

Chapter 811 The negotiations were short

Ilea mostly stayed in the background during the talks, Aki keeping her informed about the happenings through telepathy, many of the discussions going over her head due to a lack of context or knowledge on the various laws that governed Nipha.

Most of the talking happened between the present nobility of the Empire, the initial pretense of a united front quickly faltering under the growing pressure. Some were likely ready to crack even before they saw the massive machine army. Seeing the Guardians and the various representatives including Ilea sped up the entire process of the negotiations.

The later presentation of evidence found within the storage items of Elizabeth Pierce and Kerthin Farey pushed them even further. The two hadn't intended to protect anyone beyond their deaths.

Emperor Fallant sat leisurely in his silver throne at the center of his nobles, one hand propping up his head as he looked towards the Accord representatives with eyes continuously more glazed over. Thin gray hair grew to his shoulders, the silver crown on his head elaborately designed, often moved as if he didn't exactly enjoy wearing it. His light metal armor was enchanted to the brim, as were the necklace and rings he wore.

Ilea sat into an ashen chair after half an hour, relaxing as she opened herself a bottle of ale. She smiled, watching the growing tension between the Nipha nobles, accusations and evidence being thrown around as the talks proceeded.

Emperor Fallant looked at her, glancing at her ale before he sighed. The man closed his eyes and reopened them, magic surging from his form. "Enough!" he called out, startling the nobility near and behind him, many of them apparently confused by the sudden outburst.

"Our armies are no match for the machines and peoples of the Accords. I tire of this charade," he said and stood up, turning around to address his nobles. Some flinched back at his glare. "This is an embarrassment. Vultures in my own court, picking at scraps in the face of war, betraying each other to our perceived enemy." He shook his head, much like a disappointed father. A ruler who had given up, or perhaps one who finally chose to take responsibility for his inaction.

"These attacks are despicable. If we cannot face our enemy on the field of battle, we are no more than an order of assassins. We will accept the machines and any agents of the Accords within our lands, to conduct a thorough investigation," he said and grinned, glaring at the Executioner present in the tent before he took a few steps towards it. "Times are changing. I will not have our people leave for Lys or the Accords to seek a better life. I will not have our knights die to a foe we are too proud to negotiate with. Our scouts know that Lys is preparing an army to face us as well. You there, Lilith, tell them they are welcome to join these talks. Tell them they may send their agents into our lands."

"As you wish," Ilea sent before she checked with the Accords representatives. None had an issue with it. She informed Felicia and received the answer to get her in half an hour. "*They'll be here in half an hour.*"

The Emperor smiled. "*I failed to keep the corruption out of my court. Perhaps you will be more successful.*"

Ilea smiled. "*Not me. The Accords. I'm just who they send to fight whatever is threatening us.*"

“We are willing to pay reasonable reparations for the damage and death sown by those organizing within our borders, ignored or tolerated, perhaps even supported by high nobility of Nipha. Contracts with your machines will be formed, in all sectors that are possible,” he spoke, quite a few of the nobles only now reacting. Some gasped, others grit their teeth.

He’s deciding to make enemies within his own court, Ilea thought, looking at the slight grin on his face. And he looks ten times more alive for it all.

“Let’s get this over with. Speak your demands,” the Emperor said and approached the table between them.

Ilea continued drinking her ale, later getting Felicia and about two hundred Lys soldiers and nobles to the makeshift camp at the Nipha borders.

Emperor Fallant was all too happy to accommodate both the Accords and Lys.

There was a break about an hour in, several people sitting together to draft the first sets of contracts.

Ilea left for a breather, taking a sip of ale as she looked at the moons above, shining within a sea of stars. It was a clear night, the climate warm across most of the central Plains. She watched the remaining machine army, constantly rotating to fuel itself with mana from whatever underground facility Aki moved them to. She flew to a nearby hill for a better view, sitting down on the grass as she felt a soft breeze flow past.

“Absolutely terrifying,” a familiar voice said.

Felicia landed next to her, the formal gray vest and pants she wore replaced by leather armor before she let herself fall onto the grass.

“I’m a stunning figure, what can I say?” Ilea said absentmindedly.

“All of it automated. I had nightmares about these machines, constantly looking for the right dungeon that would lead to our father’s prison. And now they’re here, in the open, controlled by a friend of the healer I nearly beheaded,” Felicia said.

Ilea smiled, remembering their first meeting. “You were a little different then.”

Felicia smiled. “A broken thing.”

Ilea moved closer and hugged the woman.

“Dealing with the horrors my House has put us through. With the vengeance of my brother. The people I murdered. You were a reprieve. A reminder of what life could be like. And now here we are,” she spoke.

“Here we are,” Ilea said, kissing her cheek.

“Your machines will have to work overtime to prevent a large scale civil war in Nipha, or at least localized fights between the noble Houses. Emperor Fallant has lost control of his court and now he shifts all of the responsibility onto both the Accords and Lys. I’ll be honest, our resources are spread thin as is, with the territory of Baralia and all the technology your factions has brought to the world,” Felicia said.

