

Chapter 736 Definitely not a cult gathering

Willa joined the throng of people with a mug in her hand, the cold tea balanced as she rushed down the stairs of the headquarters. She smiled at the Sentinels around her. Many she had never talked to or even seen before. Entire teams she couldn't identify, small marks on their stonehammer and bone armor identifying them as Hunters.

Above level two hundred, and they passed the exams. She couldn't help but stare. They were the elite of their organization. It didn't help that many chose to wear their helmets, ash armor, or face obscuring hoods, even down here in their home base. The faces she did see were as diverse as the people she saw on a daily basis. Some were smiling, poking each other with jokes and gestures, others entirely silent, perpetual frowns on their faces and death in their eyes.

Dozens of excited talks made it difficult to focus on anything in particular, people constantly greeting others with joy in their eyes, hugging or punching each other. Some had been out on jobs for months, only coming back to get new assignments.

The past few weeks had been quite hectic, their regular training interrupted for some construction work and monster extermination down near Morhill. Rumors had been going around that Hunters weren't getting new jobs, instead asked to stay here for an event that would soon take place. The rumors soon became a well known fact when the headquarters filled up more and more, new rooms created to accommodate some of the Sentinels. Many chose to stay in various Ravenhall inns instead. Willa even heard that some were living out in the wilderness, preferring the quiet nights to the bustling city.

She wondered what that felt like. To be powerful enough to sleep in the forests, to survive the chill, to fight off the monsters and continue sleeping. Soon she would reach that point as well, having finally unlocked her classes. One even as a first among all the Sentinels. All her early resistance training had payed off, just as she had hoped.

Ash Huntress proved to be quite different from the usual medic classes, the nuance in its manipulation spells giving her both more things to figure out and fine tune, but more options as well. Coupled with her Ashen Medic Class that she chose for her second one, she would surely overtake even Lilith in power. A few years at most, she speculated. Maybe longer, because she worked in a team. A restriction that Lilith herself didn't have, and the only reason she was as strong as she was.

Willa heard a hush go through the crowd, many of the conversations stopping as the crowd parted to let through a large man covered in ash.

His silent form moved past with confident steps, some of the present Sentinels giving him respectful nods.

She head whispers of the name Gael. Her eyes opened wide at the mention. *The first Veteran. Level three hundred.*

There were a lot of rumors going around about various members. The joke to introduce oneself as Lilith to new members was getting old, which meant people started to instead introduce themselves as various high level members, some even going as far as using Trian's name, which admittedly didn't make much sense. And still, the tradition stuck. People started to spin stories about their

exploits, which led to conversations and inquiries amongst the students. They had songs about Lilith, but how powerful was Gael? How strong were Vienna or Chana? Plenty of members had shot past the two hundreds and many were out for months at a time, only back to eat and sleep for single nights, some only for a quick visit to the Headmaster's office. The brave ones asked questions but it was difficult to say if the high level members answered truthfully. And so it became a bit of a game. Legends were born, stories attributed to people that had happened or not.

Much of it was proven wrong, mostly just dismissed by the members themselves when asked about it. Gael however, had songs about himself. Songs that had even reached the inns of Ravenhall. His monster exterminations near the former Baralia were well known by now. They told of the Ashen Butcher. He refuted few of the stories.

She could hear the stairs groan under his weight, his eyes sharp as he watched everyone. *Like some monster in an unknown environment.* She gulped. Some rumors had said the man was insane. He was one of few who refused a team entirely. Willa didn't think any of that was true. He looked intimidating, but so did others. The man had chosen to become a Sentinel. The hair on her neck stood up when he walked past her. She smelled blood. *Maybe he's just not very sociable.*

The crowd reformed behind the man, chatter resuming now that the novelty of his presence had passed. They soon streamed into the main training hall where dozens of Sentinels were already waiting.

A few groups were standing around people engaged in battle, others showing off various magical skills and abilities. Some were using the opportunity to gain new resistances or more levels in certain rare types that few Sentinels wielded. People shared stories and songs. A few tables had been set up with food and drink being shared, card games and instruments adding to the atmosphere.

To Willa it looked a lot like the inn she had visited so many times back home. With a few choice differences. Everyone here looked similar for one. Ash armor for those at a higher level who could sustain it indefinitely, stonehammer and bone armor for those that came from recent jobs. The rest was dressed in the leather armor sets or clothing provided by the Sentinels. Very few members had clothing of a higher quality when they joined, nor would they have wanted to wear it. It was an honor after all, to be part of the Medic Sentinels.

Another thing Willa missed compared to the Rotten Inn was an often present tension. Something that had just lain in the air. A feeling she had learned to discern. Frustrated adventurers who had been injured or pushed back in the Caverns of Rot. People looking for a fight. Drunkards at the end of their wits, the dungeon more dangerous than merchants or guilds in Utach had advertised.

