

Chapter 737 Visitors

Cold water collected on the stone ceiling, drops forming before they fell to collect in tiny unseen puddles. A single torch flickered, held by a man in a red robe, his face hidden behind a bloodied mask.

Millis watched from her dry corner. Her own face was covered too, not that she assumed anybody took note of her.

“We would like to see the demons,” the red robed man said to the woman standing opposite.

She wore two blades on her back, a brown duster protecting her against the cold southern climate. Her face was covered by a simple bandana.

Rogue. Millis hated them. Outlaws, deserters, cursed healers. *Not for long,* she told herself.

Two large men in plate armor opened a grated iron door, enchantments vanishing with the gesture. Scratching sounds came from within.

“Your rituals,” Rogue demanded. It was the name she had chosen for herself.

Millis was the Soldier. She had fought for Lord Harken in many battles, had waited for the scouts to return with news of their triumph but instead the army had been defeated. By Ravenhall and Riverwatch, by the creature that called itself Lilith. She accepted that the being was powerful, but she hadn't been there, had not been subject to the illusion the other soldiers must have seen. The mind magic spells that affected Lord Harken himself. She had left that den of madness as soon as she understood the corruption their enemies had sewn within. And some came with her.

They had built what they could in Ravenhall and Morhill, had gathered all the information that was available. Yet they lacked the strength to strike against the Shadow's Hand, or reveal themselves with an attack on the Medic Sentinels. She didn't like the idea of using demons but the ploy made sense. With the upcoming tournament, thousands would be there. Chaos, to dethrone the shadowqueen of the south, to bait her out, and to kill her, and her followers.

But demons weren't their only weapon. No. Against someone as powerful as Lilith, they had to employ everything and everyone they could find. It hadn't come as a surprise to find out about other groups such as themselves. The Rogue had led a group of bandits near Riverwatch, her leader murdered by Lilith herself. She had sworn revenge on that day. The Faithful, wearing his red robes, had been part of the Order of Truth. The lies spread about their rituals made them hunted in their own lands, driven into the dark corners of the world, into exile. They have returned now, and they were prepared to show the visitors of Morhill what true blood magic looked like.

Various nobles and business owners that had been driven out by Lilith's influence had joined their side, supplying them with mercenaries, weapons, plans, and information. Millis had seen better fighters in the slums of Wynehold but who remained to stand against the might of the south? Their corruption had already spread across the Plains. She herself had been instructed to form squads, choose officers, assign resources, and organize their logistics. What she had been doing with her troops already, now simply with the new additions brought into the mix.

“They're in good health,” said a female voice. The Healer.

Millis doubted she had been from Baralia. The accent suggested something from the west. Dawntree, if she had to guess. There had been rumors about Lilith getting involved with the Corinth Order. She assumed it had something to do with them. Healers were always an asset of course, and they had been welcomed with open arms.

“The Shadows have dealt with demons before. How can we be sure they’re even a danger?” the Faithful asked.

“What do you mean? Have you seen one of them fight? These are near level one hundred and thirty. They will kill dozens of travelers, even adventurers, each one in turn summoned as one of theirs,” the Rogue said and spat into the darkness. “Horrible creatures.”

“Have you set up your rituals?” Millis asked.

The red robed man hissed and turned her way. “Our agents report that our runes are found and dealt with. It seems Ravenhall has learned from their summoning. It matters not. When the blood starts to flow, our priests will be unstoppable.”

“Quiet,” Rogue said and looked up.

Millis unsheathed her daggers without a sound, listening with her auras active. There was nothing. *Nothing*. She looked towards the ceiling and saw another drop collect, the water falling before it impacted into a dark puddle only visible to her enhanced eyes. It produced no sound.

She was about to call out when a swirl of motion moved through the room, a large scythe like blade glinting with reflected torchlight until darkness consumed all. Her body was tense, her magics active. She was hidden, her eyes seeing all three of her allies fall into pieces, blood spurting from severed arteries, all of it in perfect silence. The perpetrator she could not see, their form wreathed in shadow. Unfocused and unmoving. A dripping noise resounded, the scratching returned.

“Why don’t you take care of the demons,” a deep voice called out. Steps followed, a massive six legged being of nightmare rushed past on the ceiling. Something hit flesh a moment later, the scratching sounds gone.

“Four demons, all below one thirty,” a distorted voice spoke, green eyes flickering in the darkness, its hands moving with bladed fingers. It left a moment later, each step sending shivers down Millis’ spine.

She counted her heartbeats.

“I bet you’re wondering why I left you alive,” the deep voice said a few seconds later, turning to Millis as his form was revealed.

He saw me.

The man looked ordinary. Black hair, black eyes, muscular. *Just like...*

He smiled. “Yes, Millis. I’m really sorry,” he said and actually frowned. “I’m not really a former Baralia soldier. You didn’t do a half bad job organizing this thing but I must ask you about all the safe houses. I’m not sure if I got them all.”

“Who...” her voice was gone when something heavy impacted her chest.

“I’m sorry,” he said again, now standing above her form.

She couldn’t breathe, her daggers gone as a ringing came to her ears.

