

Chapter 644 A monster's feast

"I'm proud to hear a citizen of Kroll has managed to join your prestigious organization," he said. Apparently they were very clear on it being an organization instead of an Order. He thought it understandable considering the reputations and different intents.

"I'm sure she will do well," Ilea said with a smile, resuming her extensive lunch.

"I'm curious as to your relationship with my brother," Katarina said a while later.

Emmanuel was interested too. There was very little information about it but they apparently had an argument at a ball in Yinnahall. In a way that suggested familiarity. Michael Elyse provided important research and resources to the military and other sectors of Kroll. Many of his projects demanded a certain level of discretion. The chance of outside actors interested in his work had always been a possibility, as was an attack by certain parties, some sitting at this very table.

A loose relationship between the crown and the Elyse noble was what his father had deemed the best approach and he continued in the same manner. Michael was no threat to Kroll, as long as he could be blamed as the sole perpetrator of his methods. His sister obviously didn't like it but she never openly opposed or obstructed him either. Criminals to be executed could be used for more than just fertilizer after all. Emmanuel suspected that Michael wouldn't stop at that however but a large scale investigation into his activities would only result in more bloodshed. Lady Veyer had suggested rituals as seen in Baralia were the least of his capabilities.

Ruling among monsters who simply have no interest in such matters, he thought, looking at Lilith. Is she part of their little Order as well, I wonder? They must've set their eyes on her long before we even realized how powerful she was.

"We worked together in the Baralia war," Ilea said, the look in her eyes making it clear that this was to be the extent of her elaboration.

Katarina understood too, leaning back in her chair.

It will be interesting to know what she learns once she gets her alone. If she chooses to share it with us.

"I heard you have traveled to the chaotic northern regions?" one of the other nobles said.

Emmanuel didn't have any illusions. He grinned lightly, looking at the twenty or so people sitting at the long table. All respected nobility or high ranking members of various institutions important to Kroll. Some he was sure had other important business to attend to but they chose instead to come to Halstein as soon as the news of Lilith's arrival reached their ears.

Hawks, the lot of them, Emmanuel thought, suppressing a broader grin when he looked at Ilea. Most of these people grew up with incredible wealth. They had guards at the age of three, protecting them from the common folk roaming the streets of whatever place they ruled. Now matter how much education these people had received, they couldn't possibly understand the stranger sitting among them.

An unknown. Most certainly low born, or perhaps an exiled bastard left behind with secrets and elixirs to allow for a faster growth. Involved in various expeditions as an adventurer, Taleen dungeons no less. Joined the Shadow's hand after an incredibly fast climb to level two hundred, and

she hasn't stopped. A few years and suspiciously timely investments pushed her into leagues comparable to the crown of Kroll. If not beyond.

What these people don't understand, is that she's an adventurer at heart. She has no interest in political games, her body language alone suggests as much. Either that or she is the most capable manipulator I have ever seen. A rather low probability. Too many blunders just in the last three hours.

"I did," Lilith answered. "Arcane storms rage during daytime, and magical mists descend at night."

He had read the reports. Kroll had invested in expeditions northwards during the last few centuries but the territory was deemed too dangerous for settlement and too treacherous for exploration. A country's gold could be spent more wisely. Single high level adventurers however, they could surely benefit greatly. Perhaps her wealth came from the treasures found within a northern dungeon. He wondered what she had seen in her travels, what kind of creatures she had met and fought.

"Did you find any signs of civilization?" Emmanuel dared ask. He was genuinely interested too, it just so happened to be information that could justify funds invested into future explorations.

"Yes," Ilea said quickly, eating a few bites before she downed her sixth mug of ale. "Ancient ruins of different civilizations, much like the ones that can be found in the plains."

She's being vague, he thought but didn't press. "Would you be interested in future collaborations to map the north?"

Ilea looked at him. "Not me personally, no. I'm sure there would be Sentinels or Shadows interested in that though."

"I'll make sure it's mentioned in the letters, thanks," Emmanuel said. He ignored the glances he got for his informal behavior. *As expected. No hostilities towards us.*

Kyrie appeared next to him, whispering in his ear. "Your majesty, we received word that the Corinth Order has been attacked by Lilith, one of their High Clerics has been confirmed dead."

Ilea grinned, resuming her meal.

Excellent hearing. At this point I wouldn't be surprised if she can read minds. Can you? Ilea?

She didn't react.

"Representatives are waiting in the throne room, ready to present their case," Kyrie added.

"Let them join the feast. I'm sure Donnavon will be glad to have three people convicted so early," Emmanuel said. *As am I. A healing order failing to confirm the death of a victim. How quaint.*

"With all due respect, your majesty," one noble spoke up. An older gentleman below level two hundred. "How can you be sure that this woman is indeed who she claims to be? If Ravenhall has indeed dared make a military strike against our kingdom, we should not be sitting here feasting."

Today is getting better and better.

The man had at least not shared any information on this feast, though the more likely possibility was that he simply couldn't, in the short time he had. He may have publicly questioned Lilith but he didn't dare side with the Order.

