

Chapter 721 Hidden Figures

Ilea was led through a long hallway and through an inconspicuous door. Beyond was a large hall made of stone and wood, a massive hearth at the center where the lizardman went to start a fire. Oil lamps lined the walls and support beams. A wooden table stood at the center, various words, runes, and sketches carved into the top. Stone stairs led down to an open area with training dummies, heavily used targets, and a collection of simple weapons.

“One of the very few renovations I managed to push through the administrators of this seat of power,” Alyris said and sat down on a wooden chair, the table itself round much like what the Meadow had created in its domain.

“It’s quite lovely,” Ilea said and sat down to the side, not quite opposite the woman. She watched the others take their spots, most still somewhat tense with her presence. “You’re all quite impressive,” she added, leaning back in the comfortable chair. The wood creaked.

The lizardman growled, sitting down on a groaning chair. Another thing they had in common. “Do not mock us, three mark. We know of what you are.”

“And what is that?” Ilea asked, her grin broadening as she looked at the massive being. She was very aware of the tension instantly rising in the room, the muscles tensing on the large human, the placating gesture of Alyris herself. Magic permeated everything, mixing in with her own auras.

“A monster,” the brown haired storm mage said, an excited look on her face. Several spells around her staff were at the brink of being cast, her casual control a demonstration of her experience. Despite her comparatively low level.

“And a delivery girl,” Heron said as he plumped down into a cushioned chair. “Bringing a letter.”

“True,” Ilea said. “To both I suppose... I do try to stay human, but you know how it is,” she said, summoning the letter before she made it appear in front of the Empress. Ilea glanced behind the woman. *Curious.*

“Ilea helped considerably with the demonic mess caused by the Shadow’s Hand. She’s been involved in the defense of our capital against the invaders from the north and she’s saved countless humans in her efforts in Baralia. And that is just what we know of. General Ryse and Felicia Redleaf speak the highest praise, neither known to do so easily. Stand the fuck down before you cause the greatest international incident of our time,” Alyris said, her voice calm and steady through it all, her eyes glancing over the group of powerful individuals as she opened the letter. She looked at Ilea last and smiled. “Please don’t take their caution personally. Attempts at our lives have been growing more frequent of late.”

“I’m happy to indulge everyone who’s interested,” Ilea said, specifically looking at the lizardman.

He grinned back, sharp teeth showing as a slight magical hum became audible from within his throat.

“I don’t think assassins know what they’re getting into,” Ilea said as she glanced back to the Empress.

The woman smirked. “Desperate old crooks and crones, feeling the winds of change-” she paused, her eyes widening ever so slightly as she focused full on the letter.

Ilea didn't know what exactly was written inside but there had to be some mention of the gates at least. The allure had to be great for important people to travel far, let alone accept an alliance between humans and Awakened creatures of the North.

"The Black Death, they called you," the storm mage said and cocked her head to the side a little. "My name is Valarienne Lillian. And I am thankful for what you have done here. I wish it had been me, to be out in the streets, setting straight the barbarians participating in that meaningless siege."

Ilea gave her a slight nod, unsure how to respond to the compliment. It hadn't exactly been a pleasure but she would do it again. Now she would probably just rip apart the entire attacking army, given enough reason to do so.

Alyris made a hand gesture, the masked woman appearing by her side. She glanced at Ilea with a more serious expression, her silver eyes focused.

There you are, Ilea thought, seeing another fluctuation just behind the two women. She looked between them and made a connection.

"Greetings, traveler," she sent, smiling when the space shifted yet again. Still she saw nothing but she was sure it had been there. It wasn't the first time she had observed the spell after all.

A giggle reached her mind.

Friend?

"That depends on you, my dear. Those of your kind I have met, I call friends," Ilea sent back.

"This... this will change everything," the masked woman whispered, looking up to glance at Ilea. She brushed against her hood when an earring fell out from the motion, her hand shaking ever so slightly.

