

Dagon watched as the group split up, Kyrian and Claire joining Trian, the rest of the council joining with the Elders and Ilea. Tables with snacks and drinks had appeared at some point, the ground flattened and shifted to create some sort of yard in front of the Sentinel site. Wooden ornaments grew out of the ground to decorate the vicinity, tipped with bowls of stone. White burning ash appeared above and settled in the stone cauldrons.

He clasped Elise's hand as they watched the ground shift, elements created before their very eyes. Of course he was familiar with both storage devices and wood magic but the spectacle felt so very nonchalant. A demonstration of power, even after everything they had seen and perceived.

"Did you hear it talk?" Elise whispered to him, her eyes towards the black grass.

"Yes," Dagon said. *The knowledge this being must possess. All the beings here possess.* He couldn't fathom it all. "*How old are you?*" he asked through the telepathic link. He had dozens of questions. All wrestling with each other to be the first asked. He held his breath, unsure how much the being would truly answer but he had to try, had to know.

"*Older than most,*" it replied. "*Is it not considered rude to ask such questions?*"

"*Apologies, Sir, Lady Meadow. How should I address you?*" he asked, fumbling in his mind as Elise looked at him with curiosity.

He felt as if a giggle flowed through the very core of reality, the hair on his neck standing up.

"*Just Meadow is perfectly acceptable, librarian,*" it spoke. "*If you intend to ask for a trade of information and books, I am very much interested.*"

He smiled, barely able to contain his excitement as he grasped his ring, hoping it was still there. Dagon had brought a lot to this meeting. Whatever political and trade advantages this would bring to Ravenhall was secondary to him. The fact that they had traveled to the north, had the opportunity to communicate with beings that had never even been to the plains, could learn from them, learn about their history, their struggles, it was overwhelming. He respected the power these creatures commanded but they were allies to Ilea, and he would use that for all it was worth.

"I am," he said out loud and squeezed Elise's hand. "*May I summon a table?*"

The ground shifted as a sizable construct grew out from the stone, a well crafted table with various marked sections appeared and settled. "*I assume you have brought paper and a way for me to put information down in a somewhat permanent way. Hallowfort lacks some of these supplies, difficult to obtain and far less useful to the people in these parts of the world.*"

Dagon summoned stacks of paper, ink, and a variety of pens. "*There is nothing more useful than the preservation of knowledge,*" he answered.

"*An admirable conviction,*" the being replied.

Dagon tried to hide his shaking hands as he watched the provided supplies start floating.

Elise watched in wonder, a smile on her face that quickly distracted him from the absurd reality of their situation.

---

“You look. Good,” Kyrian said. He held a plate with some snacks.

“You think so?” the machine replied, green eyes shining as they surveyed the mingling people.

“Very... deadly,” he said and bit into the pastry filled with meat.

Aki moved his long fingers and glanced at the pastry. “I suppose that’s good for a guardian. What does it taste like?”

“Salty,” Kyrian said and looked up at the being. “Dry on the outside but the filling is nice.”

“You don’t seem particularly versed in eating, no offense,” the machine said.

Kyrian looked at the crumbs that had fallen to the ground, some onto the plate. He glanced back at the machine. “I suppose. I didn’t consider manners much while living on the isles.”

“I can teach you, if you like. Whenever we have time between lessons,” Aki suggested.

He smiled at the machine. *Not machine. He’s a colleague. Fellow teacher. Just about three times as strong than before.* It had given him some confidence to know he was at least more powerful than most people in Ravenhall. From a purely magical perspective. Here however he felt a little lost. With just the Meadow, Ilea, and the various high level beings it wasn’t an issue but now it felt more like some kind of nobility event. “I’m uncomfortable,” he murmured.

“I noticed. The hooded Shadow keeps looking at you. Perhaps she is interested in a romantic way?” Aki suggested.

“You think so?” Kyrian asked, eating the rest of his pastry.

The Pursuer waved at the Shadow, the woman immediately taking a few steps back before she joined Sulivhaan’s side, the group currently talking to Iana. “I believe I scared her.”

“Maybe,” Kyrian said as he watched Ilea look at a wine bottle in her hand, a tendril of ash forming before her, piercing the cork and flicking it away. *Produced in Eregar’s Haven.*

She poured herself a glass and vanished. “Doing alright you two?”

Kyrian glanced at the woman now standing between them. “This is not my kind of event.”

“Yeah, I can feel your discomfort,” Ilea mused. “Let me get the smiths. We found some pretty interesting metal in the pit, might be worthwhile for you to have a look at,” she said and vanished again.

Goliath and Bralin joined them a minute later, a workbench appearing on the prepared platform as they continued their discussion. Kyrian joined their side without a word, more interested in their consideration of metals than the talk of gate security and applications he heard from Iana.

Aki apparently felt the same.

“Bralin can we borrow your music box?” Ilea asked, catching the thing when he threw it her way. “Thanks!” she said with a smile and vanished.

*Does she even walk at this point?*

He looked at Trian, the man joined by Verena as they walked towards the cube like structure, set at an angle into the stone below.

