

Chapter 592 Peculiar Meetings

Ilea judged the distance to the walls too far for displacement. They would be seen between teleports. Nor did she want to test if the skill worked against whatever enchantment improvements Claire and her team had added in the meantime. She would need to be close to understand the fabrics, if her friend had indeed already added anti space magic measures.

“We’ll just enter the normal way. Just keep your heads and faces covered and don’t hiss,” Ilea said.

“We should act like some rogues? Unable to show our might?” Feyrair asked in disbelief.

Ilea looked at him, not sure if he was being sarcastic or not. Sometimes it was hard to tell with him.

“Precisely,” Neiphato said.

“We are allowed to talk thought,” Feyrair said.

Okay, he’s joking. “Sure. Just don’t share your tales of eating humans and we’re golden.”

“You don’t seem particularly concerned about all this. I thought humans harshly scrutinized outsiders. Especially in larger settlements like these,” Feyrair said.

Ilea walked towards the road. “It’s less so in larger ones actually. And I’ve gotten in worse than you two.”

Feyrair started a hiss before he turned it into a cough. “Worse than us? Now I’m intrigued,” he teased.

Yeah, I wonder what that necromancer is doing, Ilea thought, ignoring his pestering questions until they reached the entrance. She remained covered in ash, the two Elves standing a little behind and to her sides.

“Lady Lilith,” one of the guards said with a respectful bow. “Welcome back.”

“Thank you,” she said and summoned a few pieces of silver, handing them to the Shadowguard. She watched him nod to her companions as they trailed in behind her.

“Your reputation precedes you, Lilith?” Fey said to her.

Ilea just raised an eyebrow at the comment, leading them further into the city and towards Claire’s office.

The guard at the door recognized her and let the three pass. “The Administrator is present,” he informed her, glancing at the two Elves with interest. “Powerful friends.”

“Indeed,” Feyrair said joyously. “Finally, someone to recognize my capabilities.”

“Keep your dick in your pants,” Ilea said and went upstairs, knocking on the office door.

The entrance opened with an enchantment flaring up.

“Oh, this place is impressively shielded,” Fey commented, stepping inside behind Ilea and immediately going for the small bar to the right of the entrance.

“Greetings, Claire,” Ilea said with a smile, looking at the woman.

Claire had her hair bound as always, her expression serious as she took in the two newcomers. She flicked her wrist and the door closed behind Neiphato. “Hello, Lilith,” she said in a business like tone.

Ilea smiled, glancing over at Cless who was absorbed in painting, sitting at her usual spot near the window. Already a few invisible barriers likely prevented the girl from seeing or hearing them.

“No need to be formal. They’re trustworthy. And friends. May I introduce to you, Neiphato,” she said and gestured to the armored elf behind her.

Neiphato bowed elegantly, his braided brown hair the only thing that poked out of his helmet. “It is an honor to meet an esteemed friend of Lilith.”

“Ilea is fine here,” Ilea said, seeing the curious look Claire gave the elf.

“Greetings, Neiphato. I’m Claire. What a peculiar name,” she said, her brows rising a little as she turned to the second elf.

“And Feyrair. I hope it’s okay if he tries some of the beverages you have present,” Ilea said.

“Greetings Claire,” Fey said, giving her a quick glance before he turned his attention back to the bottle of whiskey he was holding.

Claire sighed, putting away a few stacks of paper before she relaxed in her chair. “Now, Ilea. Why don’t you explain to me what two Elves are doing in my office.”

“She figured it out. Hey, I like her. Strong too, for a human,” Feyrair commented, filling himself a glass.

“They’re Cerithil Hunters. The group who defied the Oracles and hunts the Taleen. We’ve been fighting the machines together for the past month or so,” Ilea said. “As to why they’re here. I just thought I’d introduce them. And show them the city.”

“Is that a wise decision? Based on their history?” Claire asked.

Feyrair hissed but Neiphato put a hand on his shoulder. “I assure you, miss Claire. That there is no danger with our presence here. We are loyal to Ilea, and to her allies.”

“Also I can take care of them if need be,” Ilea said.

