

Chapter 720 The Halls of Eternity

Ilea only had to show her Shadow badge to get into the fancy restaurant Geronimo had chosen. She had no interest in his advances but the whole affair certainly felt nice on some level. If only because he didn't treat her like Lilith. Mostly. Eleonora on the other hand didn't care in the slightest. She shared a name with the Scout Ilea had met in Morhill but the illusionist was definitely more free spirited than her namesake sister in the Lys army.

"The young lightning elemental was more or less a bird," she continued the story, a fresh set of plates arriving with portions of delicious food. Not quite Keyla's level but the place certainly didn't have to hide.

"Ah, I would love love love to meet it," Eleonora said, a broad smile on her face.

One of the waiters glanced at the free flying birds but chose not to comment, likely because the group was with a prominent Shadow. They didn't know she was Lilith, or at least she assumed they didn't.

Some of the other guests seemed to have an issue with their presence but others thought the situation amusing more than anything.

Ilea expected someone to complain soon enough. And she was prepared to deal with it.

"I'm sure we can figure something out in the future. I don't know how well the being would like you though... it tried to kill me on our first meeting," Ilea explained.

Eleonora giggled and waved her off, a sparrow landing on her hand as she did so. "Let that be my concern," she said in a low voice and a devious smile.

Ilea raised her brows and continued her meal. *The bird whisperer. I understand.*

The other two women were growing a little bit anxious as time went on, the adrenaline from their fight gone and the reality of their situation settling in. They hardly talked and still picked at their first portions, mostly avoiding eye contact with Ilea.

And Veya was so promising near the gate, she thought with a slight smile. Ah well. Reputation and all. Couldn't be helped with my entrance. The message still remained in her mind. The same werewolf that tried to hunt us down back with Kyrian and Edwin. Did it somehow follow my scent through the air? Or was it a coincidence? She also considered the possibility of there being more than one Beastwolf of Krak Duun. It was definitely playing with its food. Fatal mistake that.

"There's gonna be an event in Morhill soon. Few weeks to a month I think," Ilea said. "Your group should come," she said and continued in a whisper. "A tournament is involved and the winnings are considerable."

"Which means we'd never win anything," Geronimo said. "Does sound interesting anyway," he said and leaned closer. "Can we get some kind of special guest access?"

Ilea smiled. "Sure, just mention that you know me."

He grinned. "Great. I suppose we'll travel south next then, if everyone is in favor."

The others gave their assent, the two women who had met her for the first time with some uncertainty.

“Well, I’ve eaten my fill. Got a few more stations to visit tonight but it was nice to meet you two again, and you as well,” Ilea said, looking at them each. She stood up and walked over to the main waiter, handing him a piece of gold. “Does that cover the meals?”

“Of course, lady shadow,” the man said with a light bow.

Ilea hesitated. “This is an inn too, right?” she asked.

“Indeed, one of the best in Virilya,” the man said, his voice sober.

“How much for those four in the fanciest rooms you have available? Services included,” she said.

“That would be another piece of gold for one night,” he answered and received the piece.

Ilea thanked the man and walked past the table where the group remained. “You can stay here tonight.”

Geronimo smiled and clapped once. “The stars align. Will you stay with me, Lilith?”

“No, I will not,” she answered with a smile and waved to the others as she left.

“The stars remain aligned,” the man whispered to himself as he sat down again and hid his face in his mug.

“Thank you!” Eleonora shouted while waving, a few of her birds flying through the establishment.

Ilea only saw the twitching eye of the waiter, his gaze moving to her before he sighed.

“*You’ll survive,*” she sent.

His eyes opened wide. “*May I ask who you are, Shadow?*” he asked to her surprise.

“*Some call me Lilith,*” she answered and left.

“*An honor. I wish you a productive stay, Lady Lilith,*” the waiter said and bowed despite her already being outside.

Used to working with high level beings. Guess I’m not the only one with telepathy to have visited Virilya. She stepped out into the large square, looking around until her gaze found the largest building in the vicinity. Walls of stone, battlements, high reaching towers ending in highly decorated peaks. A monument to the empire and its military might, the last defense of Virilya and the political core of Lys. She took it in for a minute, wondering if there’s a slot for letters or if she should just waltz in with her magic.

“The Halls of Eternity. Quite imposing, aren’t they?” a voice spoke, coming from her left.

Her perception failed to pick up the source, Ilea turning with a raised eyebrow. She found an older gentleman with well kept gray hair looking forward, the vitality in his black eyes suggesting his somewhat thin and aging form didn’t quite represent more than an outer shell.

[??]

Veteran told her he was a little above level three hundred, Ilea trusting her instincts to know that he wasn’t particularly dangerous. To her. Still he managed to sneak up without showing up in her

dominion or any of her other senses. Nor did he use teleportation to get here. She would've noticed the shifting space.

