

Cless smiled, sitting on her high chair just behind the entrance to her atelier. The counter nearly hid her entirely.

She clapped her hands together when more people entered. They looked at Rock and Charles standing in the hall but came in regardless. A woman with a blue dress and lots of jewelry approached the smaller of the two men.

“Excuse me... this is the Cless Michaelson gallery?” she asked.

“It says that on the sign,” Cless said from behind the counter. She sat down and crossed her arms. People were frustrating. She had learned in her classes with the Shadowguard and Sentinels that people were able to read but maybe the ones wearing jewelry were different?

She had drawn the sign herself.

A giggle resounded in her mind.

“Not now, Violence. We have visitors,” Cless said and walked out from the counter. “All of my works are displayed. If you’re interested in buying one, there will be an auction in two days, before the grand ball.”

“In... deed,” the woman said, glancing between Cless and the Shadow. “I suppose we can have a look.”

The man who followed her rolled his eyes, giving Cless a stare.

Rude. She stared back until he stopped.

The gallery was set up as a roundabout, the entrance to the right and exit to the left of the entrance hall. She was quite proud of the progression in her art, the oldest ones coming first and her most recent pieces at the very end. She had called it *The Journey of Ash*, though there were quite a few pieces that didn’t have anything to do with Lilith.

She had never thought a gallery would be possible, especially with Claire putting her works away. But it was something she had wanted to do since seeing her first gallery in Ravenhall. Everything had suddenly happened after she had told her friend about it. The little Fae knew a lot! And it even got the paintings from Claire!

The Golden Goose was inside one of the older buildings in Morhill, located on the slope that led up to the main governmental buildings and mansions of once influential families before the demon incursion. It had been decorated with various banners and entire bushes of flowers, all in a deep red.

A carpet was laid out far into the square with a dozen guards standing at the ready. High level ones too, Dale noted.

It was one of the few four story buildings he had seen in the city, not that its towering presence was necessary to get a good view of the town and valley beyond. Its location was enough for that. No obstructing structures were in front of its large windows but he supposed the display of wealth was entirely on purpose.

Not only Shadowguards were present. He spotted a few Sentinels as well, and more individual guards armored or dressed in black, their Shadow badges displayed for people to see.

“This seems very exclusive,” Abby said in a hushed whisper.

“It does,” Dale said. He didn’t feel particularly comfortable but Abby seemed more than a little excited. Ilea had mentioned the best cook in the south after all.

Nobody stood in the queue but as they approached, a group of well dressed people landed, being led inside after a short talk with the waiter.

“Are we dressed appropriately?” he whispered to Abby, looking down on himself. Dale preferred his armor to formal clothing.

“We might stand out a little, but that’s fine,” Abby said. “We’re here for the food and atmosphere after all,” she winked at him and pulled him forward. His worries washed away with the gestures.

“Abby and Dale Langston, from Riverwatch,” she said to the waiter dressed in black.

Even he has a nicer set of clothes, Dale thought.

“Indeed, descriptions and levels match. A table on the fourth floor has been reserved,” he said and bowed lightly. Some of the guards looked at them now, previously uninterested.

The waiter rang a bell and a woman appeared next to him, dressed in a similar manner. He pointed at a line in his book of reservations.

“Welcome to the Golden Goose. Please follow me,” the woman said and curtsied.

Dale noticed the sound from outside vanishing as soon as they entered the hall. Instead he heard occasional laughter, the clinking of glasses and cutlery. A faint smell of roses remained in the entrance hall.

“I was told to inform you of a few things,” the woman said.

“Go ahead, darling,” Abby said.

The young woman continued without being fazed. “First, you have been invited by Lilith herself. Everything and everything you order or receive is free of charge. You will be dining on the fourth floor. We wish merely to inform you that *very* prestigious guests are present. Please refrain from starting any unnecessary fights or large scale battles. Such displays of magic would disrupt our ability to provide the experience you came here for.”

“Of... course,” Dale said.

“Does that happen often?” Abby asked.

“Not normally. However with guests present from various nations and factions, the head cook and owner deemed the notice necessary,” the waitress explained.

“I understand,” Dale said before they were lead up the stairwell and finally out onto the wood floor.

Oil lamps bathed the wood beams and walls in warm light, giving the restaurant a welcoming atmosphere.

Dale tried not to stare at the various present guests but he could feel the magic in the room. When they were sat down next to a broad window, he started breathing again.

“Are you okay?” Abby asked, touching his hand lightly.

He nodded and focused on the sights. Hundreds of lights were visible from the high elevation, the walled town sprawling before them, arenas and stands spreading out beyond. Dark mountains towered behind, the evening sky clear. Dale leaned forward. “She wasn’t joking with the prestigious guest bit.”

He didn’t know any of them but they were certainly eccentric. Most everyone he could identify was beyond his range. *I could even identify the Shadows outside.* The atmosphere however didn’t feel oppressive or tense. Nor were there a lot of conversations. People were focused on their food it seemed.