Claire sighed. “With the collateral damage of several monsters *taking care* of each other. No I’d rather not. Well, my knowledge of Elves is limited but it’s both comforting and scary to know that they can blend in within our cities. However, you know that I support your allies. And if you approve of their coming, so shall I. It’s not like the other council members won’t form a strong opposition.”

Ilea smiled. “I know. I don’t plan to introduce them either. Dagon and Elise would want to interrogate them for history knowledge for the next ten years. We will go north afterwards. Some new things have come up, for your consideration too.”

She quickly explained the circumstances of Niivalyr, the Taleen, Isalधार, and the various dungeons and facilities they had visited in the past six weeks.

“I’ll leave it up to you when and what to share with the others. Decisions will have to be made sooner or later, though there is no rush,” Ilea said.

“Monarchs and Oracles. Well I can’t say I’m surprised anymore. I’ll think about the whole situation, concerning your... friends in the north too,” Claire said.

“Friends in the north?” Fey asked, having tuned out while Ilea retold what had happened.

“You’ll meet them soon,” she said. “And thanks Claire. Any news I should know about? Baralia? The Lily? Ravenhall?”

Claire glanced at the two Elves. “Are you sure I can share things with them present?”

“You have no idea how little Elves actually care about humanity and our dealings. Well Ben might be interested but he’s not here at the moment,” Ilea said.

“Ben?” Claire asked, looking at the three in turn.

Neiphato smiled, his wooden helmet receding to reveal a slight smile, only a few of his pointy teeth showing. “He chose the name after becoming a Cerithil Hunter, miss. His interest in humans and their culture is highly unusual.”

“Yeah, his mind is challenged,” Feyrair supplied, sniffing on another bottle before putting it back.

“Less than ours,” Ilea mused.

The elf chose a dark bottle with a glass snake winded around the central body. “Fair enough.”

Claire looked at Ilea before she started laughing.

Fey poured himself another glass and looked over at the woman, his face revealed now too as his hair changed to a deep shade of red. “What’s so funny?”

“The absurdity,” Claire said, meeting his stare. “You are an interesting one.”

“I have no interest in weak beings,” Feyrair said with a smirk.

“Good for you that I do,” Ilea said.

“You two?” Claire asked, looking at her. “That does explain some things.”

“It’s casual, don’t worry,” Ilea said and winked at her.

“That child, is gifted beyond its age,” Neiphato suddenly said, his eyes focused on the canvas standing on the other side of the room.

“That how you knew they were Elves?” Ilea asked, looking at the girl as well.

Claire summoned herself a drink. “You’re not exactly subtle. But yes. I could’ve only guessed otherwise. There were a few choice pieces, though I took the liberty of hiding them within my storage item.”

What’s that supposed to mean, Ilea thought.

“May I speak with the child?” Neiphato asked.

“I don’t see why not,” Claire said. “Just step through the barriers.”

Neiphato bowed again. “Thank you.”

“As to your requests. Well. The war in Baralia is officially over and while timely intervention by many parties, including yourself, has prevented a large scale civil war, there are resistance groups remaining. Both hidden within cities and in the wilderness or ruins. Slavers mostly that refuse to

give in to the Empire. However it seems Lys is prioritizing their own territory for now, though it won't remain that way.

"Hadrian of Lys, brother to the reigning Empress, was captured," Claire said.

"The brother? What does he have to do with anything?" Ilea asked.

"A lot, apparently. He was certainly a part of why the High King thought it both possible and reasonable to start a war with the Empire. Hadrian was executed in Virilya, just the past week. Little was uncovered about the true plans of the Order of Truth, but from the information that made it all the way here, it's obvious that their influence on the King was more than just advisory," Claire explained. "Oh, I'm sure Trian will inform you but your Sentinels are already making a name for themselves. Clearing remaining Cursed in Baralia while protecting and healing refugees. A brilliant move by you and Trian, though I know neither of you planned it as such."

Ilea smiled. "That is indeed good news. No issues so far?"