People were outright fighting here, some beating each other to bloody pulps, others watching, offering advice or healing. But there was no real tension, no conflict. They had all gone through the same, had trained to reach similar goals, had learned from the same teachers.

Lastly, Willa felt an awareness here that she had only started to notice a few weeks prior. Something downright instinctual that came with a lot of combat and training. The way people stood, sat, the way they moved. She could tell they were experienced. Fighters each and every one of them, in tune with their bodies and their magic, some more dangerous than others. *And I am one of them,* she thought with a grin, spotting her little group standing with a few armed Sentinels.

Phoebe was talking to a Hunter, asking questions about a beast they had encountered.

"Hey all," she greeted, both her team and the other four, all but one not particularly interested in the conversation. Their armor had some visible dents and scratches, none of them wearing their

helmets. “Back from a job?” she asked a woman that looked a few years older than her, near white hair with three scars across her neck.

[Battle Healer – lvl ??]

She had learned in the inn that it was generally not the best idea to strike up a conversation with someone you couldn't identify. For more than a few reasons. Within the headquarters however, that hardly ever applied. Best case, they'd take the time for a bout, and people were encouraged to do so. Both by the headmasters and Lilith herself, the latter always open to train people when she was around. Worst case, they would neither be interested in a conversation nor training.

“Yes. We came back late last night. Six weeks in the forests near Stormbreach,” the woman explained. “Morhill looked different. Does this have something to do with the tournament?”

Willa grinned. She knew something they didn't. A glance to her team showed a scared Ember, disinterested Mila, and entirely focused Phoebe. *Hah, can't stop me now.* She moved closer to the woman and sat down on the bench next to her. “We helped build some of it. It's not just a tournament, but a demonstration too.”

The woman turned her head with one eyebrow raised.

Of course Willa and her team hadn't just helped set up arenas and stands. They had done their own scouting. The newly added buildings covered in enchantments were especially interesting. Mila had offered quite an interesting theory. “Long range teleportation,” she whispered.

The two remaining disinterested members now perked up too, one turning her way, green piercing eyes taking in her form. She could feel magic move over her but couldn't place it.

“Well... it's a theory. But it makes sense, with how the new buildings are positioned. The enchantments are set up to contain what is within but nothing suggests they're a prison or supposed to hold monsters,” she explained rapidly. “Well there are enchantments to keep people out too but that just makes sense.”

“And you came to the conclusion that someone figured out long range teleportation?” the woman said.

Phoebe and their last member had stopped their talk as well, the former glaring daggers at Willa.

Willa stuck out her tongue. *It's fine. They're all Sentinels.*

“You never know with Ilea,” the woman who had talked to Phoebe said. Her set of armor had three deep elongated dents across her torso.

“She's been busy too,” the green eyed man said. “Heard she's not been here often in the last few months.”

The white haired woman smiled. “Well, we'll learn about it soon enough. Not much of a point in speculation.”

“I'd just like to go back to work,” their last member said, his voice a near whisper. “Trian is wasting our time.”

“Our reputation is as important as our capabilities,” their supposed leader said. She crossed her arms and looked around the hall. “They have a good reason for keeping everyone here.”

A hush went through the Sentinels in that moment. Dozens of them tensed up, with auras coming to life in twice as many. Conversations and music died out as the attention shifted towards the entrance.

Willa stood up to see but she quickly realized that wasn't exactly necessary.

It had taken mere seconds for the entire hall to be silent, the only sound now a clinking of metal against stone. Silver legs moved over the well used battle grounds, a familiar form walking past the waiting Sentinels. Green eyes flickered in an angular insect like head towering over the human healers. Two elongated arms clinked with blade like fingers, the machine turning its head to the side before it spoke in a familiar voice. "Is this how you welcome your favorite teacher?"

Willa couldn't help but grin, some of the Sentinels going as far as cheering. Talks erupted all over as many rushed to the machine's side, asking rapid questions or challenging it to a bout.

The quiet man in the nearby group appeared on the bench. Willa hadn't seen him leave.

"Pursuer of Akelion. Three mark but the magic feels far beyond five hundred," he remarked in the same whisper like tone.

Willa didn't miss the slight excitement she heard.

Pursuer. That's fucking awesome. "I want to fight him," she whispered.

The white haired woman laughed.

"You're not the only one," their leader spoke, another hush going through the vicinity when Gael stood up from where he had sat meditating. Everyone made space, tables vanishing and previous circles disrupted.

"I'm afraid it will have to wait for after the announcement," Aki said, addressing the large ash covered man. "But you'll have quite a few very interesting beings to train with. If they are willing."

A slew of people appeared in that moment. One of them was Trian, the man wearing his usual outfit. Next to him were Kyrian and Lilith, nearby the other faculty.

Willa watched in amazement as Gael bowed to the woman with one hand to his heart, vanishing to join the ranks of the waiting Sentinels.

