

Chapter 726 Some gates close. Some gates open.

“Ilea. Claire mentioned you were going south again later. Did Riverwatch and Yinnahall agree to the terms?” Iana asked after she had approached.

“They did. I assume I should carry the materials and you set the things up?” Ilea asked in turn.

Iana scratched her neck and looked away. “Pretty much, yes. Your space storage, high speed, and teleportation just makes this whole thing so much easier,” she said and clasped both hands together. “But once they’re set up, we won’t need you anymore.”

Ilea stared at her bright smile and nodded. “Encouraging. I’m glad I’ll be replaced by some enchanted groundwork. You know I’m happy to help, Iana.”

*“You vastly overestimate your value if you compare yourself to the complexity of this magical technology,”* the Meadow helpfully supplied.

*“Thanks. Guess you can talk to the gates in the future,”* she sent back.

“You know that’s not what I meant!” Iana said and shushed her. “Just let me know when you’re going. Everything on our side is ready.”

*“I’ll go for a training session before. Probably this afternoon,”* Ilea sent to her.

*“You are a valued friend, Ilea. Remember that,”* the Meadow sent, with a space magic pat that she swatted away with her own manipulation.

*“Good, I’ll be here,”* Iana said and paused. *“There’s something else. I’d like to... talk to you about Aki. What you found in that facility.”*

*“Not here?”* Ilea asked.

*“Our place might be better,”* Iana said and started towards the home.

Ilea followed, glancing at the large Pursuer standing amidst a group of warriors, all of them focused on a floating stone tablet with a map of what she assumed to be Morhill and the surrounding landscape.

The home of the enchanters looked rather simple from the outside. She found its walls as protected as the central district of Virilya. To be expected of course. The inside was much more welcoming, a warm and homely atmosphere created by fur rugs, paintings, and wooden furniture.

Iana led her to the expansive kitchen. A large wooden table stood in the center, covered in notes, tools, and books. At least it seemed the enchanters focused their mess onto that one piece of furniture. *They’re not gonna have cleanliness as a priority, I imagine. Thank fuck for storage items.*

The woman sat down, Ilea instead leaning against the reinforced wall. “You figured out the research?”

“Yes. Most of it. Meadow helped with the translation but we have a reasonable understanding of Taleen now too. It’s fairly similar to a few other languages, though I think they themselves would not have acknowledge that. They certainly believed themselves superior,” Iana explained.

“You got that from research notes?” Ilea asked with a slight smile.

“Yes. Exactly,” Iana said and sighed. “Well... where to start. You know that Khan Joggoth dealt with them. The device in the Soul Forge allows for soul transformation but it seems his dealings with the Taleen broke off before he achieved that feat. Not that he would’ve shared that knowledge with anybody else anyway. We have it now by the way. Claire suggested it may be an option to help people with permanent disabilities or birth defects, but of course it’s quite an invasive and... well, permanent change.”

“Our own Ascended so to speak,” Ilea mused. “I don’t think it’s the worst idea. Someone that can’t walk or is in constant pain might prefer having a war machine as a body. Though I’m sure that creates its own issues.”

“Yes. His research is quite fascinating on its own. Owl has helped us try and understand a lot already, and the Shades are knowledgeable themselves. But back to the main topic. The Taleen did their own research, and that specific facility went with a very... technical approach. One based on enchantments. And Ilea, they were far ahead of everything else I’ve seen. Before I met the Meadow that is. I don’t have to tell you how incredible their teleportation gates are but their Guardians are just as impressive, if not more so.” She paused for a moment and took in a deep breath.

“The process they developed in Izcural. It analyzes and maps the very Essence of a being, and then creates a copy, infused into steel,” Iana explained.

“So Aki is the copy of someone else?” Ilea asked.

“Someone who died. They never figured out how to make the process non lethal. The research looks... interrupted. Maybe they stopped receiving funding or support, or something else happened. They tested the process on various prisoners and monsters, only one imprinted into a dagger. Some sort of sick joke it seems. The details aren’t exactly plentiful but... Aki... or well the original, he was an elf from the Fire Wastes, one that was captured when he attacked Iztacalum,” Iana explained.