"I didn't know the name," she said and looked forward once more, to the broad stairwell leading up to a massive open gate in the outer wall. People wearing elaborate armor and dresses came and went, many of them flying or teleporting. Military personnel dressed in the empire gray and red made up the majority. The man next to her too wore a light gray robe, a complex cut with a lot of space to hide items or weapons. A single rune on his chest was colored red, the rest of the various embroideries done in silver. "A little pretentious," she added.

He chuckled, a grin tugging on his lips. "Bold, to insult the very center of our Empire while standing in front of it. I agree of course. Fortress of stone would've been a more apt name. May I introduce myself?"

"Go on. I expect you're aware of who I am," Ilea said. She wore a set of casual clothes by now, her black hair open and falling to her back.

"I have... an inkling suspicion," he said. "My name is Heron Krahen, myself part of the Immortal Guard. That is what the guard of the Emperor is called, or the Empress, as is the case in the current age. That name too could perhaps be brought to modernity but breaking down tradition is a difficult and long process, a battle often not wise to fight in the first place."

"That is a curious name," Ilea said. "I'm Lilith. And I'm interested to know how you're hiding against Identify."

"Leave this old man the few secrets he yet retains," he said and paused. "I had hoped for it to be you. Few of your power walk these lands, and fewer yet retain their humanity. Is there a purpose that has brought you to the Halls of Eternity?"

"I'm here to deliver a letter to the Empress," Ilea replied.

"In person?" he asked.

She glanced his way. "That's the idea, yes."

He looked at her for a few seconds and blinked his eyes before he laughed. A hearty sound, both hands on his stomach as he leaned back slightly. He calmed down a few seconds later, the smile remaining on his face. "I've heard much about you. It seems to hold true. A fortunate thing that is, both for my confidence in my informants, and this night."

"I'm glad you're having fun," Ilea said, mirroring his smile.

"A ridiculous request. Let me help to grant it. Follow me, if you will," Heron said and started towards the massive fortress.

He vanished a moment later, and so did Ilea, latching on to his teleportation spell. *Shadow magic. Fitting I suppose.* She appeared in darkness. A hall. Enchanted to prevent her from seeing out with her dominion. According to her marks she was now below the fortress, at least fifty meters deep.

"An ability granted by space magic? Or did you have another way to find me?" the man's voice resounded a few meters ahead.

Ilea couldn't see him. At all. "You're really good at hiding," she said, a thin mist of ash spreading out around her, white flame erupting to bring light to the vicinity. The radiance reflected off his eyes.

“The flame of creation. You are more than extraordinary. Most would fail to understand the significance. I too can only grasp at the very edge of understanding. Who was it that granted you this power?” Heron asked as he walked to the left, his steps not producing any sound.

“You’re asking a lot of questions,” Ilea said.

“And I hear you tend to answer, uncaring of the ancient ways of human mages. I always disliked the secrecy that surrounds our skills and Classes. I’m afraid I can’t share mine with you either. It might endanger the life of our Empress,” he said.

“Of course it does. I’ve met a lot of beings in my travels. Some have helped me train in a variety of magics,” Ilea said, all her senses focused on the puzzle that was the mage in front of her. *An illusion maybe? Something like what Eve could do? But if that’s the case, his original isn’t in this hall.*

She didn’t want to send ash through him to test if he was physically present but her dominion couldn’t perceive him, neither in a physical sense nor in a magical one. *He did use a teleportation spell before.*

“Do you intend to bring harm to the Empress? In a direct or indirect manner,” he asked, stopping in his tracks.

“No,” Ilea answered. “I’m here to deliver a letter.”

He looked at her for a few seconds before he smiled again. “I see. In that case please follow me.”

The man vanished yet again and Ilea followed, both of them appearing in yet another hall, this one smaller but lit by cool magical light. Everything was made of white marble, banners hanging from the walls, white stone statues lining a red carpet that led to a black gate made of steel. A scene of humans fighting a griffin was set into the metal. Ilea saw another set of gates behind them. They were a little above ground level now.

“Imposing decoration,” she commented, looking at the various statues in turn, each a master’s work on its own.

“Like most old seats of power. I would imagine you would prefer to build something a little more welcoming for yourself,” Heron said as he turned to look at her.

“I don’t want a seat of power in the first place,” Ilea said.

He chuckled. “And yet you have at least one already. Though I hear the Sentinel headquarters is not exactly made to be a palace.”

“Do I have to address the Empress in some special manner?” Ilea asked before they reached the black gates.

“Do you want to?” Heron asked with a smile.

“I don’t want to cause an incident. And I’m willing to compromise a little to prevent more work for my allies,” she said.

“I understand. You’re refreshingly honest. A rarity in these halls... of eternity. I shall return the favor. This is the first time someone meets the Empress on such a short notice. I believe the usual expectations can be ignored in turn,” he said as the gates opened and stepped inside.