A waiter appeared a few meters from their table and walked the last few steps. “Welcome to the Golden Goose. Are there any preferences to consider or are you open and capable to try everything?”

“I don’t think there’s anything we wouldn’t try,” Abby said with a smile.

“Wonderful. Then we start with an appetizer. Glazed wyvern tail in a sauce of honey and herbs,” he vanished and reappeared with another waiter, the two putting down the plates before they came again and filled their glasses with wine.

Dale glanced at Abby. He understood why there was no tension in the room as soon as he started eating.

Eight courses later, Dale leaned back and sighed. He couldn’t do anything else but stare forward. *When was the last time we talked so little during dinner?*

Abby opened and closer her mouth a few times. She was about to talk again when the waiters reappeared and set down a plate with various sweets.

“Courtesy of Big ass Pastries,” the man said with a straight face as the other one refilled their glasses. Both vanished a moment later.

“Oh I’ve heard about that one... it’s a store in Ravenhall,” Abby murmured, though she was already looking at the various creations. Spheres of white, black, brown, berries cut into triangular shapes, fruits neither of them had ever seen.

“So this is the prestigious. Golden. Goose,” a deep voice resounded from near the stairwell.

“Sir, please follow me to your table,” the same waitress that had brought them up said to the man.

Dale looked over, as did some of the guests.

The man spread his arms and started laughing. He wore a dark leather coat, his chest near covered in belts. A red feather sat on his enormous leather hat, blue eyes taking everything in. Black rolling hair fell down his back, a twirled mustache below his nose, a thick beard going to his chest.

[Water mage – lvl ??]

“What happened to you all? Did the great Lilith cut off everyone’s balls?” the man asked in a challenging tone. He looked around before his eyes fell on a woman in a light blue dress. She didn’t look his way, instead focused on her food. He curtsied nonetheless. “Empress. How quaint. And her dogs are here too.”

He took a few steps and stopped before a table of two. A black haired man with gray eyes looked up from his plate. The short haired woman sitting opposite him had a worried expression on her face. She avoided looking at the tall man.

“And who... are you?” the water mage said.

“I could ask you the same. Please leave us alone,” the sitting man answered.

Dale glanced at Abby. He was ready to jump up and shield her. More people had interrupted their meals by now.

“Sir, please follow me to your table,” the waitress said but was ignored entirely.

“My name has gotten lost it seems,” the leather clad man spoke. “I’m the Destroyer. Scourge of the sea,” he said and looked up. “Uneducated rabble. Helena, why don’t you tell them who I am? You, Cecila? Or any of the Generals?”

Nobody spoke.

“Nobody cares about your shit tales, old man,” a woman said. She wore a blue dress, her eyes the same color, long black hair falling down her pale skin. “Sit down and enjoy the food like everyone else.”

“Stay out of this, little Dragonkiller,” the man spoke. He didn’t look at her.

She growled.

Power flooded the hall in an instant, magic emanating from the Destroyer himself.

Dale grit his teeth. He stood up and shielded Abby.

“Sir. I will have to ask you to l-” the waitress said when he whipped his hand at her, water flowing around her head.

Three Shadows appeared at the same time, aided by four Sentinels.

“We would appreciate it, if you stopped this,” one of the Shadows said. “And leave this place.”

Loud laughter echoed through the hall. “Why don’t you make me, Shadow boy. I haven’t had a good fight in what feels like years.” He grinned as more water formed around his arms.

The guards and Shadows were tense but hadn’t yet attacked.

Dale watched as a masked woman appeared next to the waitress. She held up a hand as visible air flowed around the water, all of it removed in mere moments. “Nobody is interested, Destroyer,” the woman said. “Now leave.”

“Yeah, fuck off!” the same woman from before said, lightning now sparking around her form as dark blue steel grew on her body. She jumped up and crouched, a grin on her face just before it was covered.

Her dining partner stood up too. She cleaned her face and summoned two black axes, her entire form erupting in flame a moment later.

Dale felt a heavy weight land on his shoulder. Looking up he saw a Lizardman clad in armor.

“If this starts, you get her out,” the being said. “Do not engage.” His form started to radiate a red mist.

Dale nodded. When he looked back, there were more people. An armored man wielding a scythe, another two teams of Sentinels, one of them quite a bit larger than the others, crouched with ash claws extending from his fingers.

A dozen more of the guests had stood up, various powerful magic emanating from them. Some few remained seated, glancing at each other instead. They seemed calm. Entirely unfazed.

“I will tear this whole place down with all of you in it,” the Destroyer spoke.

Dale felt a sudden surge of strange magic, both himself and the lizardman next to him wobbling slightly as they adjusted to the strange pressure. Everyone turned to face the origin, some of the previously seated people now standing and clad in armor.

