

Ilea finished the last skewer as she walked up the broad stairwell set into the mountain side. She looked at the glass monuments on top, their surface almost glistening with light. *Probably some kind of runes.* They weren't a set she was familiar with but she wasn't exactly an authority on runic or linguistic knowledge. *Didn't even learn Elos standard myself.*

She reached a plateau about halfway up the mountain, no stairs leading further up. The space looked natural but a skilled earth mage could've likely achieved something similar with enough time and care. No vegetation decorated the space, instead she saw steaming pools of water, interspersed by gravel walkways and glass arches. *Such a peculiar style.* She looked at the large building at the back, set against the mountain side itself. Spires reached up towards the sky, at least twenty meters in height, various floors with lavish balconies and massive windows intersected the design, all of it in a silver like tint. The glass surface made everything almost see through but never quite enough to actually recognize what was within, even to someone like Ilea.

Light broke in mesmerizing patterns, each step closer entirely shifting the angles. Ilea assumed to someone without high light magic resistance, the entire structure would change shape, parts of it vanishing and others appearing with every meter closer. The changes were too extreme not to be deliberate. It was more a castle than a burg. There were no battlements or walls. She would've thought it a tourist attraction or fancy hotel, maybe even a ludicrously expensive art installation. The size of it all gave her pause however, the entire structure several hundred meters in length.

People wearing light brown robes or bone armor came and went, some in entirely different styles and colors much like in the oasis below. She got a few looks but none lingered.

Silver gates of thick glass rested against reflective walls, the entrance open to all it seemed. No guards stood to its side.

Ilea strolled into the building, noting the drop in temperature. The floors and walls inside were made of glass just like the outside, magical light coming from orbs fastened to the ceilings and walls. It seemed almost dark until she realized the mere absence of bright reflections. *Nearly more impressive than the outside. Eh, who am I kidding, it's not.*

Corridors led away from the entrance hall, doors and stairwells visible all around. Ilea walked to the counter at the back of the hall, a brown haired woman sitting on a glass chair, reading a book with a bored expression on her face.

She wore a light brown ensemble. Not quite a dress and not quite robes. It looked custom made to say the least. Legs crossed, she looked up when Ilea approached. Her book closed with a careful motion. "Welcome. You must be Lilith."

"Did my incredible charisma give it away?" Ilea asked, still looking around until she focused on the woman.

"I was informed. Evan Trayne is ready to meet you, whenever you are inclined to do so. I can give you a tour or you can explore yourself if you wish," the woman said.

[Librarian – lvl 279]

Impressive level for a librarian. Even Dagon isn't that high, Ilea thought. "If he's ready, I don't want to keep him waiting."

"Certainly, please follow me," the woman said and vanished, appearing next to the counter where she turned and waited.

Ilea joined her and was led through glass corridors, up a few stairwells, and finally out onto a terrace near the top of the structure.

"If you have any questions, feel free to find me," the woman said and left.

"I will, thank you," she said and walked towards the open space.

A man in sand colored robes sat on a blue carpet, magical runes depicted on the fabric. He had his back to her, his eyes closed and breathing steady. Black wavy hair fell down his back, his skin near as dark. The clean shaven face gave her the impression of a man in his mid twenties, maybe even younger than her.

[Sand Mage – lvl ??]

Ilea walked a little closer when she raised her brows. *Two marks? That doesn't make any sense.* Veteran seemed confused as well, the ability gauging him at a level similar to hers but it failed to pin point anything. Her instincts told her he was powerful, but nothing like a four mark. His clothes coupled with the calm demeanor didn't suggest a three mark mage but then she herself often preferred to present such an image.

She didn't say a word and walked past him, leaning against the glass railings and looking over the Foundation below, the oasis, mountains, and finally the endless sands. The view in Arkamp had been nice but this was something entirely different. It felt like looking out onto the ocean. One unmoving and burning with the suns. It was calm. Entirely so. Ilea took in a deep breath and closed her eyes.

For a few minutes she remained silent, simply enjoying the calm space. Soon she started to take in her host, her dominion grasping at his magic, his heartbeat, the breaths he took. He seemed entirely calm, relaxed, as if part of the scenery. She turned to look at him, her eyes meeting his as he opened them. A deep green.

"May I offer you some tea?" he asked, his voice deep.

Ilea watched him for a moment. "Sure, I'd love some tea."

He smiled, eyes closing with the gesture as he stood up. He wasn't much taller than her.

She followed him into a gazebo like structure made of glass, tables and chairs set up within. Ilea sat down after he gestured to a set. She watched him work, the man activating runes to summon a small flame. He filled a round kettle with water and set it down, preparing leaves and spices from a variety of jars and containers.

