Either they are protecting themselves to deny any connection, or they didn’t have a way to deal with this,*” Aki sent back. “*Either way, we shouldn’t remain for long. Will you stay?*”

“*I’ll stay until everyone is gone,*” she said.

“*Wayland is at Meadow’s domain. He wishes to come through,*” Aki told her.

“*Sure,*” she said, opening a gate.

Wayland stepped through, accompanied by a few more Sentinels.

He watched the machines move through Ilea’s gate.

She closed both gates when everyone had passed to Iz.

“I’m sorry,” Wayland said. “Aki informed me. I believe I don’t have much time.” The man paused and looked up. “I see.”

“You see what?” Ilea asked.

“I’ve been to this place before. It’s been decades, then just a small base of operations,” he said.

“Seems it was turned into an underground market of sorts.” The man rubbed his hands. “Let’s get to work. Aki cleared out the obvious spots, go look for the hidden ones.”

Ilea watched the people get to work, a few Sentinels nodding her way, determination and anger in their eyes.

Might as well try and help. She spread her wings and flew through the facility, her limited detection skills mostly focused on finding recent teleportation magics and other anomalies in the fabric. There were quite a few of the former, though nothing that led her to anyone in hiding.

Someone involved in near every country. Humans trading forbidden goods and people, developing their own gates to cling to a sense of power. Her ashen limbs lashed out, slicing through the stone around her. The Sentinels were supposed to help people. The Guardians were supposed to help people. She took in a deep breath, very much wishing to be in Kohr right now, fighting unimaginable monsters of the void. But she was here now. And she had the power and influence to make something happen, from the mess that had just transpired.