“Look. Lilith hates torture. So we’ll make this brief. I also understand that you were just a soldier in Wynehold, angry with what happened. One woman destroying an army, all that. Must’ve been tough. Hard to swallow. Now please cooperate. Your pathetic crew of thugs won’t do any serious damage but I have a reputation to uphold,” the man spoke and raised her with one hand to her skull.

“All I’m saying is that we could’ve brought a change of clothes if you had told me where we were going,” Jyraiui complained. He put both hands on his knees to get some rest. “Food and water’s been out for half a week for fuck’s sake.”

The noble just waved him off with the usual dismissive gesture. “Yadda yadda yadda, can you not shuuut up for one fucking hour. Edwin please, we have no water, Edwin, I need to pee, Edwin, I’m bleeding out, Edwin my fire is meant for performing, not for fighting roving groups of goblins. If I didn’t know better I’d think you some bloody princess.” He spread his arms, the empty bottle he held flinging out of his grip with the gesture. It shattered on a nearby rock. “This is a fucking adventure!”

“There were enough fucking adventures near the capital,” Jyraiui said. Felicia had instructed him to keep them close. Not that he had any tangible control over the swordmaster.

“Yeah,” Edwin said and held up a finger. “True.” He paused. “Yeah, that’s true. But a tournament!?” he smiled now and twirled around. “A tournament to celebrate the south, the independence of Ravenhall, all the trade they provide, all the allies they have. The goddess they look up to. All hail... Lilith,” he said and bowed.

“You’re still shit at bowing. How were you even educated?” Jyraiui asked, regretting his choice of words as they came out of his mouth.

“Beaten into me, in dark fucking cellars. Facilities made to toughen up the unwanted youth. A great noble fucking life that was, I tell you,” Edwin spat before he put down his pack and started rummaging through the pile.

Jyraiui didn’t hope for anything. Edwin mostly carried bottles. Fewer now, admittedly, but for this long journey he had prepared.

“Come. We got two days left or something. It’s still a way’s off,” the noble said.

“Do you even know where we are?” Jyraiui asked. There was no road anymore, just a slope leading up to a bunch of hills. A small patch of forest to the side, and a group of Drakkenboars staring them down. He froze instantly and continued in a calm voice. “We might... have a problem.”

“What do you mean?” Edwin asked.

“Drakkenboars. They’re about to ch-” Jyraiui said and spread his fiery wings.

One of the critters crashed into the noble, shattering his entire bottle collection and leaving the man rolling down a nearby hill.

Shit. If he dies I'm gonna be in trouble, he thought and looked around. His fire wasn't enough to deal with the monsters. They were near Edwin's level and had high resistances against common magics.

What should I do. He saw the silhouettes of wagons in the distance and decided to call for help. A bright plume of fire spread from his hand up into the sky. He waited for a moment, still unsure if he should help the noble directly or not. The man was too heavy to carry efficiently and he stank. At least it seemed they were going the right direction, snow covered mountains rising up in the distance.

Nothing came from the wagons which meant he had to do something himself. He landed near the boars who had ganged up on the noble, continuously slamming their skulls and tusks into his rolling form.

"I'm fine," Edwin groaned as he raised himself up, only to be struck down again, his first sword clattering to the ground.

"Hold still, I'll distract-" Jyrai spoke when four people landed. Black wings, black armor. Ash. "Wh-" he nearly jumped when one of them appeared next to him, a warm feeling flowing through him before the being vanished once more.

The group spread out and attacked the boars with kicks, fiery magic spreading through the critters. One of them outright exploded. One of the armed ashen figures appeared next to Edwin, holding out a hand towards his crouched form.

"I said, I'm fine," the man exclaimed. "Oh not you ag... now there's four of you?"

The last two boars were dealt with and the group checked the vicinity.

[Battle Healer – lvl 104]

Jyrai checked the others and found them at similar levels. *Wait. Those boars were near two hundred!*

"We're Medic Sentinels tasked with assisting travelers on the way south. Are you on your way towards Morhill?" one of them asked.

"We'll get there ourselves," Edwin said.

"We are, yes. And we appreciate the help," Jyrai said quickly.

"Good. You should be... fine," one of the Sentinels said. "It might be good to get back on the road. There's a large caravan we just met only about an hour's walk east. With your levels it should be easy to catch up with them. They have guards."

"And soap," another one said.

Edwin grabbed for his swords but they were somewhere on the ground. "Careful," he said instead, raising a finger. "I've trained your beloved fucking Lilith. You have nothing to say to me."

"Of course," the Sentinel said in a mix of confusion and pity. "They'll be fine, let's move east and raise the distance. Push those wings," the man said and shot up, followed by the others. A few seconds later they were mere dots in the sky.

"Damn," Jyrai murmured.

“Don’t say a damn thing,” Edwin grumbled, collecting his treasured weapons. “Of course they use the same stupid fucking ash, and intrusion spells,” he murmured and spat. “It’s like she made little copies of herself, even more righteous and annoying.”

Jyraiu chose not to mention that it was Edwin’s decision to come south for the tournament. “Come on, old man. Let’s find some soap.”