He finally turned around and waited, looking at her.

"I expected you to be more talkative," she said after a while.

He smiled. "I am a keeper of knowledge," he answered, pouring two cups through a thin sieve. He set them down and sat opposite her. "Though I make exceptions. You don't think me rude, do you?"

"You offered me tea. I don't think someone I'd consider rude would do such a thing," Ilea said.

He took a sip and sighed, savoring the taste for a moment. “The leaves and spices we grow ourselves, here in this quiet garden at the end of the world. A long time has it been, for a guest quite as interesting as yourself to arrive here.”

“You’re a three mark, aren’t you?” Ilea asked.

He waved his hand.

[Sand Mage – lvl 548]

“Not many know of this. I offer this to you as a gesture of trust, though I understand you are one to do so easily,” he said.

“Perhaps too easily,” Ilea admitted and drank from the tea. His reaction to the brew had been adequate. She deactivated Monstrous.

The man paused for a while, drinking from his tea in silence as he watched her. “Why is that?”

Ilea thought about it for a while. “I had little reason to distrust people when growing up. And now... well.”

“Now, it would be unwise to deceive you. The great Lilith,” he said and spread his arms, no mockery in his tone. “There are questions I have, though should you be in a hurry, we may focus on the reason you’re here.”

“You’re aware of that reason?” Ilea asked, her brows rising.

The man laughed. “We know many things, but not all. There is much one such as you could learn from the Foundation of Glass. I understand you were looking for an individual named Scipio some time ago? Perhaps your search has led you here after all.”

“That’s not why I’m here,” Ilea admitted. She drank more tea.

The man leaned back. “Then you do not seem to be in a hurry. I’m curious about your upbringing. You had little reason to distrust people. Perhaps an understanding house of nobility, in a secluded corner of the world?”

“Is that how you think I grew up?” Ilea asked. She was deliberately difficult with her information, just to see how much the man knew. He was a three mark after all, and perhaps as old as Scipio himself. If he was indeed the original founder.

“No. I believe you are a realm traveler. On purpose or on accident. The latter I assume, due to your fast rise in power. Early reports suggest you learned of the Azarinth Order in one of the ruined temples, came to Riverwatch and trained to be an adventurer. It’s fortunate that you survived the ingestion of the Bluemoon Grass,” he said with some barely concealed disdain. “Azarinth magic will have catapulted your growth. It’s quite a powerful Class, in the right hands.”

“Your assumption is right. I grew up in another realm. In a country where crime was relatively low. People had little incentive to deceive a teenager or young adult, and if they did it was hardly life threatening. You sound like you knew the Order. Are they still around?” Ilea said. She knew that this conversation was an exchange of information as much as a pleasant afternoon tea.

“You were fortunate then. I too have arrived here in these lands without choice. My brothers and sisters, lost in the lands of my forefathers. They thought me dead, I’m sure,” he said though his voice held little emotion. A retelling of history.

"I'm sorry," Ilea said.

"Don't be. This has happened a long time ago. And what I felt then was guilt, more than anything. These lands are forgiving. Lush with water and food. With life. I don't remember much, of the realm where I was born, but I do remember the sands. Endless much like these," he said and gestured outwards. "I know of one that remains once of the Azarinth Order, though he does not consider himself one of theirs. Perhaps some of his followers have survived until now but I deem it unlikely. It has been... a long time."

"How long exactly?" Ilea asked.

He grinned. "You seem to have an idea."

Ilea smiled back. "I have heard of a sand creator... one that went south, to found a library of sorts. The source on this is from Rhyvor. A kingdom most have forgotten," she said and leaned forward. "I'm wondering if I'm speaking to that very same man."

"Rhyvor," he said, tasting the word. "That is not a name I've heard in a long time. Not until last year that is, when Maro Invalar showed up in the Plains, spending coin on drugs and mistresses. I was quite surprised... but you are indeed the missing puzzle to that confusing resurgence."

"I got him out, yes. He was stuck inside a necromantic device that kept his city guard alive. Against an invasion that happened... four, five, maybe six thousand years ago," she said.

"It shouldn't have been much more than three," the man replied. "Though it's a shame, what happened to the north."

Ilea grinned. "You are the same man."

They remained in silence for a while.

"Who is he? The Azarinth healer?" she asked.

"I believe he called himself their First Hunter. Before..." he spoke.

"Before the war? With the Ascended?" Ilea offered.

"Indeed. You know much for someone as new to these lands. Most have long forgotten," he said.

"But you didn't. You mentioned the north as well. Which means you didn't forget the third sun," Ilea said.

He nodded silently. "I believe we should move this discussion to my office. Though nobody should be listening, one can never be too sure. The secrets you share so openly have been kept in the deepest of our vaults for millennia."