Ilea didn't miss the rune etched into the small piece of silver. Her smile grew wider. *This is getting more and more interesting.*

"My name is Ilea. Are you friends with Alyris?" she asked the hidden being.

Friends. With. Empress.

Name. Ruler.

Heron glanced at her as he opened the door and received several plates of food he made vanish. The man went around and put them in front of everyone.

"That's an apt name," Ilea said out loud.

Alyris looked up, Valarienne raising a brow. Heron sat down again and glanced her way.

"What do you mean?" the masked woman said, her voice apprehensive.

The giggle once more reached her mind.

"Oh I'm enjoying it too," Ilea said. "It's nice to make your acquaintance," she added and stood up, bowing as the fires of creation briefly flared up around her. "Ruler."

Spells erupted around her, the lizardman and large human on their feet the moment she had spoken the last word. Two white eyes folded into existence behind the Empress and her highest level guard, followed by the six winged abyss like form of a single Fae. It floated around before it landed on Alyris' right shoulder.

The woman sighed and tapped the creature on its head. “Another first. I shouldn’t be surprised. This knowledge I wished to keep to myself. This... is Ruler. A Fae.”

Ilea started eating, the people around her waiting with their spells at the ready, exchanging uncertain glances between themselves and the Empress. “Not the first I’ve met. How did you come to know it?”

Valarienne held her spell. It felt like the temperature in the room had changed, and for once it wasn’t her own magic. Alyris was on edge, something that hadn’t happened in years. Even Syrithis was tense. Whatever had been in the letter had unsettled them. *It changes everything.* She was intrigued. Had they found a way to enhance humanity? Had they found an ancient magical weapon? Or perhaps a way to manipulate time itself? Syrithis chose her words with purpose but now they had another issue.

Lilith had seen the Fae. Somehow. And Valarienne wanted to know how. *The fires, the way she moved the letter. Her space magic is far more powerful than we anticipated. And she had met the creatures, perhaps even talked to them.*

The guard was ready, even Alyris ready to deploy her armor. Their visitor remained in her chair, eating in a manner so casual it was downright condescending. Valarienne gulped. Did they stand a chance? She hadn’t felt like this since their time in the wilds. A monster they had called her but now for the first time she felt it too, down to her very spine. Her voice had changed too, the question about the Fae not a casual way to make conversation but a demand. Why it was important, she did not know but Alyris’ response would decide what happened next.

“In our travels. We had assaulted a ruin overrun by undead beings, a crazed dark mage from a nearby village had reached an evolution that affected his mind. He had brought the corpses of all those he had killed to the ruin and was preparing a ritual, perhaps affected by a dark god. The Fae we found trapped inside a magical contraption, its form injured and drained of power. We healed it and it left. A few weeks later it showed up again, more often afterwards until it chose to stay by our side. Most of the time that is,” Alyris explained, each word chosen with deliberate care. Only the truth.

Valarienne watched the woman eat.

She looked up and smiled. “That’s nice. They get trapped all the time.”

Valarienne breathed out, slowly letting go of the magic gathered in her staff. The tension was gone.

The Fae appeared in front of Ilea and twirled around. It liked to communicate through telepathy, but generally kept to the Immortal Guard and the Empress, its existence one of the most tightly guarded secrets of their group. *And she just saw it.*

“You asked me before, where I learned,” Ilea said and glanced at Heron.

The old man opened his eyes a little wider, a gentle smile on his lips. "I see. That is comforting. They are quite... elusive, and surprisingly wise."

"The single ones can be hit and miss," Lilith said. "Though I like the Baron quite a bit, I suppose the real thing is more impressive." She had a big smile on her face as she watched Heron's surprise unfold.

She's just messing with you old man. What does she even mean, the real thing? It's right there, Valarienne thought and glanced at the creature that tried to sit down on Lilith's shoulders. First the right, then the left. It turned back and stomped the air in frustration before finally settling on her hair.

Friend, it spoke, to everyone in the room.

