

Chapter 560 Breakfast?

Dagon, Elise, Sulivhaan, Claire, Trian, and Ilea had settled in Claire's enchanted office.

Ilea enjoyed a mug of ale, looking at the masterful depiction of herself sitting on a wolf like head. Claire had no issues with her taking the painting off her hands, even offering more.

They just didn't have the time yet to go through them, the administrator prioritizing the end of the war and a potential new ally in the deep north to the distribution of Cless' paintings. Something Ilea didn't quite understand.

"A teleportation gate would grant that creature of yours direct access into Ravenhall," Sulivhaan said. "It cannot happen."

Ilea kept her gaze on the painting. *This one she could draw, but not the Fae. See, Icy? It really was worth it. Now I have something to remember you by.*

"A gate prototype is currently being built in a secluded and enchanted underground facility outside of the city, far enough away that a breach of our walls would be difficult," Claire said.

Ilea ignored the argument that followed which involved most of the council members.

A final vote apparently overruled Sulivhaan, even Dagon too curious to let his caution prevail.

"We will meet and talk to the council of Hallowfort should the prototypes lead to a working model. As will we evaluate this Meadow," Claire said. "I already drafted a few potential treaties, similar to our agreements with Riverwatch."

"What about Lys and Kroll? They won't accept the sudden appearance of monsters amidst our own," Trian said.

"The Empire won't interfere, not with the potential of a teleportation network," Dagon said.

"Lizardmen and dwarves are rarely seen in our cities but near the northern and western borders, they're neither unknown nor unwelcome," Elise said. "I don't see how these beings would be any different."

"They're vastly more powerful," Sulivhaan said.

"Not necessarily," Trian said. "Especially for Ravenhall. We have plenty of powerful people here."

"Any crimes they commit will be treated the same way as when a human commits them. That has always been the case here," Claire said.

Sulivhaan crossed his arms. "I suppose that's true. I do believe an early period with restricted travel would be wise. Should these experiments come to fruition at all. We're not the only ones who have tried to set up working long range teleportation."

"Of course. I'm sure this Catelyn thinks the same. As to the possibility, we'll have to see." Claire said.

A tube flopped into the receiving tank behind Claire, a red band around the parchment inside of the container.

She turned and grabbed the thing before reading the short message.

“It seems we have a visitor in town. One quite interested in cake,” she said, turning her head to Ilea.

“Where is she?” Ilea asked.

“Popi’s shop. She has asked to meet Lilith,” Claire said.

“I’ll go immediately,” Ilea said.

“We’re not done with the meeting,” Trian sighed.

“Claire gets my vote,” Ilea said and vanished, bypassing the anti space magic enchantments with a grin.

She would have to explain that one to Claire upon her return.

Not bad... but not close to what the Meadow can conjure up.

Ilea teleported a few times until she reached the shop.

Ten members of the Shadowguard had taken positions around the shop, both on rooftops and on the street.

Onlookers were curious but were told to move on.

Helena wore a cute green summer dress, her hair flowing freely. She wore no makeup just like the last time Ilea had met her, the woman currently laughing at something Popi explained, the large man sitting on a comically small chair opposite the woman.

Ilea casually passed the guards and joined them at the small table, taking a chair from a neighboring set. Most of the cafe was empty, the left behind plates with half eaten cake indicating the now vacant patrons hadn’t planned to do so.

“Ilea, my dearest, it is so good to see you,” Helena said and smiled warmly.

“Helena, can’t say I expected you here,” Ilea said and glanced at Popi. “I hope she wasn’t any trouble?”

“Oh? No no, you see, this nice woman is a baker too. Like me!” he exclaimed and laughed.

“I know, I’m aware of her profession,” Ilea said and glanced at the woman. “Is it alright if I talk to her for a while, I’m sure you two can swap out recipes afterwards.”

“Sure,” Popi said and leaned in closer. “She is a good baker,” he said it in a deep voice and looked into Ilea’s eyes, as if it was a warning. Or perhaps something to respect. He left, whistling to himself, entirely ignoring the tension of the whole situation.

Ilea did the same, crossing her arms in front of her as she looked at the people glaring at them. “You don’t suppose we can find a more... private place to talk?”

“But the pastries are just wonderful here,” Helena said.

“Then let’s take some with us, shall we?” Ilea asked.

“As you wish,” Helena said and stood up, brushing off her dress unnecessarily before she grabbed her plate with a half eaten piece of cake on it.

Ilea went into the store. “I’ll have a few plates with a bunch of everything.”

Melly glanced between Ilea and Helena, a strained expression on her face as she nodded. “Of course, ma’am.”

“There’s a terrace nearby where I usually eat breakfast. It’s quite lovely,” she said to the woman.

[Warrior – lvl 322]

“The mountain air is quite welcome. Though I do like the calm of my hometown,” Helena said, glancing at the people walking by.

Some were still glancing over.

“Hence the terrace,” Ilea said, receiving the platters before she made them vanish.

A few people gasped and whispered.

“Follow me,” she said and blinked, quickly reaching her usual spot.