Kyrian looked up to see a new being floating above the workbench, white eyes looking down on the plans and metals before it glanced his way.

“Hello,” he said, assuming it was the Fae he had met before.

*Hello. Human.*

The voice sounded different, more feminine. *She managed to find another one*, he thought when music started playing, the volume adjusted until it faded into the background. *Yet another technological marvel.*

He focused back at the large workbench, ready to say very few words for the remainder of this meeting. And yet he still wanted to be there, a tense but excited atmosphere in the air, the significance of the meeting more than obvious to everyone present.

---

Claire tasted the wine, her eyes on the gate placed slightly above the stone ground. The drink wasn't the best thing she's ever had but she liked the taste. Red and heavy, much like blood. Not that she ever drank glasses full of blood. “*They should arrive soon,*” she sent to the Meadow, the being more than accommodating with all the questions and concerns she's had. At least she had proof now that the creature was more than just a powerful four mark. She didn't know yet if that was a good thing or not.

“*Indeed. About three minutes, should no complications occur,*” the being answered straight into her mind.

“*Thank you,*” she answered and sipped once more from her wine. Her gaze wandered to the floating undead creature engaged in mock battle with the hammer wielding Shadow. She was interested in the creature but more so in the barrier around them. Never had she seen anything like it. Claire doubted anybody else would've noticed but the Meadow was likely the most competent barrier mage that she now knew of.

“Doing okay? Nervous? Overwhelmed? Stressed?” Ilea asked when she appeared next to her, a glass of wine in hand, now wearing a flowing black dress that hinted at her ashen form.

“Why do you never wear that during our lessons?” Claire asked instead, looking her up and down.

Ilea twirled with a smile. “I'd stumble,” she answered.

“That means you’re not good enough yet,” Claire said. “Maybe you could get us one of those music devices.”

*“The Meadow is working on it already. I plan to make a few for myself,”* she said.

Claire smiled. *“Can it hear us if we talk through your telepathy?”*

*“I doubt it, it’s not a mind mage. Unsure if we can trust the thing?”* Ilea asked.

She swirled the wine and took another sip. *“It’s less about trust... and more just the incredible power. Nobody could stop it. Nobody could defy it.”*

*“Just give me a few more years,”* Ilea replied with a wink. *“We wouldn’t have the gates if not for the Meadow. We wouldn’t have the Soul Forge. I’d hardly be the same space mage that I am without its tutoring. There’s so much the Meadow can help us with, it’s ridiculous. It’s not human, Claire. It doesn’t have the same desires as most beings I’ve met. And it’s proven to be trustworthy, time and time again.”*

*“All true. It just feels... like we’re not in control. At all,”* Claire said.

Ilea puffed. She smiled and raised her brows. *“Claire. We’re not. Humans have very little power in this world. The same is true for most Dark Ones. Even Elves would not dare oppose a Dragon, at least I doubt it. This here,”* she said and gestured around them. *“With this, we’re taking the first steps.”*

*“You’ve seen more than I have,”* Claire admitted.

*“If anything, the Meadow can prevent us from slaughtering each other,”* Ilea added.

*“You have a lot of trust in its judgment,”* she said and refilled her glass. The alcohol didn’t affect her.

*“I saw what it did in Erendar. I know what it can do, know what it asked of me. And I brought it back to this realm. Already it has prevented the Feynor from attacking this settlement. We need allies, Claire. In the long term. Adam Strand alone destroyed Ravenhall. There are people capable of blood rituals that can wipe out entire cities. We need an answer to that,”* Ilea said.

Claire took another sip and paused, looking at one of the tunnels. A group of beings approached. It was time.

*“I thought the answer was you,”* she said.

*“Not to everything. Neither is the Meadow. Everyone here is needed,”* Ilea said. *“We also have Nes and the Cerithil Hunters. And I’m sure I’ll meet more interesting beings in the future.”*

*“One world changing step at a time,”* Claire said. *“We can’t all evolve as fast as you do.”*

---

Catelyn walked in front of the group. The council members of Hallowfort were equal but she understood that her small size would place her at a lower importance to most humans. It was just how they thought, their perception more focused on the visual than the magical. Nor did she think her large form would cause anything but tension. They were here because of Ilea and the Meadow.

It had been ages since their entire council had agreed on anything without complaints. Haiden had known Ilea for quite some time. If the teleportation gates came to be, he'd get both new customers and resources. Doravin and No respected both the Meadow and Ilea for their strength, no convincing would be necessary for most everything the two would suggest. Catelyn was just glad they mostly stayed out of Hallowfort's affairs. Good intentions without the necessary historical and cultural knowledge could lead to tensions in the town. Her early concerns with the Meadow had turned out to be unfounded, the ancient being of space and life more than just helpful, learning about them in the background and assisting where it could. She still sometimes worried about the sheer influence it would have in the coming centuries but in all her thinking, she had found no reason not to risk it. The benefits were simply too great.

Varahan unsurprisingly loved the idea of teleportation gates, her four wings fluttering almost in an excited way today. Catelyn just hoped she would adhere to the rules they had in place, and the likely new ones to be discussed today. For her sake.