“I don’t need it,” he said.

“I know,” Jyraiu sighed. “I know.”

Dale looked at the guards. Some of them he had trained himself. It would’ve been easier otherwise. “Sure this is safe?” he asked again.

“People went through. And came back. All in order, Captain,” one of them said. Though it was clear the young man was a little skeptical.

“What’s the holdup?” someone asked outside of the entrance.

Dale sighed, a reassuring hand touching his shoulder. He looked up to see Abby.

She smiled. “What is it?” she asked in a near whisper. Some of the guards damn near snickered.

He glared at them.

“She said it’s safe, right?” Abby asked and stepped onto the platform.

“Lungs, was it?” he asked in a dry tone as he joined her.

Benerick held a magical device and put it into some sort of pedestal. “Ready, Captain?”

He nodded and closed his eyes.

“Lungs,” Abby repeated. Then everything went white. Magic surged, then calmed.

Dale opened his eyes to see the inside of a stone hall, steps leading away from a platform much like the one they had just stepped on. Guards clad in black stood nearby, various people sitting on benches, some holding their stomach. He recognized some of them from the queue outside Riverwatch.

Magical light burned from above, a hand grabbing his. He looked to the side and saw Abby, the red hair and green eyes as captivating as the first time he had met her. *The same smile too.*

“Let’s see where we are,” his love said with a bright grin and skipped off the platform, dragging him along.

Dale glanced around the room as he followed along, his gaze stopping on a massive man in full plate armor. *No eyes*, he wondered, something about the way the guard stood gave him pause.

The large man nodded when they reached the door. "Enjoy your stay," he spoke in a deep whisper like tone unlike anything Dale had ever heard before.

Abby giggled. "That's a mighty voice! Is it magic?"

The guard didn't visibly react. "My voice? Mighty? Thank you," he said and bowed, the large obsidian axe on his back visible. "One blessed by flaming hair and emerald eye. Welcome, to Morhill," he said and opened one of the large steel double doors.

Sound instantly flooded into the hall, throngs of people walking past outside, some glancing inside to see the newcomers. Music rang in the distance.

"Thank you. One blessed by mighty voice and heavy armor," Abby said with a smile as she dragged Dale outside.

The guard gave them a curt nod and shut the door.

Dale saw the stone buildings rise all around, simple in design, gray tiled roofs half covered in snow. Buildings made to last, to withstand the cold. Two stories at most, windows closed and murky.

"Look!" Abby called out, her voice near instantly lost in the chatter and cheers.

He too followed her gaze, his eyes landing on a snow covered mountain reaching up into the skies. It wasn't Karth. He knew Karth.

Dale stood there for a long moment, just taking in the different backdrop. Sure, it didn't look like Riverwatch, but that had somehow not exactly been enough to convince him. A mountain though?

Teleportation gates, he thought and shook his head. He watched the hundreds of people flooding the streets, the stands and stores open to welcome the influx of tourists, wares stockpiled for the festivities. And at the center of it all was the healer he had found a few hours outside Riverwatch.

"Are you okay?" Abby asked, getting closer, her hand still holding his.

"Yeah," Dale said and kissed her. "Let's see what this place has to offer."

They both smiled and joined the hundreds of people. Dale spotted well placed guards, all around. Atop houses, leaning against walls, or sitting at the edge of the small squares they passed. Most of them in black but there were differences. He had heard of the Shadowguard but few of them were supposedly above level two hundred. There were too many in that level range, and most of them wore full plate armor and were large for men. *Ilea's friends from the North then?* he wondered.

The people he saw in bone and steel armor weren't quite as stationary. They moved around with purpose, staying atop buildings or to the side. Focused eyes took in everything, the healers occasionally vanishing or checking on tourists. Dale watched one of them when the man made eye contact, the only thing revealed by the guardian's horned helmet. *Sentinel*. He gave the battle healer a light nod and received one in return.

Their level ranged from fifty to beyond what he could identify, but even the lower leveled ones moved through the crowd with ease, a light tension in their bodies that reminded him of experienced adventurers. He would take one of them over a higher leveled guard whose last battle had happened two years prior any day of the week. Dale felt the hair on his arms stand up when he watched them. *Intermingling with the crowds*. He assumed the healer tag was what kept them at the back of people's minds because to him, they were absolutely terrifying. Knowing their strongest member didn't exactly help.

They spent the next hour walking the streets, soon reaching the walls where massive banners informed them about the arenas and stands located outside of the city proper. *Didn't have space for everything, I see.*

Leaving the town didn't exactly lead to the wilderness however. Instead there was another set of walls, showing considerably less wear than the main city defenses. The walkways here were much broader, lined with stands that had been set up in the past weeks. Goods from all over were being sold, Dale even spotting some Riverwatch specialties. Beyond that towered a variety of round structures, some larger than others, a few even covered in a dome.

"Feeling the urge to compete?" Abby asked as they walked past one of them, the details of the respective tournament explained in large black letters near the entrance.

It seemed every arena had its own competition.

"I think watching these will be more interesting," Dale said. "This is a vacation after all. No need to work," he added with a smile.