

Chapter 801 Shades

Fania came out into the open, her mana strained as she kept all her spells active. She took in a deep breath. Crawling through the small enchanted tunnel had been more than a little annoying. She could feel dirt everywhere. *Escaping like a roach.*

She focused on her surroundings, the tall trees and nearby bushes providing cover, the moons painting the landscape of Nipha in a pale light. Staying in the hideout would've been a death sentence. The people that had searched the tunnels in the end weren't quite as clueless as the army Lilith had summoned upon her arrival. It all happened so fast. Yet it made sense, of course it did. The Accords were the ones who gave the Plains teleportation gates, they would have a few other tricks up their sleeves.

Fania kept moving. She knew the landscape, had both memorized a few maps and traveled past to find potential ambush and hiding spots. Officially, they didn't exist, though the hideout was certainly known to quite a few nobles and officers in Nipha. An operation like that couldn't have been possible without enormous backing, though the Accords themselves had made it possible. Near free to use teleportation gates, incredible trade benefits to everyone involved, access to experts all over the Plains and more importantly, beyond.

Fania by no means considered herself average at what she did, but even at her level she could feel the impact of the gates. Accomplished assassins, spies, thieves, and black market traders could now travel through entire countries unseen. Someone killed in Virilya one day, a deal made in Dawntree on the same evening. It was a scramble, who would remain on top. And the Heavenly Sweets had been somewhat conservative in their adaptation, perhaps afraid of the Accords if they abused all their systems too much.

Kerthin had called them weak, but Fania could see the reasoning now. It was possible they just had more information on Lilith and the Accords. What seemed like an incredible opportunity could've just been a way to lure out people like them. Thorns in the eyes of the Accords. Slavers that could not bide their time, did not choose to set up safe operations and instead rushed into things. She had expected them to be found out by informants rather than the teleportation gates. They had to be thrice as concerned about spies just as the Accords and everyone else.

Maybe I should fuck off to the north and train somewhere. Plenty of dungeons around there.

The situation in the Plains was brewing up to something. The old guard split between those supporting and benefiting from the Accords and those that resisted the change, fearing both the gates and now machines. She knew plenty of racist and specist individuals too but most of them hated the poor, low leveled, other gendered, or even certain types of mages just as much. It was nothing new. With Dark Ones, dwarves, and peasants coming to their cities, things couldn't be ignored quite as easily.

She smiled to herself, not making a noise as she floated through the forest. Fania checked behind herself constantly, the black winged shadow etched into her mind even more now. *They died. And I survived.* It reminded her of why she did it all. The rush. As if she defied the very gods. Stealing food at first, to prevent herself from starving. Killing her first man, to steal his gold for armor. Assassinating diplomats and infiltrating cities. Yes. Leaving now was not an option. Not while she remained connected.

Fania was on the losing side, she was quite sure of that. But she wanted to see it all unfold. How those in power fell, were killed, or how they grit their teeth, accepting deals they hated themselves for, rationalizing their own behavior for the primal need of survival.

It was all quite beautiful.

Even now she didn't know if she wanted to find any Nipha troops. Easily they could be made scapegoats for the true patrons of this operation. She at least had her personal power. Killers and spies could always be of use, even now that they were more easily available. Kerthin was the one who had to consider her position. *If she escaped at all.*

She picked up speed about an hour out of the hideout, for now avoiding any torchlight or flying squads, all of them showing the blue and silver of Nipha. Far more pronounced than she would expect of their military on any given day. Of course she understood the implication. If the Accords were caught operating in foreign territory, it meant conflict. Nipha would have to pressure as much as they could, especially knowing they had tolerated this trade hub in the midst of their lands.

Cooperation with former Baralia nobles and merchants wouldn't be well received from Lys, though the Empress could perhaps be pushed in their direction if it was clear the Accords freely invade other nations, without consequences.

All games. If the Accords were led by conquerors, the Plains would just be a stepping stone. She had seen Lilith. The Sentinels alone were already a fearsome force. But even knowing that, Fania wouldn't have been convinced until she saw the Executioners. Not just knowing they were three marks, but seeing them move and use their magic. A few of them could overwhelm a small town, or they could devastate a larger one. *Disposable machines even.*

But they weren't conquerors. Not how the High King had chosen to conquer. With blood and death. Instead they influenced through trade. Rulers would remain, countries still their own, but the people will be employed by the Accords, the enchanted armor and weapons will be supplied by the Accords, the teleportation networks will be controlled by the Accords. Everyone would become so dependent on their technology and machines, entire cities would simply crumble if their support was removed. And if single powerful rulers remained, oppressing their people, Fania didn't doubt for a moment that Lys or the Accords themselves would choose to intervene. As saviors of course, and not conquerors. In the end the people would be given opportunities and wealth after all.