“You worry too much,” Ilea said, patting her head. “Look at it,” she said, the two watching the flying Destroyers, the thousands of Guardians. “We’ve discussed a potential war with the Elven domains, I think we can handle Nipha.”

“I just hope to prevent further bloodshed,” Felicia said.

“You did cheer me on when I deactivated all those traps. With quite a bit of bloodshed,” Ilea said.

Felicia turned red and pushed her away, not quite in earnest. “You got heavier again.”

“Scandalous accusations,” Ilea said. “Besides, more density is a good thing. All my friends say so.”

The Redleaf noble raised her brows and rolled once on the grass. She plucked a flower and twirled it between her fingers. “The opinion of Fae and ancient Trees do not concern me. You should listen to your human friends. How long until you crush me?”

Ilea rolled and stopped above her, feeling her hands sink into the soft earth. She grinned. “Then maybe you should work on your resilience. But remember, I’m a healer,” she said and moved down to kiss her.

Felicia giggled. “You’re ridiculous. Our factions are negotiating for peace and we’re out here... doing this.”

“Nobody is here. Other than the tens of thousands of machines,” Ilea said and looked up, considering. “Or the tens of thousands of knights, warriors, and mages from Nipha.”

Felicia tried to push her off but failed. She used her wind magic instead, with the same result.

Ilea smiled and rolled away.

“You’re too strong,” Felicia said, crossing her arms in front of her.

“You weren’t so bothered by that a few days ago,” she said.

Felicia tapped Ilea’s nose. “I do enjoy your power, when it suits me.” She grinned, going in for another kiss.

“We’re negotiating for peace, Felicia. Please,” Ilea said before the woman kissed her again to shut her up.

The wind mage laid back down on the grass and smiled. “I do like peace.”

“As long as there are monsters to fight, and magic to be trained. Bouts are fun too,” Ilea said, holding herself up on one elbow.

“They can be fun, yes,” Felicia said, touching Ilea’s neck. “And I’m sure there will always be monsters somewhere. Are you going back to Kohr soon? Or will you finally explore another continent in this realm?”

“I think I’ll stick with Kohr for now,” Ilea said. “Less chance of anything dangerous following me from another realm. I’ve nearly fucked up with the Caverns of Rot, and I don’t want to imagine what would’ve happened to Hallowfort if we hadn’t destroyed that corrupted Sand Elemental.”

“A reasonable concern,” Felicia said, summoning a glass of wine into her hand.

“Drinking during a diplomatic mission? Perhaps I should inform the Empress of your irresponsible behavior,” Ilea spoke, before drinking from her ale.

“Feel free to write up a report. My... *friendship* with you has made me more influential in the past months than I ever hoped for,” Felicia said.

Ilea lied down, looking up at the moons. A few clouds had moved in to slightly obscure one of them. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. A part of me is hurt that your importance in the world is impacting the political standing of House Redleaf, but I knew that I would have to be pragmatic when I chose to take over what little my father had left behind. In the end, it doesn’t matter why others listen to my opinion, as long as the change I wish for is enacted,” Felicia spoke.

“It doesn’t sound easy,” Ilea said.

“Nobody claimed it would be. It’s why I wanted to leave it all behind.”

“You still could, you know.”

Felicia glanced at her, yellow eyes reflecting the moonlight. She smirked. “Virilya is a pit of snakes. And you know, I do sometimes still enjoy beheading others. But it’s so much more satisfying if they see everything around them crumble, their cruelty and greed turning to pain and regret. And I’ll be there, unbeknownst to them, picking up the broken pieces and adding them to my own little haven,” she spoke, her index finger tracing the rim of her now empty glass.

“Just don’t turn into one of them,” Ilea said, tapping the woman’s forehead.

“How could I? After everything? Nobody will suffer like we did, not if I can help it,” Felicia said.

They remained silent for a while.

“How are they?” Ilea asked.

Felicia looked at her before she sat up, hugging her knees. “Edwin is adventuring somewhere in the west, last I heard. He’s... a little better. Aliana is positively annoying. Chipper and in love. She hardly walks anymore, skipping everywhere and whistling happy tunes while she butchers her meat.”

“Does she still eat people?” Ilea asked, remembering the stares the woman had given her initially.

“I don’t know if she ever did, though I wouldn’t be surprised. We did kill quite a few humans in our time,” Felicia said.

“Well, most of the Elves I know would think her reasonable, for not wasting the meat,” Ilea said.

“She would feel right at home,” Felicia said.

“What about Maria?” Ilea asked.

The woman was silent for a while before she sighed. “She... sometimes still works for me, but most of the time I don’t know where she is, or what she does. Killings happen, people go missing. I sometimes ask myself how many of them are her. She’s... angry. I don’t know if she’ll ever find peace.”

Ilea took in a deep breath.

“I asked her once, back when we were hunting for father. When they would stop. When it would be over,” Felicia said and shook her head. “When all of them are dead, is what she said.”