There were no customers present, one of the privileges of owning half the city. One waiter glanced over and cursed to himself before he straightened his hair.

“Some privacy, please. Check back in a few hours,” Ilea said. “Thank you.”

The man nodded and left, his hand shaking lightly as he closed the door as quietly as he could.

Ilea still heard him as he cursed another time, walking down the stairs.

Helena winced.

“Don’t murder the guy for saying fuck,” Ilea said.

“You scoundrel,” Helena said with a frown, sitting down on one of the chairs.

Ilea summoned the platters onto the much larger table and took a seat too, calming herself as she looked at the mountains nearby, the snow not reaching quite as low as it usually did.

“I accepted your house rules,” she said. “This however, is not your house.”

“I concur. Yet I retain my right to complain,” Helena said.

Ilea smiled. “Of course. Now why don’t you tell me why you came here in the first place? Just to see the nice panorama?”

Helena looked around for a moment. “It is quite lovely, isn’t it?”

She straightened and switched her attention to the pastries instead. “Thank you for the selection, I shall not hold back. Now, in the company of a lady that comprehends the beauty of delicious baked art.”

Ilea helped herself too. She had expected a letter, or no communication at all until Claire took care of that. To see the woman here, in Ravenhall. It was a little disheartening.

“Well, to be honest,” Helena said, still piling things onto her plate. “I heard a lot about this bakery. Big Ass Pastries. Quite vulgar, if I may say so. I learned it’s part of the Lilith Empire when I looked into it, so by coming here, I could kill three birds, with one spell.”

“And those are?” Ilea asked.

“Well for one, tasting these. I talked to Popi already. Marvelous ideas. I had thought about convincing him to work for me instead but I suppose some healthy competition isn’t entirely useless. Especially in such a faraway corner of the world,” Helena said. “Now, my second reason to be here, is a small vacation. The cleanup from this war has been... messy. There is still a lot left to

do but I suppose sometimes it's acceptable to let those paid and trusted to do their work, do just that.

"My third reason is of course, you."

Ilea started eating, letting the woman continue.

"A truly outstanding display. I had expected a clash with the Destroyer, but to think you somehow befriended that old pirate. Quite an achievement. The same is true for your help in both cleaning up these horrendous rituals and preventing more from happening. I'm not sure how involved you still are but your efforts in Yinnahall have led to a rather stable local situation. The same is not true for many of the other cities," she explained.

"Go on," Ilea said, having gulped between bites.

Helena took a bite too, taking her time with savoring it before she swallowed. "There was a vote. The Golden Lily welcomes you as a member to our esteemed organization. Or perhaps the band of wolves and assassins that you prefer to see it as. You have the choice to join or to refuse a membership."

"I'll have someone get in touch with you," Ilea said.

"That is acceptable. I was surprised to hear both Michael and Velamyr speak in such high tones of you. They don't do so about one another," Helena said.

"You came here to give me a lot of praise," Ilea said. "What's in it for you?"

Helena smirked. "So suspicious. My dear, just because I'm the owner of the largest guild of assassins doesn't mean I can simply praise someone for a job well done. But I suppose you're right. I came to see you, after the stories I have heard about this place called Erendar. To speak to a four mark creature is both a terrifying prospect and a marvelous privilege. It's a shame it could not travel through the realms and join us in our humble endeavors."

Ilea looked up, her face stuffed with filled croissant. "Mhm, shame."

"I had expected you to advance, but to see you beyond my identification range. There must have been a lot of powerful creatures," she said.

"Thousands," Ilea said. "It was wonderful."

The woman laughed. "I can imagine," she said and sighed. "I know there are differences between your interpretation of the world and what members of our orders do, organizations we own and are part of. But I do hope you consider a cooperation. For the sake of all humankind."

"Is that a threat?" Ilea said, smiling to herself.

"My words are often interpreted as such. Take it as habit, I'm not threatening you. I have people and places I care about too, despite your worst assumptions. And I won't see them harmed for a childish dispute with an upcoming power like yourself. Your refusal will be met with disappointment and perhaps overeager ambition, but not from me. That, I promise to you right now," Helena said.

"I suppose then we're on the same page," Ilea said.

Helena smiled and continued eating. "I hope you don't mind if I stay here for a while?"

"I don't plan to leave either. Meetings and responsibilities. Eating pastries with a likely legendary assassin is much more interesting," Ilea said and summoned some ale.

“A legendary assassin isn’t exactly good at their job,” Helena murmured. “Isn’t it a little early to start drinking?”

“Says the woman who poisons her cake,” Ilea said.

“Don’t act like you didn’t enjoy that masterpiece,” Helena said, huffing slightly.

Ilea nodded slightly. “You’re not wrong.”

“So what’s new in the bakery and assassin businesses?” she asked.

Helena lightly dabbed her lips with a tissue, cleaning off the powdered sugar. “Murders are happening, politicians are bribed, cities are slowly taken over from within, wars are prevented. And that’s just the baking side of things. With your aversion to criminal activity, I shan’t go into details. It’s a messy business. Necessary but most certainly not pretty.”