And now the only sizable operation we know of to fight back against any of it was half taken out in the span of an hour.

The problem weren't the traders that had been taken. They would share their knowledge, but what could the Accords really do against forbidden goods being traded by independent people. Anyone would deny responsibility. Political and economic pressure would in time lead to that trade being pushed to another location, not an issue with teleportation gates. No, what would cause the most damage was the loss of their enchanters and scholars. Most of them people that did not care how their work was used, simply pushing to understand and advance magical technology. By any means.

The secrets they knew and the time it took to find and fund them was not something they could replicate. Not anytime soon. With the Taleen machines, the pressure to adapt had increased ten fold, but now the nobles of this world were truly in a bind. *And desperate people, will look to desperate measures. Betrayal, defeat, murder.* And Fania would be there to witness it.

Now I'm distracting myself from the fact that I fucking lost it when I saw Lilith. She sighed. *At least your paranoia and fear had you survive in the end.* She had felt like a girl looking at the form of a

god. Even though she knew Lilith was just a human. An incredibly powerful one, but one that could be manipulated, hidden from, perhaps even one that could be killed. Not by her. Not in a thousand years. But there would be ways. Surely.

She checked her surroundings again, waiting for half an hour before she finally checked the hidden stash between a set of rocks, previously discussed with the team. Kerthin was arrogant, for understandable reasons. And still she planned for most eventualities, the complete removal or destruction of their base of operations being one of them.

Fania looked through the notebook and found the measures. Traveling without gates and without pursuit to the town of Navetihin, with the symbol of a northern mountain eagle. The notes were written in code, and even if one knew it, the conditions were generalized enough for a correlation to become difficult. Not necessarily to prevent anyone from finding their location, but for them to be able to deny a connection.

She put the notebook back in case anybody else involved had survived or managed to flee, though she certainly doubted the possibility of the latter. The information in it was only applicable for one day after anything had happened. *And I know Wayne and Kerom didn't make it. May you rest in peace, Kerom.*

The journey to Navetihin would take a few hours with her flight speed, but Fania stayed low and in the forests to avoid both Nipha troops and potential hunters of the Accords. Lilith herself could be following her after all, she was known to act on emotion or random whims, which made predicting her moves rather difficult. Nor did she care much for potential diplomatic impacts. She had the entire Accords to fix things in her wake after all, and realistically, even if she destroyed the entirety of Nipha, they could probably retain their treaties with every other nation in the Plains. More would scheme in the dark but that wouldn't bear any fruits in a long time.

That desperate was their situation.

She pondered the possibilities and her emotional response as she made her way to her destination, finally flying out of the trees and onto the cleared out rocky terrain before Navetihin.

The city itself wasn't particularly large, but built against a set of small mountains providing a natural barrier towards the north and west. The walls were thick, with dozens of guards visible atop. Large stone gates remained open, a paved road leading out towards the south, several large gray structures visible where the teleportation gates were kept.

Fania saw people come and go, the machine Guardians of the Accords not present in the lands of Nipha, though there were guards inside the gate structures. She knew most of the various groups, knew who she could pay off and who not to cross. The Shadowguard was interesting. A collection of adventurers, rejects, former military, former slaves, and people that didn't quite bring enough to the table to be independent or part of a more powerful organization. Information from Ravenhall was somewhat scarce and difficult to come by, the higher ups rather loyal and well paid enough not to be easily persuaded.

Blackmail and extortion were rather direct and often not worth the risk. Guards were generally bored and Fania found it rather easy to get a general idea of the people involved. She assumed it had to do with the fact that she was genuinely interested in them. At first. Depending on their background, they could easily be persuaded to exchange services. Some more, some less. Gates to study were rather easy to come by, especially with the wide deployment the Accords provided. Their guard personnel wasn't quite as well structured, though mostly because they were understaffed.

Shadows were surprisingly difficult to convince, their order more loyal to Ravenhall than most would assume, especially knowing they were mercenaries. Those open to sell information were well known in the organization itself, meaning they wouldn't receive critical information anyway.

The Sentinel were an absolute no go. They were loyal to Lilith and the Accords, to a downright fanatical degree. Perhaps the organization Fania was most concerned about in regards to the coming years and decades. More so even than the Taleen machines.

Anyone else, she found, was fair game. Just as easily paid or coerced as anybody else. Dark Ones in Hallowfort, granted they had to be in another location due to the existence of the Meadow, and most importantly the dwarves from the Pit.

Fania assumed there was a possibility that the Accords would force Guardian guards now that they were both available and someone managed to create gates themselves. It was merely a possibility.

