

Helena straightened her dress before she stood up. The reputation of the Golden Goose didn't disappoint. It could hold its own with the best of Myrefield or Virilya. Mostly thanks to its Breed head chef, the nature of whom was not known to many. Fitting, she supposed, with all the monsters that were now walking the streets of Morhill and soon Ravenhall.

Another glance through the room revealed that most of the previous guests had already left, replaced by unimportant nobility, high ranking officers, and adventurers rich enough to think they could participate in the games of their betters. Hector's appearance hadn't been a surprise. What had surprised her was the fact that he couldn't, well, destroy anything.

Whenever that man took an interest in anything, it ended in something quite excessive. Usually in a violent manner. An event as widely advertised and well attended would not slip his attention, even with his blood fueled raids and expeditions. It had been no wonder that few knew his person. It was lizardmen and island dwellers that were really the main targets of his lunacy. In the past century that was. Perhaps the coastal human towns just lacked a challenge.

Helena gave the gray eyed young man a last look and left, thanking the waitress and waiters wishing her a favorable night. *Curse magic like nothing I have felt before.* She nearly shuddered. It had been beautiful. One of Lilith's team mates in the Hand, though this one seemed not merely elevated by her ridiculous power and wealth. And she had hardly heard of him before. Which meant his surge was recent. Another monster at the side of this dangerous piece.

Lilith was beyond her now. She had survived. All the trials and tribulations she had endured to reach power beyond what Helena had thought possible. And her momentum had not waned. The entirety of her collected allies were dragged with her. It irked her. To see these upstart and unimportant figures offer contracts and pledges suited for centuries old Emperors. And yet she couldn't deny their competence.

Ilea didn't organize this event, nor did she write any of the legislation now a part of the so called Meadow Accords. And least of all did she contribute anything but her own resilience to the creation of these teleportation gates. *An eye for people. Distributing resources where she deemed fit. That or Claire is even better at her job than I had anticipated.* She grinned, now out in the street, her guardians close by but far enough to be inconspicuous.

The rise of Lilith reminded her once more of her own ascent to power. Though through different means and a different scale. She was not delusional enough to deny her own feelings of envy. Worst of all the woman didn't care. She did what she loved and just happened to come into one of the most powerful positions in the Plains. *Well played, Ilea. And yet you wouldn't care nor even acknowledge my congratulations. My defeat, such as it is.*

She knew Hector well enough to know that his stupid, idiotic display, was his own. And yet Ilea had plucked him away like some child, throwing a tantrum. The same way she could have plucked away anybody else in that room. The Empress. King Eilhart. Or herself. At least others with incredible power had never been space magic users. Monsters in their own right but overwhelmed by numbers, caught in traps, or blackmailed with the help of their loved ones. Lilith was different.

Dale Langston had been present, enjoying dinner with his wife. Yet another insult thrown at the powers of the Plains, the presence of the low leveled and unimportant captain not dare or trap, but a

declaration of victory. She hadn't even been surprised when Wayland showed up, the revelation of his involvement just another piece to add to Lilith's overwhelming set. Underhanded methods and silent intrusion would be challenged too, and not by someone that lacked inexperience. Helena assumed the pirate's tantrum had been chosen as the perfect time to reveal himself to the present guests. *I am alive. I am protected. I am the one you shall face.*

She grit her teeth, walking through the streets of the once noble district of Morhill. Towards the location she had been given. Like some rabble. People came to her. Visited her town, to plead, to talk, to hope for scraps. She took a deep breath. She hadn't made any mistakes after all. Her businesses were firmly planted and already she had favorable contracts with these emerging powers. More potential came with the gates, for all her endeavors, and with the new business partners in the north. She just wished she could've put up more of a fight.

Is this how my enemies felt? The gray haired and wrinkled ancient men and women I killed and had killed? And now I am left with my domain, my baking. No longer a player but reduced to a mere piece on the board? A part of her didn't hate the idea. Retirement in a sense. To let this young alliance spearhead humanity into the next era. Her magic surged, windows cracking as she walked. Was her fire gone so much? What was left of the Helena she had been? The Helena that lay coated in the blood of those who had opposed her, injured and crawling, surviving. Always. To finish the job.

She did finish it. Ages past. So long she hardly even remembered all the details. And then she ruled. Her little part of the world, as she had always wished for.

Helena smiled when she reached the newly built hall, one of the many structures that held one of their precious teleportation gates. There were many questions, issues, and annoyances born from the actions of one woman. Her allies, and those she supplied with boundless resources. But one thing Helena could not deny. It had been forever, since she had felt the blood in her veins so clearly. Morhill was pulsing with life and soon the entire continent would be infected. Chaos, possibilities, uprisings, heroes and villains born and killed.