“A Cerithil Hunter? No, if he attacked when the Taleen were still around, their cities wouldn’t have been dungeons,” Ilea said.

“I doubt it, yes. As far as we understand, the Hunters didn’t exactly exist in that time,” Iana confirmed. “I assume he was quite young. The described measures to hold him are not enough to stop any of the Cerithil Hunters I have seen,” Iana added.

“Fuck... Aki’s the copied soul of an elf...” Ilea said.

“Yeah,” Iana said and tapped the table a few times. “I haven’t told him yet.”

“Whelp, could be worse I guess. He could be the copied soul of a bird or something,” Ilea said. “Should I tell him? I don’t mind.”

“I’d... I think I’d appreciate that, yes. I don’t know it’s just... cruel,” Iana murmured.

Ilea shrugged. “Eh, he meditated through most of his time down there. And now he’s got a Pursuer body. Better than most forms I suppose,” she said with a smile. “I’ll let him know.”

Iana nodded.

“Thanks for looking through all that, I appreciate it,” Ilea added and patted the enchanter’s shoulder. She left and addressed the machine. “*Aki, can we talk for a moment?*”

“*Of course, Lady Lilith. What else could my time be invested in but to listen to your insightful thoughts?*” the being said and moved over, decidedly slow.

*“You’ve been hanging out with the Meadow too much,”* Ilea said.

*“The Meadow has been hanging out with me too much,”* Aki replied when he reached her and crouched down.

*“You’re moving differently. Trying not to freak people out?”* Ilea asked.

*“Yes. I love this form but it’s... very powerful, and it seems people have bad memories associated to Taleen beings,”* Aki replied.

*“Makes sense. Speaking of form... Iana figured out what happened to you. And what you are. Do you want to know?”* Ilea asked.

The machine looked at her for a long moment, his eyes shining a little brighter. *“How horrific is it?”*

Ilea waved her hand sideways. *“Could be worse. Could be better.”*

*“I’m listening,”* the dagger said.

She nodded and explained the findings. He listened in silence, sitting with the knowledge for a while after. Ilea waited.

A sigh reached her mind. *“Ironic, I suppose. Elf turned dagger... and now I’m in the body of a Pursuer, one of the most powerful Taleen machines,”* he mused and started laughing, the sound echoing in Ilea’s mind. *“I don’t hate it.”*

Ilea grinned. *“I thought as much.”*

*“I was saved and brought to purpose by you, Ilea. I am grateful. You uncovered my past... it’s less glamorous than I had perhaps hoped for but I think deep down, I knew. I am Aki, Pursuer of Akelion. Who I was before does not matter, whose soul I was molded from does not matter. I am the Guardian of the Medic Sentinels, and so it shall be. Neither Elves nor Taleen will determine my path,”* he spoke.

*“You’ll find your own way. Thanks for keeping the Sentinels safe, and helping out with all the work here. We’re there for you, whatever you will do in the future. That, I promise. Well, if you decide to murder all the kids in the world, I might take issue but you know what I mean,”* Ilea said.

*“The murder robot plan is a no then? That’s very sad. The Meadow had some other great suggestions however. One involves a haunted house, I quite like that,”* Aki mused.

Poor Sentinels, Ilea thought with a sigh. *“Stop being a bad influence,”* she sent to the Meadow.

*“Remedy from his exposure to you,”* the being answered.

*“We’re horrible parents,”* she sent, shaking her head.

*“I am the ideal parent,”* the Meadow said.

*“That’s exactly what a horrible parent would say,”* Ilea sighed. *“You know parenting is more complicated than helping creatures awaken?”*

*“I appreciate the reminder about my inability to conceive a child,”* it spoke.

*“Have you tried dropping a few crystal seeds?”* Ilea suggested.

*“I will complain to the Accords in my behalf. Your behavior is unacceptable,”* the Meadow said.

*“Feel free to make up and fill out a form. Good luck finding an enforcer. Besides me that is,”* Ilea said with a grin.