"Wow, I can downright taste the need for battle," Ilea said as she looked around. She was clad in her ash armor, her face revealed to everyone.

Kyrian chuckled.

Trian clapped his hands together. "Can someone close the entrance?"

Lilith raised her hand and the gates shut with a crash.

Yes. Exactly that, Willa thought with a wide grin. She glanced at Phoebe who gulped. Her team leader at least smiled a little bit, but she always feared for the worst. A trait that had probably saved their lives a few times already. Not more often than their healing.

"I'll make this quick. I know many of you are eager to go back out and I apologize for the delays and lack of communication. As many of you know, both me and Lilith are part of the Ravenhall council and thus entitled to vote on major decisions regarding the city and its allies. The tournament and planned events in Morhill involve not only our own city but various factions throughout Elos," the Headmaster spoke.

Throughout Elos?

“We will be around to answer questions afterwards so please hold on to them for now. Lilith, in one of her adventures, managed to save and bring back a being from another realm. The Meadow, a high level four mark creature capable of various advanced magics. Iana and Christopher worked together with Lilith to find a way to replicate the Taleen teleportation gate technology. Involving the Meadow made the technology a reality far faster than we expected.”

“I knew it,” Willa whispered to herself.

“*Oh did you now?*” a voice spoke into her mind.

Her eyes whipped around until she found Lilith glancing her way. She gulped, unable to formulate a response.

“I’m sure you understand the implications of long range teleportation. An alliance was formed with various settlements throughout both the Plains and the North, involving awakened beings of species most of you have likely not encountered before. Hallowfort and the Pit are the current northern allies. The Medic Sentinel Corps too has entered the Meadow Accords. You’ll receive detailed documentation on what that entails. Should any of you not agree to such terms, you are free to discuss with us and in the worst case exit the Medic Sentinels. However based on what I know of each and every one of you, I don’t see much of an issue,” Trian said and paused for a moment.

“We offered to provide security and healing in the festivities around Morhill. The city will become a teleportation hub for both adventurers and travelers. You too will benefit from those installations. Travel times to many parts of the world will be shortened. Current frontiers will be reached in mere seconds. Any participation is paid and of course not mandatory. Should you be interested to join the tournament itself, we merely ask the higher leveled members to reconsider. It wouldn’t be the best look if all the winners are Medic Sentinels. A few might be good however. We have some time until the festivities start, which means an internal set of discussions and bouts could be held here to determine who wishes to take part,” he explained.

Willa glanced at her team. They could participate. *We’re too low to be guards at such a prestigious event. But against others of our level... we will absolutely dominate!*

“Teleportation gates,” the other team leader murmured. “Still think it’s a waste of time?”

The man didn’t reply.

“We will guard this event,” the woman added. “In favor?”

The three others instantly made the same gesture.

“Good. I will talk to Trian in an hour. Clean up and get your repairs done. Briefing in two hours, Harpy’s Inn,” the woman said, two of her allies vanishing instantly.

The white haired one remained, both hands behind her head as she leaned back.

“You should clean up too,” the leader said.

“Gael is eyeing the machine. I want to see,” she said with a smile.

“I want to see too,” Willa said, hands on her thighs as she tried to follow the woman’s gaze.

Ilea watched the Sentinels that approached, Trian handing out copies of the Meadow Accords and answering questions to the best of his abilities.

Gael had stood up and glared towards Aki.

“Might want to go show off a little. Reestablish your dominance,” Ilea said to the machine.

“What do you mean re establish?” Aki asked, one of his eyes sparking. He moved over to face the single Sentinel as movement returned to the hall.

Many of the higher leveled ones had already left, some still discussing various options in their teams. There were nearly two hundred of them now, about a fourth above two hundred. With them all being healers, Ilea didn't exactly know how to gauge the gathered power. She gently brushed her hand against Trian's shoulder, smiling to herself as she watched the heated conversations. The clash of steel against ash resounded in the same moment, cheers resounding as Gael rammed his large head against the high level Pursuer.

That's going to be one chaotic as fuck tournament, she thought when a group of ten battle healers approached.

“Lady Lilith, we e... while you're here... maybe you c... could help with some pain tolerance training?” one of them asked, urged on by the others. None were above level one hundred.

“Sure,” Ilea said with a smile. *“I'll be in the city for a while. Trian, do you need me here still?”*

“Expected you to take part in the bouts,” he said.

“We can half participate. Just need a corner of the hall for them to lie down in horrific pain,” she said and gave him a thumbs up.

Some of the Sentinels gulped.

“Don't worry. That's the good part with my healing. No permanent damage,” she said and tapped her temple.

“I'm not so sure about that,” Kyrian said in a dry tone. He deflected a chunk of stone that had flown towards their group, Gael's roar reverberating through the hall right before his legs were ripped off.