Perhaps she had bathed in her own self satisfied ego for too long. Now that it had cracked and injured, she felt once again alive.

Helena showed her invitation and stepped into the hall, joining none other than the rulers of the Plains and their nations. Mingling with creatures from the North, dwarven barbarians in their machines of war, survivors from a savage land. Lilith herself did not even deign to show up.

"Even you could not deny the allure," a familiar voice spoke.

"Heron," Helena said.

"So very cold. And here I thought this whole affair could rekindle the flames of your youth," the man whispered, laced with the same magic that kept his voice out of everyone else's ears.

You know me too well, old friend.

"Have you been given leave to mingle?" she asked with a calm voice, looking at the various gathered people. Quite an assortment. The main representatives of all the power humanity could present. She had made sure the Meadow Accords were not out to strike them down but the idea was entirely ludicrous. And still, worthy of investigation, if only due to the abnormally high potential impact.

“Oh? Perhaps I was wrong,” Heron retorted, the edges of his mouth moving up ever so slightly. “It is beginning,” he added. “I must return, to protect what I hold dear.”

Helena joined the group as well, the first set of people vanishing on the platform. She looked on with slight suspicion. *How easy would it be, to murder us all.* Her old friend had been right however. The allure was far too great. *Like mice, entranced by blocks of cheese. Beggars, lured with coin. And yet we fall just like them.* She stepped onto the platform with a group of others. *Now let us see, what all the fuss is about.*

Magic flared up, some of her mana used to power the complex set of enchantments placed into the metals and stone below her. A bright white light came and went, the hall replaced by a high reaching stone cavern, the familiar cool light of deep underground crystals illuminating some of the vicinity. Helena took a deep breath, her eyes closing for a moment as she appreciated the dense mana. She nearly armed herself out of sheer instinct.

They were most certainly not in the same place anymore. Where exactly and how far they had traveled, she did not know. Everyone else looked around with varied ability to shroud their amazement. She had displayed an adequate reaction, though her true excitement to see this place lay well hidden for only herself to see.

Catelyn took the lead. “Please follow. The gate is placed a few hundred meters away on purpose.”

Helena looked at the expanding cavern, pillars of stone reaching up to support the distant ceiling, an entire section at the back open to let in the crystal light. A flat stone road led towards the strange assortment of buildings, some few simple stone structures, a set of forges, and an entirely out of place slab of metal. A cube set into the ground at an angle, stairs leading up to a broad and open entrance. Beyond the buildings and among the pillars lay a field of black grass, golden light shimmering in floating bits, vanishing mere split seconds later.

She caught glimpses of a crystal tree behind the pillars, perhaps three meters in height. Few branches moved out from the central trunk. No leaves adorned it. She couldn't help but feel mesmerized by the glittering reflections, something about the tree making her blood pump. A strange sort of anticipation. *A sleeping beast. An ambush. The promise of blood.* She felt as if back in her early days, back when she killed monsters on the daily.

The procession stopped on a broad stone platform, inscribed with a variety of decorative swirls.

“*Welcome to my domain, rulers and guardians of mankind. I am the Endless Meadow,*” a voice resounded in her mind, followed by a gentle wave of magic. She felt chills go down her back, all her experience necessary to stay planted where she was. Some few failed that task. She did not fault them.

Helena schooled her expression, the grin plastered on her face a failure unlike anything she had done in decades.

“*I am eager, to meet and discuss with all of you,*” the Meadow spoke.

Helena heard laughter, turning her head to see Michael shake his head with a smile on his face. His hands shook before a chair and table appeared.

The imperial guard had gathered before Alyris, as had the other respective guardians before their rulers.

She took a step forward, tried to sense the creature. Now that the telepathic connection was present, she could almost grasp it. Her hand extended, as did her magic. She gasped, her hand shaking as she

perceived a glimpse of the being. Her eyes widened as she focused on her breathing. She could feel its attention. Its sight. Its eyes.

“Do not be afraid.” the voice spoke into her mind.

She was terrified. A primal fear she had not felt, perhaps ever before. Entirely frozen, she stood. Until the feeling waned, the attention of the being gone, the connection it had established cut. *For my benefit*, she realized. Like a god, whose presence had frightened a child. She was not angry, nor frustrated. It was a fact. Reality. She was grateful for its consideration, for she could breathe again.

Everything this new alliance had presented faded into obscurity. Even long range teleportation paled in comparison to the presence of this being. *The Meadow. And so casually had they spoken of it.* She gulped.

“I apologize,” the being said. *“You are... unusually perceptive.”*

She opened her mouth and closed it, raising her head to see. Once more she averted her eyes, shutting them like the child she was. *“Please. I need time.”*

The presence vanished.