"You know you can just say that you're impressed," Ilea said as she stood up.

"Concerned more than impressed. You are invoking names and events that perhaps no human ever should," he spoke.

Oh? Did I just find the reason why nobody remembers any of this?

"Is that a threat?" she asked.

He stood up and looked at her with a smile. "No. Not at all. We are different, you and I, Ilea. We both seek to uncover the secrets held in ancient ruins. But you fight the monsters long forgotten, shake the foundations set by those who think themselves in control. I on the other hand, have

remained here. I have taken this piece of the world that nobody else deemed worthy, and I have built on it. My goal is to learn and preserve.”

“I assume it’s been working out well,” Ilea said.

“I am still alive after all. You’re not the first to rise in such a way, and you won’t be the last. With the level you are at, you must be aware of the unimaginable creatures lurking in the dark. And you know that if you stay on your path, there will come a day when you die,” he said.

Ilea grinned. “And what a day that will be.”

The man laughed. “Indeed. I hope to hear the songs of bards. But I will be honest, most of the time people like you simply vanish.”

“Do you mean three mark humans? Have there been that many?” she asked.

“As always, too focused on these numbers. I have met Shadows that have reached the three hundreds in mere months. Some of my trainees have pushed far beyond what I thought possible. Neither remain among the living. Both you and I are proof of what humanity can accomplish. Your healer Class may keep you alive for longer than most,” he said.

“Is that what you hope for?” Ilea asked, following him back inside.

“I do not wish for your death, Lilith. The longer you rise, the more will be uncovered, and the more can be learned,” he spoke.

The man led her down into the depths, glass soon replaced by hard stone, all of it enchanted. They continued in silence as people walked by, many of them greeting the man. Finally they came upon a double door, Evan leading her inside before he shut the door.

His office was rather modest. Shelves with books, magical lamps much like the ones in the corridors outside, a desk and chair but nothing fancy.

Ilea assumed he didn’t remain here often. The enchantments were certainly impressive.

“You spoke of the third sun. What do you know of what happened three thousand years ago?” he asked and sat down.

“I’m interested in what You know about it,” Ilea answered. She sat down on an ashen chair instead of the less comfortable option.

“The Ascended came to this realm. According to Taleen records, much earlier than what most of the involved factions believed. Or believe. I’m not aware of all the hidden knowledge kept by powerful mages, factions, and nobility. Some likely still remains. They set up facilities to collect mana, deep within the depths of these lands. The process likely continued for hundreds of years until they were ready. We are unfamiliar with the specifics but a sun was taken from the very skies of Elos. This event led to a cataclysmic shift in the very fabric of the world,” he said.

“And the North was destroyed in the process. Arcane storms and Miststalkers instead of human kingdoms and a lush frontier,” Ilea added.

“Oh not just the north, Ilea. The Isanna desert was hardly worth the paint on a map before this event took place. And now it’s a desert larger than the Plains themselves. Everything was impacted, some places more than others. Why such differences were present, I do not know. The Plains remained mostly livable, though it took time for balance to return,” he explained.

“Why keep this knowledge hidden then? I don’t see the benefit,” Ilea said.

He scratched his chin and leaned back in his chair. “Fear perhaps? Hate? Do you know of the alliance and the war?”

“Elves, Taleen, and humans, all working together to invade... the Great Salt. To fight the Ascended,” she said.

“And yet are Elves not the most hated species by human kind? Times have changed. Though recent attacks have fanned old fires, there was a time the Plains only remained stable due to the fear of a common enemy,” he explained.

“Sounds like something the Lily would consider,” Ilea said.

“You have been contacted then. A reasonable possibility but no. The Lily is old but it formed after the war, and I do not believe the people involved would have gone after such knowledge,” he said.

“Another faction then,” Ilea mused.

“Perhaps. I have considered non human intervention too. You must understand that the Plains themselves weren’t quite as affected. Many thought it a natural disaster, and of those there are hundreds every decade. Generations over generations soon forgot, written records vanishing in turn,” he said and tapped the table.

“You seem to like a theory in particular,” Ilea suggested.

“Do you know how the war ended?” he asked.

“I know the alliance returned and split up. I know the Taleen and Elves had a war of their own shortly after, which suggests the Ascended were defeated. The Azarinth Order died out, and I don’t know what other human factions were involved,” she said.

“All those notable. To correct something, the Azarinth Order didn’t die out. They were eradicated. They grasped for too much power and were spread too thin. After the war had ended, the enemies they had made over the centuries used the opportunity to strike back. And they had made a lot of enemies,” he said. “Your knowledge of the Ascended... I’m curious as to the extent of it.”

“I don’t think they lost exactly,” Ilea said.