"I confirmed her identity myself. As have my advisors," Emmanuel stated before looking at Ilea "Do you have a way to disguise yourself?"

The look she gave him didn't seem to suggest she did.

"Would you allow an illusion in that case? It will simply hide you behind a layer of magic. You will still be able to see beyond," he asked.

"I don't mind at all," Ilea answered. "I'm always interested to see new spells."

A scholar? Or merely for resistance training?

The reports hadn't surprised him terribly. Adventurers often subjected themselves to various levels of danger and magic, often on purpose too. With enough potions or healers close by, the training was mostly safe and any resistances would help immensely in battle. Though the kind of training Lilith underwent suggested some level of madness. Either that or she possessed the second tier of Pain Tolerance. To undergo such torture. Was it merely for the benefit of her power? She didn't seem broken. *A way to heal the mind. Perhaps. Or she truly is not human.*

Kyrie cast his spell, standing next to the woman's chair as he covered both of them in a shadow that vanished a moment later, leaving behind the illusion of an empty chair.

"Shadow magic?" Ilea asked.

Emmanuel gestured for Kyrie to talk freely. The man took his job very seriously, despite their shared past. The King appreciated it.

"Yes," Kyrie answered.

"I'd love to get the resistance. Must've missed it along the way," she said.

A few of the nobles murmured amongst each other.

Subjecting oneself to pain. Not something people consider who haven't faced a monster in decades.

He wondered if a conflict wouldn't benefit Kroll in the long run. The constant tensions between Lys and its northern neighbors forged the Generals and soldiers of their armies. He dismissed the thought. Prosperity and peace were valuable assets on their own. Ones that required protection. Emmanuel had long known that his court would provide little actual might in a conflict.

"It would be an honor to train with one such as you," Kyrie said.

A few people gasped at the exclamation. Even Emmanuel found himself a little conflicted. He understood the notion as an adventurer himself. But to admit such as a member of the Kingsguard, amongst the nobles of the country. He glanced at the man, locking eyes with him, the illusion not covering his angle. *A risky play, Kyrie. Even for you. Who knows if it will pay off.*

The gates opened, two guards escorting the trio of Corinth Healers. Two of them wearing Inquisitor armor, the last and most important member being High Cleric Mateo.

Emmanuel had met the man a few times before, his build supporting his past as a Paladin. A few scars showed on his face, likely from his childhood. Before he would've benefitted from the Order's healing.

[Veteran Paladin – lvl 228]

The Inquisitors were both above level two hundred. Perhaps meant as a show of force.

"Mateo. Long has it been. Please share your accusations. I hear the matter is quite pressing," Emmanuel said, his voice sincere as he leaned forward a little, gesturing for the man to speak.

“Indeed. As you may know, the monster Lilith... who claims to be the head of a healing order in Ravenhall has answered our invitation to discuss potential cooperation,” he paused for a moment, gritting his teeth as he furrowed his brow. “She attacked and killed High Cleric Donnavon in a savage strike.”

Emmanuel could see the veins pop in his forehead, the man of faith not blessed by extensive hair growth. *His reaction seems genuine.*

He glanced at the Queen who gave him a slight nod.

“Has she escaped?” Emmanuel asked.

“No,” the man answered, sighing deeply as tears came to his eyes. “The battle was fierce but decisive. We recovered her remains and will burn them at a later time. This strike is not why I’m here... it seems Lilith has not been alone in her schemes.”

“Go on,” Emmanuel said.

“An adventuring team that arrived just about a quarter hour ago has shared information on demon sightings southwest of Halstein,” he exclaimed.

“Impossible,” one of the nobles said. “There hasn’t been a demon sighting in nearly a year. The threat has been dealt with.”

“Our Inquisitors and Paladins are preparing for battle as we speak,” Mateo said.

“How many?” Emmanuel asked. He didn’t look at Ilea. *Convenient. If she had attacked, the demonic threat would immediately be linked to the Shadow’s Hand. Some of the nobility here seems to agree despite her presence. To think they would go as far as summoning demons. At the very least they had the decency not to do so within our walls.*

“Hundreds, your majesty,” the High Cleric answered.

“Are you suggesting Ravenhall has declared war on our country?” Emmanuel asked the man. Silence spread through the room.

The Cleric glared at him now. “The presence and reckless murder committed by Lilith confirm our suspicions about her nature. The Shadow’s Hand has proven their ability to summon these creatures,” he said and paused. “However. No Shadows have been seen amongst the creatures. Whatever threat we’re facing, I suggest that we prepare for war.”

“How long until these monsters reach our city?” Emmanuel asked.

“Less than two hours, your majesty,” Mateo said.

They can clean up the mess they’ve made. There is no reason to sacrifice any of our soldiers to this ploy.

A sliver of doubt remained within the King. A convoluted plan, Healing Orders conspiring to overthrow governments, clerics willing to commit treason to support the will of their gods. He could see several ways everything connected but one piece always failed to make sense. And that was the woman sitting to his left, concealed by shadow magic and still silently eating. To the annoyance of Kyrie, he realized.