"Trian knows about the specifics when it comes to the other orders but with the Order of Truth breaking apart, and the Corinth Order, there is little resistance so far. Though I'm sure it will become more as your organization grows in influence and power. But rest assured, we will call for you if needed," Claire explained. "Representatives from Yinnahall have sent for you. An invitation to their celebration of independence, from the King that is. We're still discussing the specifics with Lys but I'm optimistic to add another city to our alliance in the coming years. You must have left quite an impression, on both parties."

I guess I did, Ilea thought, seeing Fey glance at her.

"What is it?" she asked the elf.

"Hmm. What indeed," he mused. "Merely that you seem terribly involved with matters beneath you."

"Some paperwork is necessary. I hope you'd be at least a little involved too if you had the influence I have," she said.

"Perhaps I'll be able to borrow your assistant here. She seems terrifyingly competent," he suggested with a hiss.

Claire looked at him and smiled. "I'm afraid I'm hers alone, little elf."

"Daring. You wouldn't mind a spar, would you?" Feyrair asked.

"Of course I would. I cannot stand against your martial prowess, but my weapons are not swords and spells," Claire answered.

Feyrair grinned. "Then you have terribly little to defend against me. It would be wise not to insult those who could defeat you."

Claire smiled back. "That's why I have her," she said and gestured to Ilea.

Ilea waved at the elf. "Yep, that's true. Touch her and I'll remove you from existence."

"Troublesome. Your treaties and agreements. Where are the days when men fought for themselves?" he said.

"I'm human too, you know?" Ilea said, smirking his way.

“Hardly,” Fey commented. “Though continue, I did not mean to interrupt your unimportant babble.”

“No you did,” Ilea said but turned to Claire nonetheless.

“I’ve also authorized large sums to be spent on the retaking of various cities that had been devastated by the rituals. Though the Empire is involved as well. Our influence will be lesser than in Yinnahall,” Claire said.

“Well it hardly matters, as long as the people there get a home. Do you have the invitation?” Ilea asked.

Claire summoned a letter and handed it over, the seal already broken.

“That’s in a month, right?” she asked.

“Yes, it is. Perhaps your dancing lessons will come in handy, should you attend,” Claire commented.

“You won’t go? I could take you,” Ilea suggested.

Claire smiled. “Thank you, but no. I’ve finally managed to escape the responsibilities of a noble woman, and it will remain so. Though perhaps you will find some joy in it. I’m sure you three would make quite a sight.”

“Could take a few Dark Ones too,” Ilea suggested. “Maybe the Trakorov.”

“I suggest you refrain from that, just based on what I’ve seen in the paintings,” Claire said. “But yes, it would certainly make for an entrance.”

“Something smaller then,” Ilea mused, glancing over at Feyrair with a meaningful look.

“What?” he asked finally, busy taste testing every bottle Claire had to offer.

“Oooh, now I understand. He’s that monster,” Claire mused, nodding to her. “Yeah that will leave an impression. But I suggest you refrain, I do believe you mentioned a dislike for cult like followings.”

Neiphato returned from the secluded area, Cless rushing past him. “The elf man is nice!” she exclaimed, looking up as she giggled.

The elf smiled. “You are quite talented, little one,” he said.

Cless rushed past and hid behind Ilea’s chair, obviously blushing. She turned to Feyrair, the two locking eyes for a moment before she growled.

Feyrair growled back.

“Is this tiny human challenging me?” he asked, looking at Ilea.

“I don’t think so, right Cless?” Ilea asked.

The girl still stared at Feyrair. “I like him more,” she said, pointing at Neiphato.

“He’s much nicer, yes,” Ilea said and patted her head. “I think it’s time we took our leave. Or is there anything else you wanted to talk about?”

Claire smiled, looking at the four of them. “No. Trian didn’t tell me about anything urgent either. Until your next visit then,” she said.

“Sure,” Ilea answered and got up, her ashen chair disintegrating a moment later. “Come on boys, we’re heading out.”

“Brave little child,” Feyrair hissed, looking at Cless who now hid behind Claire’s massive desk, her eyes poking out above, staring at the dragonling.

“Good luck on your journey,” Claire said.

“Thank you for your hospitality,” Neiphato said with a slight bow.

“And the drinks. Interesting creations,” Fey added with a toothy smirk.