Ilea followed, up the stairs and into the long hall. Marble was the material of choice in here as well, pillars lining the entire length, reaching from ground to curved ceiling. Murals above depicted a

variety of grand battles, not all between humans alone. Closed doors on the walls led out, hundreds of enchantments visible in her dominion. The red carpet led all the way to the stairs at the end of the hall, a single throne of moderate size sitting on the raised platform. It looked neither small nor imposing, though delicately carved. On it sat a woman about as tall as Ilea, blonde hair weaved into a complicated braid, silver eyes taking in the two walking figures as soon as they had entered the hall. She wore a deep blue dress embroidered with silver designs. The Empress looked comfortable in her throne, interest in her eyes as she glanced between Heron and the visitor.

Standing spread out on the three broad stair steps were four people, their gear in the same design as the robes worn by Heron.

Ilea raised her brows as she looked them over. The first was slender, wearing delicate light metal armor with a white and silver mask covering her face. She had no visible weapons on her. The second was not a human at all, instead a lizardman wearing a set of heavy armor, his claws exposed as he stood with crossed arms and an intense glare from under his large forward curved helmet that covered the entirety of his long neck.

She wasn't sure if he was smiling or frowning. Nor was she sure of his gender but the large build suggested male.

The third one wore robes and held a white wooden staff with intertwining roots at the top, air moving around the bit in an ethereal manner. Her hood was down, revealing long chestnut hair and eyes of the same color, a smile on her face as she looked at Ilea.

Last was a massive two meter thirty man in gray pants and a large shirt. He wore a simple imperial helmet but the blue eyes below were focused, staring at the visitor with an intense look. He opened and closed his gloved fists, muscles tense.

Heron stopped about five meters in front of the stairs, Ilea doing the same next to him.

[Wind Healer – lvl 370]

The masked individual tensed up, likely identifying Ilea at the same time as she identified her.

She can see the three marks, Ilea thought with a light smile.

[Claw Berserker – lvl 330]

The lizardman didn't react visibly, his eyes still focused on hers. Ilea could tell that he was eager to test himself against her. That much she could gauge after having fought so many creatures. They clicked on a deep level. She gave him a light nod, her smile broadening.

[Storm Mage – lvl 314]

The robed guard wielding her staff, the weapon itself giving off a powerful magical glow in Ilea's perception. The woman seemed intrigued but neither tense nor concerned.

[Bone Bruiser – lvl 405]

And you can see my three marks too, Ilea thought, looking at the massive man in clothes that seemed put on him in a failed attempt of concealment. Or perhaps a conscious threat. She assumed the former, his demeanor suggesting he didn't exactly like the formal aspects of court.

And finally, the Empress herself.

[Empress – lvl 312]

Ilea raised her brows again. *The lowest leveled one here. Even Heron should be higher*, she thought, watching the man step a little closer to the stairs but remaining between the other guards and Ilea.

“I have the honor to introduce Lady Lilith of Ravenhall. Ilea Spears of the Shadow’s Hand, founder of the Medic Sentinel Corps and Council member of Ravenhall,” Heron spoke.

The robed woman spoke next. “Welcome to the Hall of Eternity. You are in the presence of Empress Alyris of Lys.”

No titles or anything.

“I have suggested to forego formalities due to the... unprecedented state of this situation,” Heron added.

The large man to the right sat down on the stairs, rubbing his knees as he murmured something to himself in a language Ilea didn’t understand.

“I appreciate it, Heron. As to our guest, I assume you agree to such a process? How should we address your person?” Alyris spoke, her voice warm and clear. She glanced to the large man before she looked back to Ilea.

“Ilea is fine, that or Lilith. What should I call you?” Ilea replied.

“Alyris is more than sufficient,” the Empress replied, eliciting raised brows from the robed woman. “I understand that you are here to deliver a letter, though I would invite you to dinner if you are inclined to join us. I’ve heard much about you and it’s truly a shame that we never had the opportunity of meeting.”

Ilea thought the woman genuinely interested. She had a casual feel about her, though her authority wasn’t in question, not with Ilea’s presence here or with the high level guards standing before her. *Something to do with her Class? Or just natural charisma?* The woman reminded her of Maro and Elana in some ways, different in others. One thing she could tell was that Alyris was a silver mage, a powerful one at that. She wouldn’t be surprised to see her fight off higher leveled individuals. Against herself, she assumed the challenge to be more than manageable.

“Who wouldn’t make time for the Empress of Lys?” she asked.

The lizardman puffed, the robed woman smiled.

“I know you’re not interested in this court, Ilea,” Alyris said and stood up. She straightened her dress and smiled. “But I’m sure we’ll find something intriguing to talk about. Over dinner. Let us relocate.”

The large man appeared by her side. He didn’t use a teleportation spell.

Ilea looked at him and smiled.

“If anyone is interested in a spar, you may ask our guest after we have eaten,” Alyris said before she started towards one of the closed doors.

The rest followed, Heron staying behind Ilea.

“You didn’t tell her that I came from dinner?” Ilea whispered to the man.

“If I’m sure about one piece of information about you, then it is your insatiable appetite,” Heron answered. “And the placating effect food has on you. The main weakness of the monster named Lilith.”

She puffed. “You’re not supposed to spell it out.”

The man smiled. “I told you. We’ve chosen to omit formalities.”