“Food and drink has been prepared within the northern Sentinel outpost. Those who wish to meet a few more of our denizens and later move on to visit Hallowfort are welcome to join, whenever they are ready,” Catelyn said and started a casual walk towards the sideways cube.

Helena didn't fail to see the glance the fox gave her. *Concerned and caring. Not smug and triumphant.* That fact should've made her furious, but she found herself calm. These people were not beyond her. Those who stood with interest or walked without fear in the presence of a god were merely blind. She turned towards the cube and walked with unsteady steps. Had she ever felt so small? So insignificant? Their confidence and growth was no surprise, with the Meadow at their back.

She took a deep breath when she entered the cool hall of the supposed Sentinel outpost. Few of them were present, standing to the side whilst keeping an eye on the few that joined the fox.

Catelyn jumped onto a high chair and moved food with her tails onto a plate.

Helena did not feel like food. She just needed distance, and she knew that was exactly what the fox had offered. She spotted a familiar face sitting at the table, back slightly bent.

The man ate a filled pastry, closing his eyes as he savored the taste.

He's been here?

She sat down next to him, some of her composure back. Her hand shook slightly when she tried to reach for a glass, instead deciding to wait.

They were the only ones on that section of the long table, others sitting down, some silent and with wide eyes, others talking with enthusiasm.

“You have made the journey,” the old man said. He didn't look at her.

Lucas had once been a stable voice for the Shadow's Hand. A calm mind among them, neither inexperienced nor consumed by his own ambitions. A pleasure to negotiate with. She had wondered if he had still been alive.

“What have you seen?” he asked.

"I don't know," Helena answered truthfully. She could appreciate his maturity. There was no mockery in his voice, there was no mention of her obvious fear.

"I too have felt it. To my very bone. It will fade in time, though what you have seen, will not," he said.

Helena hugged her own chest. She didn't speak for a long while. Nor did she drink or eat. She simply sat. Helena didn't notice the gasps, nor did she look up.

"Are you okay?" a gentle voice asked. A woman.

Who would dare insult me in such a manner, Helena thought and turned her head. What she saw was a face of ethereal quality, the only discerning features two glowing purple eyes and a glowing line that suggested a mouth. The entirety of its head was made of magic itself, as was its floating body, crouched to meet the sitting human.

She turned away and grabbed the glass she had reached for earlier, downing the contents in a single gulp, whatever it had been. Now she saw the fox smiling her way, though more amused than anything else.

"Owl," Catelyn said. "One of the denizens of this domain. She was introduced to the others outside." The fox said and stood up to leave.

Helena turned again.

[Greater Lich – lvl ????]

"I didn't mean to scare you," the being said and retreated a little.

"What kind of... circus..." Helena murmured. She had the sudden urge to slap Ilea, damned be the consequences. *What in all of existence did you do in these past years? There are rules... limits... structures.*

She watched as the four mark monster refilled her glass with wine. "Thank you," Helena said and downed it again.

The Lich smiled and moved on to talk to someone else.

"Welcome to the North," Lucas said in a dry tone.

A single fox like creature looked up to a humanoid being of ash. Blue piercing eyes looked down, a grin on the woman's face. The night was well under way, and yet the streets of Morhill remained active, the recent festivities persisting with no sign of slowing down.

"That's such a cute pet!" a young woman exclaimed but quickly retreated at the stares of the two powerful beings.

"So this is it?" the fox asked a few seconds later.

“He moved it to Morhill for the festivities,” the human said.

“Popi... you say?” the fox spoke.

“Indeed,” said the woman.

She walked with the fox following, into the shop. A nod towards the group of women.

“I’m sorry everyone but we’re closing for an h... a few h... tonight,” one of them said with as gentle a smile as she could muster.

Complaints by the customers quickly died out when they saw the ash clad monster standing in their midst, horns and unmoving wings marking her as one of the renowned Medic Sentinels.

The doors shut with the last customer gone, three women waiting with tense expressions.

“She wants to meet the baker,” the Sentinel spoke and locked the door.

The fox looked at the women. They stared back.

“You’re really cute,” one of them said.

The fox growled, the sound deep and threatening.

A plate appeared before her, swaying on the floor until it stopped, the piece of decorated cake now right before her.

The growling stopped, drool forming on the fox’s mouth before it evaporated, flames now burning on its fur.

“Can I touch her?” one of the woman asked, now crouching next to the fox with a strange expression on her face.

“If you want to risk it,” the ashen woman said.

She did and the fox did not care. For it had entered heaven.

Lilith herself stood guard before the famed establishment. What transpired that night within the Morhill site of Big ass Pastries would not be seen nor known by anyone but the staff. Public image after all, had to be maintained.