

Chapter 440 Catching up

Claire notified Trian with the device behind her desk, sending a small enchanted letter through a tube.

“You weren’t the only one being busy,” she said and sat back down, taking a sip of her ale.

“Your assets are growing, both here and in Riverwatch. Investing there got much easier now that we’re in contact with Alistair. The treaty you initiated with Riverwatch benefited both of us greatly. Sulivhaan and Dagon could hardly believe it was you to suggest it. The timing was perfect for both of us. The empire has accepted our independence, mostly citing all the help the Shadows provided in the war efforts and with the demons,” Claire explained.

“Didn’t we cause the demons in the first place? And the war in turn?” Ilea asked.

“Adam Strand caused the demon summoning. Empress Alyris is very much aware of that. We have our theories on the war as well but it is still too recent to make final judgments. Let’s just say that I think Alyris has been looking for a reason to be rid of Baralia for a long time. For them to actually initiate the war might have been the best possible result. I won’t bore you with the politics of it all. Suffice to say we are in a complicated but overall agreeable relationship with the empire. Riverwatch adds to our claim and we add to theirs.” she explained.

“Thousands died from that war,” Ilea said but just shook her head, not about to get into the reasons behind such things.

“We won’t ever engage in war, except if we are attacked or a threat is too dangerous to ignore. I hope you can trust me on this, Ilea. Neither do I believe the empress wanted the war. It simply did align with some of her goals. If you want her reasons, I suggest you go and talk to her yourself.”

Ilea chuckled. “Talk to the Empress of Lys? That’s the last thing on my list.”

Claire nodded. “I thought so too. Turns out I was wrong. I have you to thank for that, I suppose.”

“You met her?” Ilea asked.

“Letters only. We communicated with her together. The leaders of Ravenhall. You have a say in our decisions as well of course. The empire is busy with rebuilding and fortifying their cities as well as with the war efforts. Currently we merely signed treaties as to our independence, the removal of all imperial personnel from the Ravenhall mountain chain and open borders for trade. I assumed you have nothing against such.”

“Of course not. I’m sure they’re glad to have the soldiers and guards back that were stationed here as well,” Ilea said. “They’re still at war then?”

Claire nodded. “Baralia has turned into one of the largest battlefields in recent history. We even have reports of Nipha and Asila joining the empire. Plenty of Shadows have joined as well, mostly as a response to the bounty that was set out for them by Baralia. The Shadow’s Hand however is not officially at war. Members of course are free to act independently as long as Ravenhall or the order are not endangered. We suspect it might have been Alyris in the first place who was responsible for the bounty but it is merely a theory. One that would make a lot of sense. The lack of resistance to our independence may be the payment for the Shadows’ involvement in the war.”

“Might just be they joined for the simple benefits of war. Good way to get some power and gold,” Ilea said in a dry tone.

“Vultures flying over a soon to be corpse. I agree. And yet Baralia is not a corpse quite yet. Their cities are fortresses held by high level nobles and their families. People that have been in power for centuries. They will not give up ground easily. We benefit greatly of course, exporting food, armor, weapons and dozens of other goods into the empire. Most used to rebuild and protect their cities, towns and villages.”

“I forbid any Lilith owned businesses to profit directly from the war efforts but I hope you understand that it is impossible to completely prevent it,” Claire said.

“Sure. As long as we don’t sell machine guns to the front lines, I don’t care,” Ilea said.

“Alistair and I are working close together with the establishments you own in Riverwatch to extract and take in refugees and slaves. It is proving difficult but I dedicated a good sum of gold towards those efforts. I hope you agree.”

Ilea nodded. “Double or triple it if possible. How are the slaves in Baralia? Just used for entertainment and manual labor or is the society a little more advanced than that?”

Claire smiled. “Administrators, cooks, leather workers, smiths, and much more. All useful and needed. That is the main reason why I prioritized those efforts.”

“Always with gold in mind,” Ilea said and shook her head in a joking manner.

“Ravenhall has mostly recovered but now we are starting to retake Morhill. Your smith friend Balduur has agreed to our suggestions by the way. Both cities are additionally building downwards as well, the mountains providing great ground for expansion, now that the Haven is producing ten times the food we previously managed to grow. Before you ask, we are looking into expansion there as well, to not solely rely on its soil.”

“We need all the people we can get. If they are trained and capable, even better,” Claire said.

Ilea nodded. “When will you give yourself the title of Empress?”

“One ruler is not reliable as a form of government. Efficient and simple, yes but I don’t plan to leave behind chaos in case of my death.”

Planning even beyond her own death. Well, I guess I suggested the right person for the job back then.

“Come in,” Claire said.

Trian burst into the room, wide eyed and with a broad grin on his face.

“Hey. You look horny,” Ilea said with a smirk, tilting her head back to look at the man.