She checked the guards from a distance and made for the gates. Nobody would notice her, but she made sure to keep some of her spells active. The blurry form of an Assassin would perhaps unsettle a Ravenhall guard but Navetihin was a little different.

Ravenhall had its Shadows, Navetihin had its Fading.

Fania paid a fee and entered the city. Instantly she noted the putrid smell, a smile coming to her face. *Nothing like home.* She hadn't visited in years. For good reason.

The buildings were made of stone, old and high reaching. Clothes lines created a mesh above as people talked and shouted. Everyone she saw walked with quick and confident steps, their faces hidden behind masks, helmets, or scarves.

She noted the shades, magical presences barely noticeable in her perception moving past on the house tops. The next generation in training. Fania felt a tinge of nostalgia and quite a bit of pain as she made for the western part of town. Not her chosen destination but she could handle it.

Now for that mansion. High flying eagles, and yet they're all hiding behind their nobility. Ironic. Pierce, was it?

"It's an incursion into the territory of a foreign nation," Omdir spoke.

Ilea tapped the large round table with one finger. She had returned Wayland and the others, the Meadow, Aki, and a few others sorting through all the evidence they had found within the Soul Forge.

"The destinations were unknown. Nobody has anything to stand on, not without acknowledging that they were part of this operation," Sulivhaan spoke.

"An operation, I wish to remind you, that managed to create lesser variants of our gate technology," Catelyn said.

“Yeah, how’s that possible? I thought they couldn’t be copied? People certainly tried to get the Taleen ones... for ages,” Helwart spoke.

“The security measures have not been breached. The concept of teleportation gates is not quite as complex as you wish to believe. Your incompetence doesn’t mean impossibility,” the Meadow spoke.

“So far we know they tracked material purchases and transports, anyone involved with gate deployment, their connections, and possible ways to gain information on the technology itself,” Aki spoke through one of his Executioners. “They managed to study several gates from the time of their deployment. Cities involved will surely deny cooperation.”

“Do we have any evidence?” Sulivhaan asked.

“Some,” Aki spoke. “But there were enough gates in frontier locations that could easily be examined. Few guards would’ve been present.”

“Still doesn’t explain how they could manufacture a prototype this quickly,” Helwart said.

“After examining a variety of memories, I believe it possible that much of the required information was given to a set of previously thought unconnected individuals that have consulted me on a variety of topics, including enchanting and space magic. Limited information was also shared by Iana and Christopher, all within trusted circles of the Accords. Should all this truly be a connected operation, it still presumes the existence of one or several highly adept enchanters with at least some base understanding of space magic theory,” the Meadow spoke.

“There are two factions at this table that could supply such individuals,” Catelyn said. “And one of them has not been a part of the Accords for long enough to warrant an investigation.”

All eyes went to the Taleen and Helwart.

The war machine wearing dwarf laughed. “Hmm...” he grunted. “Combine the devious organization of humans and the will to improve enchantments... yea. I’ll investigate. And I welcome the Accords to do so on their own terms. No restrictions.”

Ilea noted the dwarves around him that reacted with tension, focusing on every slight change before she memorized the people. She told the Meadow, the tree confirming her observations with its own.

“You don’t seem at all regretful,” Omdir spoke. “A piece of important technology was stolen. For thousands of years we were the only ones wielding long range teleportation, and now in the span of less than a year, two additional factions wield it.”

Already talking like the Taleen have been part of this alliance for centuries. Plus you’re wrong. The Ascended had long range teleportation... probably long before you even thought up the concept.

Helwart answered with another laugh. “Cause you kept all your secrets to yerself, old man. Why you were stuck in that city for thousands of years. Just saying. If anything I’m proud of whoever managed to crack all this and build a semi decent piece of teleportation gates. I’ll have em work on my own war machine.”

“They provided tech to slavers,” Ilea said.

“I’m sorry, lass, but it’s not them. It’s you. Well, us. Technically. The Accords brought the teleportation gates to the Plains. And compared to the Taleen,” he said and glanced meaningfully to Omdir. “You lads didn’t shy away from sharing things. To the prosperity of all. Including slavers,” he spoke.

“While your argument holds merit, the accusations remain. The people involved have direct responsibility. If they weren’t forced or misled, which they could claim either way. The testing involved in the creation of their variant alone is reason for execution,” Catelyn said.

“And how did we test our gates exactly?” Sulivhaan asked.

“With me,” Ilea said.

“They didn’t have pain resistant and space aware healers at hand. Sacrifices were used instead,” the Meadow supplied. *“Blood and death magic rituals remain a powerful tool, albeit more akin to a war hammer in this case than the required needle.”*

Sulivhaan remained quiet.

“With all the nations that have taken part in this, how do we react?” Alistair asked.