“She might be killed at some point,” Ilea said.

"I know that," Felicia said. "She has lost herself to vengeance. Too long did she rot in that dungeon. I hope one day, she will stop, find peace. In life, or in death."

Ilea didn't reply. She hadn't known Maria for near as long as Felicia had. She just hoped her decision to let her go back in Baralia hadn't led to the death of innocents. A part of her knew that wouldn't be the case, but at the same time she couldn't deny the part that wished for those abusing their power to be hunted down. She herself would not choose such a path, though already she had gotten involved in morally questionable situations. She remembered the corpses in the estate belonging to Elizabeth, the people chained and used. Ilea didn't regret what she did. What they had done. But she was glad the Accords were around now, possibly enforcing systematic change through laws and the subsequent enforcement, instead of vigilante justice.

"That's why I enjoy fighting monsters," Ilea murmured.

Felicia smiled. "I know." She moved over and hugged her again.

"We should go back soon," Ilea said.

"A few more minutes. Once this meeting is over, I'll be busy again for weeks, if not months," Felicia said.

"So is the fate of the head of House Redleaf," Ilea spoke, using her space manipulation to pluck a few flowers out of the grass, hovering them in the air before she tried to intertwine them.

"Yes. And I love it," Felicia said. "And you probably won't be as busy after this demonstration of power. Lilith is just one piece of the Accords, not its entirety. I think everyone who hadn't known realized as much in the past week."

"Let's hope so. I don't exactly feel like dealing with another underground group of slavers and kidnapers," Ilea said.

"Yes, let others deal with them," Felicia said. "We will have to show off as well, if we want to stay respected."

"Hard to make a point in the face of Aki's machines," Ilea said.

"We don't have to prove ourselves to the Accords, but to our people," Felicia said. "Most of them wouldn't know the difference between your magical prowess and mine."

"Way to be a noble, calling the plebs stupid," Ilea said.

"Less experienced, high level, and perhaps less educated. Those are facts, not arrogance," Felicia said. "And I do try to rectify those disparities, as do you."

Ilea let go of the woman and stood up, stretching as she looked at the stars one last time. "Speaking of which. The magic academy I mentioned. With Aki as is, and the gates, we'll have plenty of teachers for all kinds of classes."

"The one in Ravenhall," Felicia said.

"Yeah. I still think Edwin could be a good fit. He's just enough of a dick to push potential students," she said. "Those sane enough not to join the Sentinels that is."

"I remember a time when joining the Shadow's Hand was the craziest thing an adventurer could feasibly do," Felicia said as they started towards the stone building a few hundred meters away,

clusters of soldiers and machines standing on each side, the former equipped with torches, the latter only visible due to their shining green eyes and the occasional floodlight from a passing Destroyer.

“You sound like an old woman,” Ilea said.

“Time isn’t a good measure for how fast things are moving,” Felicia said.

“An old philosopher,” Ilea said.

Felicia smiled and raised a finger to her lips, shushing her.

Ilea for once, shut the fuck up.

The remainder of the talks was cluttered with formalities, contractual details, responsibilities, and a long discussion on how much reparations have to be paid to whom.

Ilea healed her mind, trying not to snap at the entire present nobility for the fact that they were haggling over gold when hundreds had died, tens of thousands left to hunker down in their homes, fearing for their lives because a bunch of power hungry nobles decided to play their game. She knew the whole process would protect tens of thousand more, and would prevent something like this from happening again. Plus she knew neither the Accords nor Lys would slack in their investigations. People would pay for the decisions they had made, judged by Nipha or someone else.

And she wouldn’t have to be involved.

The most enjoyable part of the discussion came when Emperor Travir Fallant of Nipha asked Aki for a protective detail through Ilea’s telepathy, knowing he would be swarmed by assassins and nobles with nothing to lose as soon as he returned to his capital.

She left the decision to Aki and the Accords, getting a summary of the various deals and finding nothing majorly wrong with them. Politics remained politics however. But it was either this or a rule of power by Aki and the Accords.

She thought they could do better.

Ilea distracted herself by tracking her huntress marks in the last half hour of the talks, the skill lagging behind, being the lowest leveled one in the whole bunch. *Kohr Kohr Kohr, how long will those disgusting void monsters still provide suitable growth? How many of them are even there? How big is the realm or planet anyway?*

She shuddered, thinking of possible alternatives where she could find challenges. The large eye of the Leviathan came to mind, as did Audur, and the Monarch of the Sky domain. Though she had to admit the elf didn’t exactly compare to the previous two monsters. *Let’s hope he remains in his domain until I can swat him away like a fly.*

Ilea smiled, playing with a bit of ash as she waited. Nobody bothered her, nobody asked if she wanted to leave, and she remained informed about the proceedings, thanks to Aki’s uncanny ability to summarize complex economic agreements.

She stood up and cracked her shoulders when everyone prepared to pack up. Looking up at the stone ceiling, she knew she was ready for a hunt.