*“Then I’ll just have to make you punch yourself. Wouldn’t be the first time,”* the being said.

*I knew that was on purpose. “You absolute piece of shit,”* she sent with a squint.

A giggle went through the vicinity, some people looking up at the strange phenomenon.

*“Well, let me know if you need anything. And hey, if you’re up to it, maybe talk to Iana,”* Ilea said to the Pursuer.

*“I will. Thank you again, Ilea,”* he said and looked at his long knife like fingers, the blades retracting before he closed his silver fist.

*“Great. I’m around too... well back to Iz now. By the way, you don’t have a mark yet. Mind if I put one on you? We can share ten words once per day. And I know where you are,”* Ilea suggested.

*“Of course. It would be useful in case of an emergency,”* the dagger said and received her mark. It appeared on one of his arms, the rune still looking distinctly Azarinth. *“Thank you.”*

*“Sure,”* she answered. *“Hey Meadow, a lift to our frustrated Elven friend?”*

*“Kyrian too I assume?”* the being spoke.

*“If he’s up for more near death,”* she answered.

A moment later she vanished, and appeared at the edge of the Meadow’s domain.

Feyrair was sat on a boulder. He looked up when she appeared, followed by the metal mage. “You know,” he said. “It does feel like I’m unwanted in there.”

“Aw hush, people are scared of your kind. Tell your younger brothers that they should stop with the genocide. I’m sure you’d be welcome in a few hundred years,” she said.

The elf hissed but he had a smile on his face. “Back to Iz then?”

“That’s the idea,” Ilea said. “Speaking of which... you know how the Ascended stole one of the suns from this realm? As far as I understand the reason for the ancient war in the first place. It’s probably inside that sphere in Iz.”

The elf looked at her. “I don’t care.”

“You don’t? In whatever form it is now, that thing was the reason entire civilizations went to war,” Ilea said.

“The reason people went to war is because of those that were lost. Because of an external invasion, because their power was challenged. Because their kingdoms were destroyed. If we have a chance to end what the Taleen have left behind, that is what I will work towards. Elves don’t much care for artifacts and devices, I’m not much different. I suspect you don’t plan to tell Isalthar?” Feyrair said.

“I would’ve left that decision with you,” Ilea said. “I won’t, but neither will I stop you.”

He smirked, sharp teeth showing before he hissed. “Yes. I believe you have proven more than trustworthy. With all that my kind has done, to both me, and all that were deemed cursed, I would rather have it with you. Not just the sun, if it really is something that can be acquired, but everything else we find as well. It is why I hoped to entrust the keys with you in the first place. It

brings me joy, to know that perhaps a Monarch or two are seething with rage at the thought of a mere human possessing such power.”

“Thanks,” Ilea said and smiled. “I’ll try not to abuse your trust. And I’ll be there, when the time comes.”

“And it will come. But not yet. I want it to be decisive. And for that you’ll have to reach quite a bit more power. I will focus on catching up,” the elf said.

“You two plan on fighting the Monarchs?” Kyrian asked.

“He does. I mean I do too, the sky one at least, he’s a piece of glowing shit,” Ilea said. “And I want a rematch with the Beast.”

“The pole wielder. You mentioned him,” Kyrian said. “To think there’s someone out there that can demolish you like that.”

Ilea raised a finger. “It’s been a while. I’m much stronger now.”

“She is,” Feyrair confirmed.

“Of course,” Kyrian said and chuckled.

“What?” Ilea asked.

The elf hissed.

“I can tell it’s personal. I’ll help where I can,” the metal mage said and laughed.

“Remember when you were shy?” Ilea asked.

“Yes. Your influence on people is quite remarkable,” he answered. “I don’t know if you noticed, but there’s an entire group of peculiar beings working together because of you. One of them being a Greater Lich.”

“Meadow Accords, remember. Not Lilith Accords, not Ilea Accords,” she reminded him.

“Sure. Sure,” he said with a smile.