"Stay on your guard. We don't know her intentions," Syrithis sent.

"I don't think we can handle her, old friend," Valarienne sent back. *"Why don't we trust the little one. Its intuition is as good as Alyris'"*

"Heron suggests she has learned from the Fae. Who is to say she hasn't subdued them? We cannot risk losing Ruler," Syrithis sent back. The lizardman nodded, his demeanor less playful by now.

"She relaxed once Alyris told her what happened. She was thinking the same thing," Valarienne sent.

"And none of you is a space mage?" Ilea asked, interrupting their hidden conversation. She had finished her plate, a bottle of ale in her hand as she sat back in her chair, eyes on Alyris. "I would've liked to learn and compare with a human for once."

"Are the Fae not worthy teachers?" Heron asked, the old man always out to gain every scrap of information he could. Valarienne liked that about him. Very much. And so far Lilith didn't disappoint. She didn't know if the woman was being foolish or if the truly powerful simply did not care. They all knew how tough Syrithis was in a direct confrontation, her healing a major boon. Facing a battle healer above level five hundred would be more than uncertain. The location was in their favor but the ace in their metaphorical sleeve was currently getting its wings stuck in their guest's hair.

"Violence is a horrible teacher," Lilith said.

"I find its lessons valuable," Malkorn said.

The woman seemed confused for a second before she spoke again. "No, Violence is the name of a Fae I know. My teacher is the Meadow."

Glances were exchanged in a split second, Alyris now with eyes wide open, all pretense gone. "You brought it back," she said in a whisper.

Lilith grinned, sipping on her ale. "I'm a space mage," she said and set down the bottle. "Don't tell Velamyr, he's gonna have a hissy fit."

"The tree," Syrithis spoke. "The ancient being from Erendar. You would risk taking an unknown of such power into our lands? General Ryse deemed it a threat to all of humanity."

Ilea shrugged. "I trust the Meadow more than any of you."

“You do not represent humanity... Alyris, we cannot stand by while this woman allies herself with unknown creatures,” she said, the air around her thrumming with power.

Lilith looked at her and started chuckling. She stopped and grinned, a predatory expression with sparkling joy in her eyes. “Then why are you wearing that ear piece?”

“You...,” Syrithis spoke, her magic flaring up as the table splintered in front of her.

“Stop,” Alyris said and stood up, both hands on her ally’s arm. “Syri, please.”

“If she knows...,” the masked being said.

Ilea sighed, a disappointed look on her face as she looked to the battle ready Malkorn. “If only you people weren’t so fucking important. Tell me then, why are you wearing an Elven rune?”

Syrithis looked between Ilea and the Empress, the latter giving her a light nod.

“If she brought back the Meadow... it explains the gates,” Alyris said.

“*She will be the first to oppose us,*” Syrithis said, her mental voice shaking.

“Ruler is sitting in her fucking hair. Trust me, Syri,” Alyris said, her voice gentle. She raised her hand to the trembling healer and touched her delicate mask.

They all waited. Valarienne glanced at Heron, the man watching with the same interest as herself, winking her way once. *Well you’ll get out of it anyway. Old fart.* She knew he understood.

Syrithis sighed, raising her hands to her face. *Both secrets undone. Maybe her battle hungry persona is really just an act,* Valarienne thought as she watched the woman, her reaction more important than what she knew her ally to be.

Enchantments came loose and the mask fell.

Valarienne grinned. She knew a battle could break out at any moment but she just couldn’t miss the moment. And then it passed. Lilith just sipped on her ale.

What.

A few seconds passed, the guard glancing between each other with nervous looks.

“Have you nothing to say?” Syrithis demanded. She sounded almost insulted.

Lilith raised her bottle and shrugged slightly. Then she hissed.

Valarienne tensed up, ready to cast her spells when Syrithis started laughing.

“What is happening?” Valarienne asked, looking at the Empress.

The Empress sat back down and sighed. “Lilith just greeted her... as an elf would.”