He walked up to her, one of his eyes twitching as lightning sparked around his hand.

“Careful now,” Ilea said, her voice traveling through the room with a pulse of powerful mana.

A second of subdued silence passed as her companions were entirely frozen before she giggled.

Claire shook her head and summoned some documents. “Madwoman,” she murmured with a slight smile.

Trian laughed out loud. “Perfect! At least you didn’t waste your time. Do you know how difficult it is to answer the questions of nearly sixty people about the leader of their organization while I think she is dead?!”

Ilea smiled. “Sixty? Damn... I expected like five. Well done.”

“I want an apology,” the man said and crossed his arms. “I don’t give a shit about your powerful healer shit. You said you’d be back sooner.”

“Apologies Trian. There was a powerful blood manipulation spreading in the north, capable of large scale destruction. Then a Sand Elemental was corrupted and we had to put it down before I was nearly killed by one of the Ascended.”

“Thanks.” he said and summoned his own armchair, sitting back before he closed his eyes and cupped his face with both hands. “Wait... Sand Elemental?”

Ilea spent the next twenty minutes retelling her adventure through the Descent, starting with the first layer battle, the exploration, her advancements as well as the Sand Elemental battle. She made sure to share all her discoveries about resistances, levels, elves, Blood Manipulation, third tier general skills, the Ascended and everything else she encountered. She did decide not to share much on the Fae itself.

Claire wrote everything useful down and nodded with increasing joy all the while Trian sunk further and further into his chair.

“So apparently you can get a third class at level three fifty but I’m not sure about the requirements yet,” Ilea said.

Claire nodded and put away another page, enchanting it in the process. “I’ll get a list of general skills together that you might be able to learn quickly. As well as a list of potential resistance trainees within the Hand, the Shadowguard and potentially interested adventurers in the city. You used the arena before. Are you planning to stay for a while?”

“Schedule it for every morning. Sunrise to noon,” Ilea said and gave her a thumbs up. The woman had understood immediately. “I love you,” she whispered.

“I love you too, dear. Anything I should scratch before I hand it to Dagon, Elise and Sulivhaan?” Claire said.

“No. Just make sure that they know the information on the Ascended cannot spread. I don’t want that one entering this city,” Ilea said.

“Of course. We have protocols in place for a potential three or four mark breach but I had not honestly considered a sapient being with such power. Even the elders won’t be able to deal with that,” she said and sighed. “Well, it was only a matter of time. If we want to do more than survive, we will have to be able to fight both Elves and anything else that exists out there. It is at least somewhat comforting that powerful creatures like that should dislike the low mana density,” Claire said.

“A little. Terrifying at the same time,” Ilea said with a smile.

“No shit. We are fishes in a pond right next to the ocean,” Claire said with a smile.

“You like the challenge?” Ilea asked.

“Not in the same way that you do. But of course. It was nearly getting boring. With the Empire accepting our independence. I’ll make sure to triple the power of our defenses. Finally Sulivhaan might accept my budget suggestions,” she said and rubbed her hands together.

“Lightning... Ele... mental,” Trian whispered. His eyes were wide open still, not a peep coming from him during her whole monologue and the conversation after.

“Yep. Quite powerful too, that one. Do you want to meet it?” Ilea asked.

He groaned and straightened in his chair. “Ilea. I apologize. For asking for an apology. I should have known you were busy with tasks beyond my understanding. And no. I do not want to meet an Elemental, not ever. Thank you.”

She smiled. “Might be one attacks the city at some point. Would be good if you prepared a little. Don’t worry about the apology. I fucked around plenty after we dealt with the corruption. Meeting the Ascended wasn’t exactly part of the deal. Any word on Kyrian?”

Claire shook her head. “We have no idea where he is. Still alive and continuously more... rugged and powerful. According to the paintings of course. Perhaps it is simply Cless’ evolving style. You two certainly seem to be the ones advancing most in power.”

“I can take you two to the north at some point, as soon as things are running a little more smoothly. Would be good for you to at least reach level three hundred. The benefits will be crucial,” Ilea said.

“Not anytime soon, sadly. I will continue to train of course,” Claire said.

[Mage – lvl 227]

A couple levels at least, Ilea thought and nodded.

Trian was at two twenty nine, not much different than the last time they had met. Considering the small time frame it was still impressive of course. Both of them had found the time to hunt and fight.

“Can I add dungeons in the area as well for resistances or do you prefer to train here? I’ll just add the magic schools I won’t find, if anything close by can fill a gap,” Claire said.

“Sure. Focus on Void, space and blood. Hey, don’t you have blood magic spells?” Ilea said, looking at Trian.

“I know some people who can help there. I focused more on drain spells and lightning,” the man said with a smile.

“Here are the most recent paintings on Kyrian,” Claire said and showed her a bunch of canvases.