“Don’t worry Fey, we’ll include you sooner rather than later. I met Syrithis last night, she’ll be key to people accepting the Cerithil Hunters. We just can’t rush everything. Hallowfort and all its Dark Ones is already going to be difficult,” she said.

“Ah, you did? She is grown now I imagine. Was she stronger than me?” he asked.

“Honestly? No,” Ilea answered. “But she’s not weak by any means.”

“Good. She’d never shut up about it. Enough talk, I’m bored. Let us depart. Where is the closest gate?” the elf said.

*I guess revelations just don’t hit the same if you’re centuries old,* Ilea thought as she summoned her key locator.

They found a nearby dungeon in less than half an hour, all machines already cleared out. Ilea put in the gate device and opened the map. "Oh." She tried again but nothing changed. Her locator came to life and she double checked the map. "Well, shit."

"What is it?" Feyrair asked.

"Iz vanished," Ilea said.

"What do you mean it vanished?" Fey asked.

Ilea pointed at the holographic map. "All the destinations around Karth are gone. Fucker turned off the gates."

The elf hissed.

Kyrian sighed.

"Guess we left an impression," she said with a smile.

"Any other way to get there? Can you not teleport us in?" Kyrian asked.

"I didn't really plan for this. But I mean we know where it is, more or less," she said. "Care for some digging?"

"You remember the passages we uncovered, right?" Feyrair asked. "Hundreds of them died just getting there."

"That just means there might be interesting creatures to fight on the way there," Ilea answered. "I probably won't be able to make the whole journey but my gates got an upgrade," she said, having set one of the marks in the domain of the Meadow. "Just have to reset them every day so that we don't lose any progress."

"Down into Karth," Kyrian said.

"Yeah. Fey cover your Elvishness. We're going into human lands," she said.

"You and your fear," the elf hissed, his face covered by scale armor.

"Just choose a human evolution at five hundred," Ilea suggested and activated her third tier transfer.

The group appeared near Riverwatch where Ilea set another mark for her gates. *I'll so forget resetting these. Ah well.*

She tried to open them quickly. "*Meadow?*" she sent. *Doesn't seem to register.* She put her head through the gate and tried again.

*"There she is again,"* the tree sent.

"*You can't see through?*" Ilea asked.

*"If I wanted to, but I decided not to interfere. For your self confidence,"* the tree lied.

*"Of course. But you can send spells through no?"* Ilea asked. A stone sphere floated through the gate and out on the other side. *"Great. So now I can summon heavy bombardment from you,"* she said with a grin.

*"I can't exactly aim through that,"* the tree answered.

*“If I need you to hit something, I don’t need accuracy. We should figure out a signal. Three spheres of ash for full force bombardment. Two for a push of space magic? One as a warning that something is going to come through?”* Ilea suggested, her head still through the gate.

*“You intend to use me as some kind of garbage disposal?”* the tree asked in return.

*“You’d get blood and stuff,”* she said.

*“Well, it’s a deal then,”* the eldritch being spoke.

*“Great. I’ll send a few Dragons your way,”* she said.

*“Please refrain from sending four marks, or even opening a gate at all. I recognize the fluctuation but I cannot guarantee the safety of everyone here,”* it said.

*“Sure. Only for emergencies. Or just to show off. Or if it’s funny. Or if I want to show you an interesting creature,”* Ilea said.

The Meadow was quiet for a long moment. *“That is. Acceptable.”*

*“Great, see you then,”* Ilea said and closed the gate again, with her head out of course.

*“I understood that correctly,”* Kyrian said. *“You can open a gate directly to the domain of the Meadow?”*

*“Pocket Meadow, yes,”* Ilea said. *“For emergencies only.”*

The elf and human looked at each other, Kyrian raising a brow. *“Of course,”* they said in sync.

*How large can I make these gates. I’m sure throwing a few hundred tons of dense rocks would flatten pretty much anything.* She considered the thought while getting concerned looks from her companions. Surely they simply didn’t understand greatness. *“Don’t act like that. I’ll be stronger than the Meadow soon enough. This doesn’t make a difference,”* she said, like a liar.