The most skeptical of the bunch was Elana. Despite the early concerns of the other council members about her being favorable to humans specifically, she was the one to distrust them the most. Not surprising to Catelyn. She had dealt with the species enough to know they'd rather trust the arcane storms not to hit them than an unknown member of their own kind. Natural, for beings that have lived so long challenged mostly by their own people. The harsh environment of the north largely prevented such issues.

Catelyn hoped the gates didn't promote the same problems within Hallowfort as she knew to exist in human cities. *The Meadow will stay vigilant*, she reminded herself. Its promise to protect their settlement was genuine. No corruption, Feynor, nor the Dark Protector will be able to invade. Not anymore.

She saw the black grass in the distance, the crystal tree reflecting the light coming in from the expansive cavern outside. The same she saw from her room in the Hunter's Den. Though she felt little like a hunter in the presence of the Meadow. *"Greetings, ancient one, bearer of the fabric,"* she said through the already established connection. She bowed her head slightly, the beings around her doing the same. They had agreed not to treat the being for what it truly was, but power and reputation had to be acknowledged. Anything else would be beyond a lack of respect.

*"Good day, Catelyn, bringer of flames. The representatives from Ravenhall are present. Ilea has introduced them to me and the beings present,"* the Meadow spoke.

*Good.* Catelyn hoped their own forms, strange to most humans, would not be quite as surprising now that they've already seen the likes of Owl and Aki. *Though they should be veterans in their own right, more familiar with strange beings.*

The Elders of the Hand she had already met had once been monster hunters primarily, now comfortable with the idea of thinking and talking creatures they would've only seen as beasts in their early days of being adventurers. Except for the Lizardfolk that sometimes traveled through the plains, once likely Dark Ones themselves.

Musical sounds came from the gathered group, the people gathering to greet the newcomers. Some she had already met. Verena, Pierce, Lucas, no longer an official part of the Ravenhall government

as she was informed, though their council would surely be considered. About the others they had learned from both the Elders and Ilea, not much, but enough to start.

*Dagon the librarian, visibly anxious to return to the book covered table. Fallen into the hands of the Meadow already, as expected. Trian, friend to Ilea and Kyrian. He will likely focus on considerations related to the Medic Sentinels. Only a fool would oppose his demands, battle healers and the direct support of Ilea's organization were a priority after all. The masked individual would be Sulivhaan, perhaps the counterpart to Elana on their side, his body language suggesting a similar skepticism. He would be difficult to convince but considering the benefits and pressure from everyone else, he will have no choice to accept. The actual work will be a long term one. Both of them would obstruct if alienated or given reason to suspect any foul play.*

*Three warriors at the back, with a man shrouded in shadows. Catelyn did not know who they were but she would find out soon. Ilea stood by their side, looking towards the approaching council as she swirled a glass with red liquid in her hand. The same woman that came to the Hunter's Den and helped clear out the corruption from the Descent. The same woman that saved my life against the Feynor invaders. The Bringer of Cake. And yet she felt different now. Dangerous. To an extent Catelyn would've never expected. An ally nonetheless, and a friend she would never betray.*

She only glanced at the cake on the table for a split second before she forced herself to look at the last and most important individual in the group. The Head Administrator of Ravenhall, Claire Russel. Much of the communication between their settlements had been handled by the woman, demands, compromises, plans, and administrative work which Catelyn mostly delegated to Haiden and Elena. A competent individual, praised even by the former Queen of Rhyvor. *And a good friend to Ilea.*

Without the battle obsessed ash creature, they would not be here today. The Meadow would not be here today, nor would they already know so much about the other.

Ilea walked towards them with a smile and wave, the gravity of the event either lost on her or of no importance. "Hey everyone," she greeted. "Do you want like an ashen box or something to stand on? Wait you can fly, no?"

"Telepathy now as well. It's good to see you, Ilea," Catelyn said and started floating. A deliberate delay to show her ability.

"Good to see you too, come, we have food and wine," Ilea said and pointed at the group of humans. "Council of Ravenhall with additions, Elders of the Hand," she then pointed to Catelyn's group. "Council of Hallowfort."

Varahan made an annoyed sound. Doravin laughed, the large warrior walking over with his large axe before he addressed Ilea. "Do you wish to battle?"

Catelyn sighed, the only solace in his display the fact that some of the tension broke with his challenge. She saw one of the human warriors grin, hammer in hand. Catelyn locked eyes with the hooded woman next to the man, their shared pain one of experience.

She floated forward and addressed the opposite council. "Greetings, esteemed representatives of Ravenhall. I'm Catelyn, speaker for Hallowfort. Head Administrator, it's good to finally make your acquaintance," she said to the woman.

Claire Russel took a step forward and bowed in an elegant manner. "I'm delighted to be here, Catelyn, wielder of flame," she said and addressed all the others with appropriate titles.

Catelyn took in a deep breath, seeing the wink sent her way by Ilea.

*“And that’s where I fade into the background,”* the woman sent.

*“At least you had the decency to bring cake,”* Catelyn answered.