“I can imagine. Maybe butcheries would have been more fitting?” Ilea asked.

“I shall forgive that remark based on your incredible personal power. Having affordable pastries, cake, and sweets is my way of balancing the scales, Ilea. I do believe that just like a murder, good sweets can change someone’s life. Perhaps not as permanently, I’ll admit,” she said and continued eating.

They continued in silence until Helena spoke again.

“There were rumors. About a new Healing order, one based in a certain mountain city,” she said.

“Dawntree?” Ilea asked. “Now that the city was taken over by rebels, I’d imagine the Corinth Order is replaced by something a little less... controversial.”

Helena smiled. “I shall await the official opening then. It’s long overdue for someone to enter that segment. With both the Corinth and Truth shaken, it’s a rather splendid time to do so.”

“Oh? I suppose you’re right. How is the Order of Truth faring, now that Baralia has fallen?” Ilea asked.

“One may even assume that a political mastermind has initiated such conflicts and wars... just for these benefits. But I digress. The Elders, I hear, have fought to the death. Only one managed to come to an agreement with the Empire,” Helena said.

“Lucky guy,” Ilea said.

“Well,” Helena said. “His body was found in the very thoroughly guarded cell just last week. Little was left to determine who the attacker could have been.”

“Horrible story,” Ilea said, eating a piece of cake.

“Very,” Helena said with a smile.

“I heard the capital fell. Do you know how it happened exactly? What about the High King?” Ilea asked.

“There were no further rituals, if that was the information you sought. Many died of course, on both sides but mostly soldiers. Once the high level squads breached the city in various points, the defenders splintered quickly, seeking terms with the Empire instead of dying for their High King. He himself remained in his palace, barricading himself inside with some of his most loyal followers,” Helena said.

"I see. I'd imagine quite a few officers and nobles died storming that place and taking him down," Ilea said.

"Fewer than you think. Lys engineered siege weapons are quite effective against city walls. Even more so against a ceremonial palace. The Generals do not think much of architectural history. A shame really," Helena explained.

Ilea couldn't help but snicker at the thought of siege weapons absolutely decimating the High King's palace, however it had looked. With magic, architecture in Elos didn't hold quite as much history and value as it did back on Earth. Still a substantial amount but she understood the commanding officers in this case.

"High King Baron of course survived the initial blasts but even his high regeneration and powerful blood magic couldn't stand against the combined efforts of the Imperial troops. I hear he had nearly reached level three hundred and fifty," she said and raised a glass of juice she had summoned from one storage item or the other. "You're more powerful than the High King of Baralia."

"I have no interest in being king," Ilea said.

"A shame really. Especially those who would refuse such titles, are all the more suitable to fulfill such roles," Helena said.

"What about you then? Why rule so much when you're obviously not thrilled to do so?" Ilea asked.

Helena's smile vanished. She seemed to consider for a moment before she looked up. "A promise. That is all I will tell. And know that I have told this to few."

"Not like I could use it against you," Ilea said.

"Every piece of information that you share can be used against you, in the hands of those creative and knowledgeable enough to see the power given to them. Yet I am aware of your disinterest in such matters. It's refreshing. It really is," Helena said, looking towards a nearby mountain with a distant look in her eyes.

Ilea stood up and stretched. "I was interesting. You'll hear from me or mine. Don't stab someone on your way out, I'll hunt you down."

Helena glanced at her and waved her off. "Let's not make a murder from a bit of stabbing. If I were a little younger, I'd have taken that as a challenge. Perhaps a warning, for your future dealings."

Ilea smiled. "Noted. A good day to you, Helena."

The woman raised her fork, a piece of lemon cake pierced through the steel grate. "And to you, Lilith."

Ilea vanished into the lower floor, finding the waiter from before. She informed him that his shift for the day was over and found little convincing necessary to leave a mark on him for protection.

It replaced the one she had left on Ember, the girl now safely residing within the Sentinel Headquarters.

She made her way back to Claire's office, whistling to herself. *Did she really come here just for that? Maybe becoming a member is a bigger deal than it feels to me.*

"... Lys is already increasing the pressure again. If anything, the war has increased their incessant arrogance," Sulivhaan said.

“Wonderful moment to join,” Ilea murmured and retook her seat next to the beautiful blue and white painting.

“Riverwatch is too far out of their territory. And with Lilith and the Shadows’ involvement, we can easily fend them off for some time. You don’t have to do so much personally anymore, Sulivhaan,” Claire said, trying to soothe the man.

He rubbed the top of his mask and sighed. “You’re right. You’re right.”

Ilea remained until the rest of the meeting concluded, various boring points about economic, law, and defense later. She was glad they all sounded boring to her, nothing immediately dangerous or highly important going on. Boring politics was usually a good sign.

“She came here?” Claire said after everyone else was gone.

“Indeed. I’m invited to join their cool kids club,” Ilea said.

“Want me to handle it?” Claire asked.

“I would have refused to join otherwise. Just keep me posted about what’s going on,” she said.

“Thank you.”

“I do what I can,” Claire said, looking quite smug.