Valarienne could’ve sworn she saw the Empress blush ever so slightly, Syrithis just shaking her head until her brown eyes focused on Ilea. She pulled back her hood to reveal the white floating hair and her prominent ears, slightly curved upwards, just like her teeth were slightly pointy. Not quite as extreme as with a full blooded elf but decidedly inhuman. Her skin was pale, her features delicate. Valarienne understood why the Empress had taken a liking. *Good for them.*

“You know of what I am?” Syrithis asked.

Lilith finished her drink and made it vanish. “Honestly? No. You’re female... but you’re too weak to be an Oracle, or so I think. A half elf?”

Syrithis glanced to the Empress before she continued. “Indeed. My mother was human, and my father, is of Elven blood.”

“Life finds a way I suppose,” Ilea said. “You remind me of someone. With that hair, and your magic. Are you familiar with the Cursed?”

Syrithis opened her eyes wide. She continued in a whisper. “The Cerithil Hunters. Have you... met them?”

Lilith sighed. “This is not something all of my allies know. But I suppose if your highest level guard, advisor, and lover? Is a half elf, it doesn’t matter much. Yeah, I’ve met my fair share of Cerithil Hunters, and I tried to help them where I could. I’ve also met plenty of other Elves. Those were a little less... let’s say, friendly.”

“You... spoke of someone... with my liking,” Syrithis said.

It’s like she’s a different person. This turned out even better than I hoped for.

“He’s got white eyes and is quite a bit more powerful than you,” Ilea said.

“You...,” Syrithis spoke. *“She speaks of Isalthar. My father.”*

“Is he alive?” Alyris asked.

“It would take quite something to kill him,” Lilith said.

“Can you tell us his name?” the Empress said. “I, Alyris of Lys will personally owe you a favor if you do this for me.”

“Sure. His name is Isalthar. Some call him the Val Akuun,” Lilith said.

Syrithis took in a deep breath. Her body shook slightly. A hand from Alyris steadied her before Ruler appeared next to her face, giving her a hug.

“He’s your father, isn’t he?” Ilea asked. “Never thought him to take a human woman, but I suppose with that age, he’s been all over the world. I’ll have to tell Fey.”

“Uncle Feyrair?” Syrithis asked, wiping at her eyes.

Lilith looked down. “Oh no.”

“He is well I hope?” the half elf asked.

Ilea couldn’t look at her face. *This unlimited aging shit is freaking me out. Better not tell her about anything. What happens in the deep north stays in the deep north.*

She coughed slightly. “He is. Well, I mean.”

The group seemed to treat the Fae well. The little creature had confirmed them to be friendly and quite nice. Its presence here and now the revelation of the half elf gave her more than a little confidence in the future relations with Lys. Alyris still felt like one of many rulers to her. Somewhat deceptive, very charismatic, difficult to gauge, at least her true intentions. But her care for Syri was real, as was her protection of Ruler. She could only imagine the confusion caused by the name. *Lys won't stand in the way of Hallowfort, not with all these beings here, at the very core of their power. Let's find out if they'd be against an elven ally, the Cursed kind.*

She summoned her bone helmet, twirling it on the table until it faced the Empress and Syri. The symbol carved into its cheek showed the same rune the half elf wore on her silver ear piece. "Who are you, and why are you by the side of the Empress of Lys?"

The half elf bowed. "Syrithis... Nauum, as my father before me. I was trained, and taken care of, by him, after my mother had died. Yet after many years of battle, I asked to live a human life, to travel and find my own purpose, one not bound to the Hunters of Cerith. Their cause is just but even amongst them, I was an outsider," she spoke and raised her head. "I have found my place, by the side of Alyris. A human that would accept me as I am."

The Empress blushed a little, decidedly looking away.

Gods they're cute together. Ilea thought and summoned her key locator. It spun and pointed. *As I thought. No capital without a hoard of treasures.* "Sounds like a difficult childhood. Alyris, I do believe you mentioned a favor?"