“Is that a cape? Of needles? And claws? He looks pretty wild, I like it,” Ilea said and gave her a thumbs up. “Cless is a terrific painter as well, as a side note.”

“She is getting better,” Claire said and nodded.

“He looks more beast than man,” Trian said.

“Ah, you grew up noble. He looks perfectly fine to me,” Ilea said with a grin on her face. *Maybe I’ll have to reconsider him after all.*

“I wouldn’t mind his courtship either, if I had a shred of time to spare on such matters,” Claire said, not showing a single bit of emotion at the apparent loss.

Trian cleared his throat. “Now that that is out of the way. Do you still plan to help out with the Medic Sentinel Corps?”

“Of course. That’s the main reason why I’m here. I told you I’d be back. Just took a little longer. So... sixty people. Tell me about the Medic Sentinels,” Ilea said with a grin.

Trian sighed with relief and smiled. “Of course. Now... we have fifty recruits at the moment. I interviewed each one myself and at least for now I can vouch for them. Most came here to Ravenhall due to the demon invasion or the war with Baralia. Some were referred by William, others by Sulivhaan. Claire helped with most of the rest.”

“They aren’t scared, Ilea. They are smart and eager, tired of being powerless. Many share convictions you set forth for the Sentinels. I don’t know how aware you are of this but your second name has made quite some waves. Not just here in Ravenhall. Lilith is the main reason for many to even consider joining the Sentinels and for even more of them it is the only reason they remain after the past weeks.”

“Why am I so important to them? And what happened in the past weeks?” Ilea asked.

Claire chuckled.

“Do I really have to explain why you are important? They’ve been taking classes and have started to train but they have yet to meet you and not few of them have started to ask questions. Healing orders are known to be hard on recruits, many people never returning after joining. Worse rumors are out there and I have no reason to believe they are wrong.”

“Aki might be one of the reasons people haven’t left as of yet. Him, Sidney and Orthan are the combat trainers for the recruits, teaching them tactics, hand to hand combat as well as the use of various weapons. At this stage I have to say that they’re mostly just beating down the poor sods.”

“Sidney? Orthan?” Ilea asked.

“Sidney is a Shadow. She was responsible for evaluating new potential members before the demons happened,” Trian said.

“She was the woman who evaluated your combat abilities, alongside Adam Strand and William, as far as I’m informed,” Claire cut in.

“I see,” Ilea said.

“Orthan is one of the people you rescued in the Alymie... estate. He has always been loyal to my family. I have... heard... that your first meeting wasn’t exactly favorable and should you wish to have him removed, I will do so,” Trian explained.

“Ah, the old guy with bone magic? Maybe I can get a resistance from him,” Ilea said. “What do you think of him?”

“He can be rude but he knows what he is doing. My own combat prowess is partially a product of his teachings. And beatings,” he said.

Ilea nodded. “I’ll talk to him but I trust your judgment, Trian. I don’t want to torture the recruits either. I hope you made it clear that this isn’t a noble’s mage factory bleeding out orphans.”

“Of course, Ilea. They are harsh but not to an extent that is unreasonable. The Alymie never participated in such practices. It is Sidney and Aki that sometimes go overboard after all. They profoundly apologize to the recruits of course but that doesn’t exactly add to our credibility, despite their undeniable combat prowess and experience.”

Ilea snorted. “Combat prowess? Aki? Are you fucking kidding me?”

“He has improved considerably. A very dangerous level two hundred machine capable of keeping up with even me,” the mage said.

“Really? I’ll be the judge of that,” Ilea said with a grin.

“He would be happy for the challenge and I’m sure it would be a motivating sight for the recruits,” Trian said.

“Can we call them students? I don’t necessarily think of this as a military thing. More a place of learning,” Ilea said.

“Learning about resistances,” Claire murmured.

“Not if they don’t want to. We need administrators, trainers, teachers, consultants and whatever else we can think of as well. If they want to become powerful healers and assets to a strong adventurer team or even a Shadow team, they will gladly get those skills,” Ilea said.

“Pain Tolerance in the second tier would be a priority but it won’t be easy to sell. I personally don’t plan on ever getting that far,” Trian said.

“Why would you? You have a stable position, you have reached a level of power most humans will never come close to. There are however plenty of people that would like to reach higher. Leave it to me to show them what is possible. And to give them the resources to do so in this world of information hoarding nobles, clinging to the shreds of power they think significant,” Ilea said.

“You will face plenty of adversity,” Trian said.

“From whom?” Ilea asked.

“The existing healing orders, many of the nobles in the empire as well as any other kingdom. Information sellers, alchemists selling their overpriced potions. Just to name a few,” he replied.

Ilea smiled and took a sip of ale. “Just doesn’t seem that much of a challenge after seeing the power of Elementals. Let them try.”