“My name is Kyrian. You asked. And you will leave this place, Destroyer,” he stood now, covered in savage black metal armor, spikes and edges moving as he raised his arms.

“Now that... is the opponent I want,” the Destroyer spoke.

“I won’t fight you. I merely ask you to leave,” Kyrian said.

A dull thud resounded from the ceiling, the walls shaking ever so slightly. Some of the people looked up.

“Well I wont lea-” the Destroyer said when he vanished.

Dale turned when a distant impact resounded. He looked out the window to see Kyrian blocking a beam of water before it struck a nearby house. The metal mage appeared inside again and sighed, sitting down opposite the short haired woman. Another impact resounded, this one farther away.

Most of the people had sat down again, resuming their dinner, back in their dresses and vests. The masked woman gently helped the waitress, asking her if she was alright. The Sentinels and Shadows were gone.

One of them appeared again a few seconds later. Dale hadn’t even sat down yet. “Excuse me ladies and gentlemen. It seems an avalanche of rock and snow has been triggered. If any ice mages are present to deal with the latter, we would be in your debt.”

A gray haired man stood up from a nearby table.

“William,” the Shadow said with a light nod.

The old man just sighed. “I’ll be right back,” he said to the trio sitting at the table. “Uncivilized, rude, barbarian,” he growled and vanished.

“Oh, I’ve rarely seen him that intense,” the lightning mage woman said, back in her dress. She seemed quite a lot less threatening, a casual smile on her face as she resumed eating.

“Nearly killed a man who was rude to a waiter once,” the woman opposite her said.

The lizardman gave Dale a nod and returned to his table.

Wait, Empress? Dale glanced at the table where a blonde haired woman sat. She looked around the room and finally glanced at him. Silver eyes. He looked away. And sat down a few seconds later, not quite stable on his legs.

A waiter appeared a moment later. “Are you alright, sir?”

“Yes. Just. Need a moment to breathe,” Dale said with a genuine smile. He shook his head and started laughing a moment later.

Some people smiled. He didn’t care. “Fucking Lilith.”

“Hush, don’t curse in this company,” Abby said with a warm smile.

“I love you,” he said.

“You always get like this after a dangerous thing happens,” she whispered, a smirk still on her face.

A group of waiters appeared, plates in their hands. One of them tapped a glass. “An improvised addition by the head chef. Crushed velra clam in black powdered halmer shell. The Golden Goose apologizes for the interruption. We hope your experience will not be marred by such an unfortunate display of discourtesy.”

Some approving murmurs went through the room as everyone received their plates.

The next half hour went through without any major events. Until heavy steps came from the stairs.

An ashen form reached the floor, still dripping with bloodied water. She took in a deep breath and sighed. “The Destroyer will no longer interfere. However, I’ve been informed that he has signed up for the main tournament. If any of you were still on the fence, perhaps facing him is worth the trouble. I won’t be participating myself,” she said and tilted her head, hitting the other side to get rid of water in her ear. “I’ll throw in a small favor. If you take him out of the competition. That is all. Enjoy your dinner.”

She walked back down with a bed of ash cleaning up behind her.

Murmurs erupted right after, quite a few people soon talking in excited voices.

“She started something,” Dale said.

“That, she did,” Abby answered and ate a piece of clam.

Edwin stood in front of the painting. People came and went but he couldn't take his eyes of the canvas.

It depicted a woman clad in ash, wings on her back, resolve in her eyes. She stood atop a monster's head, enormous black horns growing out of its skull. Sand was all around them. The scale of it all was shocking, displayed in such a lifelike manner he may as well have been there himself. The heat. The anticipation. The magic.

But I wasn't.

He had been ready to mock the so called gallery. A little girl supposedly the artist. And yet with every piece he laid his eyes on, he felt smaller. More insignificant. He had known her, had he not? The woman depicted in many of these incredible works. Ilea, the healer. He had fought her, had given her pointers. Inexperienced and instinctual she had been, naive and blind to the truth of this world.

He ripped his eyes from the canvas and walked into the next hall. He looked around to see the many visitors commenting on various pieces. Most treated it like some legend, a tale spun by the local bard. He knew the truth. Deep down he knew, that all of this had happened. He grit his teeth and walked to the one person in the room he knew.

"I thought you wanted to sign up for the tournament," he said, stepping next to the young woman.
Why do I even care?

"Doesn't he look lonely?" Lily asked. She wiped at her face and focused back at the large canvas in front of her.

Edwin looked. A dark castle, covered in snow. Dark clouds seemed to move below, purple light pushing through. The ocean, unending, flowed into the distance, the last light of day coloring the single mountain in an autumn hue. He sighed, finally spotting the single figure standing on the peak, black flails lying in the snow behind him. He was unfocused, a mere smudge in the vastness of the world.

"He's waiting," Edwin heard himself say.

"For what?" the girl asked.

For what indeed.