Lilith was undoubtedly a three mark creature. Likely human, and likely capable of killing everyone in this room and perhaps even in the entire city in less than an hour. He had seen monsters at that

level fight. A human with a keen mind and the variety of two Classes, perhaps even more, was something entirely different. She had been capable of fighting an entire army, and that was years ago.

“Have you seen the body?” Emmanuel asked.

Mateo nodded. “Burned flesh and bone. Ash spread out through the halls of our holy site. The Inquisitors who had been part of the battle managed to take her head. I saw her skull.”

More people to add to the list. I doubt they would fail at such a simple task. Ilea can survive being beheaded. How do you kill a monster like that? Her heart? Destroy her body entirely?

“It’s quite the tale you bring to us today, High Cleric. One that may push us towards war with the independent city of Ravenhall and its Shadows. You know what that would mean,” Emmanuel said.

He watched the man closely, as did everyone else.

Mateo nodded lightly, a deep frown on his face. “I too wish to avoid such a conflict. But our Order can’t take such a direct attack without retaliation. I simply won’t accept it. Should I be the only one who feels such, I will charge at the enemy alone.”

“I commend your bravery,” Emmanuel said. “And I believe you are sincere. However there are a few flaws in your story.”

“Please enlighten me, your majesty,” the High Cleric said, obviously annoyed with the apparent play.

Emmanuel had shifted his attention to the two Inquisitors next to the man. Their faces were covered by helmets but their body language, breathing, and heartbeats would likely offer enough.

“You see, earlier today me and my advisors entertained a few rather incensed guests. Most of whom you should be familiar with,” Emmanuel said. “High Cleric Donnavon is very much alive. He came here with Paladin Bryce and Paladin Naomi to inform us of a rather devious plot.”

“Impossible... he was... killed,” Mateo said, looking at the Inquisitor to his right.

The woman didn’t visibly react but her heart beat increased, her body tensing as she shifted slightly. The other Inquisitor had a similar reaction, though more subdued.

“Inquisitors,” Emmanuel started. “If you value your lives at all, I suggest you lay down your weapons and submit to the guard. If you resist, you will be executed for treason.”

The woman hesitated.

The man vanished.

“Kyrie,” Emmanuel said, watching the rogue vanish too. Two guards followed as well. Just to be sure.

Two more went to the woman who had raised her arms.

“Please, I had orders,” she said, turned around as magical cuffs were put around her ankles and wrists.

“Orders... from whom?” Mateo asked, a greatsword in his hand now, confusion apparent on his face.

What do you intend to do with that?

The High Cleric glanced over to the now occupied seat left of the king, his eyes blinking as he looked at the casually dressed woman eating to her heart's content.

Perhaps not human after all, Emmanuel thought.

“Indeed. It was Lilith who saved the life of your fellow High Cleric,” Emmanuel said.

Ilea drank from her mug before she waved. “Hello.”

Hello?

How many of these situations have you been in?

“But... that's... impossible... the Inquisitors... why would they... I saw, your bones,” Mateo said, his greatsword starting to glow lightly. “Demon.”

Ilea remained calm, piling another few items onto her plate. “You're a pretty shit healer if you think most of a body is proof of death. Also I'm not a demon. Think about what you do now. You're in the presence of your king.”

Emmanuel glanced at her before his eyes met Mateo's. *Is she just being respectful? Or did she just delegate this problem to me?*

His adventurer background suggested the latter.

“What is going on?” Mateo asked.

“Donnavon and our spies are trying to figure that out. In the meantime I suggest you join the efforts. And prepare for the demon attack. I will hold the Corinth Order accountable for any damage these creatures inflict on our lands and its people,” Emmanuel said.

“I can take care of it,” Lilith said.

Emmanuel looked at her with inquisitive eyes.

“I get that some of you think Ravenhall sent them. I hope me taking care of that problem will ease your minds. A small token, towards our future cooperation,” she said, glancing at the king and then Mateo.

“There are hundreds. How could you possibly face them alone. Level two hundred monsters. You were there in Ravenhall, when the Shadows retook their city, were you not?” Mateo asked, still doubtful and certainly angry. It just seemed he didn't exactly know where to direct his anger.

“Then come and see,” Ilea said. “You and your warriors of Hella.” There was no mockery in her voice, but the challenge was obvious.

Mateo remained quiet, a testament to his experience. Her unidentifiable status certainly helped but the people present with combat experience exchanged glances.

There had been no hesitation, no change in her breathing or heart beat, no fear. She was either mad or believed hundreds of demons to be nothing even worth a mention. Rats breeding in a cellar. Vermin to be exterminated.

Emmanuel felt the hair on his arms stand up, his gambeson luckily covering everything. For the first time today he truly realized that he was in the presence of Lilith. The monster who had braved the north, who had fought alongside General Velamyr Ryse, who had faced and defeated the army of Lord Harken, single handedly.

He decided he would go, and see.