“Indeed they are,” Claire said, a smile on her face as she looked at him.

Ilea led the two back out of the city, spreading her wings as soon as they had passed the gates.

“Your friend is a curious human,” Feyrair said as they flew over the mountains, taking a detour to throw off anybody who might be watching or following them.

“Taken a liking, hmm?” Ilea asked.

Feyrair didn’t say anything, lost in thought as he flew close by.

“That girl... her skills are unusual. Inspirations from... somewhere else,” Neiphato said, the trio landing near the underground testing facility, Ilea displacing them into it.

“She’s from another realm,” Ilea supplied, putting them all onto the platform.

“I see,” Neiphato said.

Feyrair glanced around. “Is this what I think it is?”

“Work in progress, but yes,” Ilea said. “Power is not just about conjuring up the biggest firestorm.”

“No, it still is. But I will admit a teleportation gate would be quite useful to have. If only to make more use of said firestorm,” Fey said.

Ilea rolled her eyes and initiated the connection, deactivating her resistance as the familiar spell formed yet again.

Such a convenient way to travel, she thought as they appeared in the domain of Meadow.

“This mana,” Neiphato said and looked around, his gaze stopping on the tree in the distance.

“*Are those the Elves you warned me about?*” Meadow asked into their minds.

Neiphato recoiled slightly, clutching his head as his breathing quickened.

Feyrair spread his arms and stepped towards the tree, his face quite obviously strained, if only slightly.

“No, they’re allies actually. And much less dangerous than the ones I talked about. But watch them anyway, especially this one,” Ilea said and pointed at the dragonling.

“*You seek to challenge me? Young creature of flame?*” Meadow asked in an amused tone.

“This being... Ilea... what,” Neiphato spoke, his utter disbelief quite obvious in his expression.

Ilea could downright taste his fear through her perception, Feyrair on the other hand showing quite the opposite reaction, downright ecstatic as he walked onward.

“Eh, I wouldn’t go too far. Your arcane resistance is probably not enough!” Ilea shouted, turning to the two enchanters who had stopped their work.

“Is that...,” Iana spoke, looking at Neiphato.

“An elf, yes. Cerithil Hunter, the ones who invade and destroy Taleen dungeons,” Ilea said.

“That tree... is... impossible. It’s existence is...,” Neiphato stuttered before he turned away, focusing instead on the two enchanters. “Yes. That is much more manageable. Neiphato, nice to meet you two, normal humans.”

“Interesting to meet you too,” Iana said with an apprehensive expression. “I thought you were all monsters.”

“Well, reputation isn’t always based on factual evidence,” Neiphato said with a smile, his expression wavering a little when Fey roared and hissed, storming towards the tree as his form exploded in scales, claws, and fire.

“An impressive transformation,” Meadow admitted. *“How much damage can this creature sustain?”*

Ilea smiled. *“He’s quite durable. But not as much as me. Feel free to play around a little.”*

“It would be quite a surprise, but after Meadow. What really is,” Christopher said and walked to Neiphato, bowing lightly. “Pleasure to meet you. You’re the first Elf I see. But I have heard of Elven Hunters before. I believe one of our mercenaries mentioned you.”

“Mercenaries?” Ilea asked.

He turned to her with a smile. “Ah yes, well not ours but Arthur’s back before you got us out of there. She talked about Elves fighting the Taleen machines, herself looking for ruins. I believe her name was Zoy.”

“She knew about the Cerithil Hunters?” Ilea asked, surprised to learn that. *She did know about Praetorians too, didn’t she.*

“Well Cerithil is not a work I heard before, but it fits with the bits of knowledge she had shared. That there are Elves who hunt the machines. Arthur did mention finding an Elven corpse in a dungeon before, which goes against what we know of Elves,” Christopher said.

“He seemed to have been quite open with his information,” Ilea said.

Christopher laughed, touching the back of his head. “Well. We were just the enchanters.”

“You’re more than just that,” Ilea said with a smirk. “But I *do* have plenty of projects I need your help with. And that of Meadow,” she added, seeing the white flames washed away as a massive dragon like creature was cut apart by barriers in the distance.