

Chapter 731 Exchange

Evan looked at her for a while. "I'm certainly interested in your source. What makes you think the Ascended were not defeated?"

"Because I met one," she said.

He leaned forward a little. "You did?"

"Yes," Ilea said. "As to the reason why I'm here. Your Foundation is in the possession of a Taleen artifact. It should identify as a key of sorts. I would like to have it."

"The Bronze Key. Indeed. One part of a set. Many have speculated on what exactly the keys open. I suppose you would know?" Evan asked.

"That is not information I'm willing to share," Ilea said.

He considered. "And you're willing to take this artifact by force, should I refuse?"

"I don't need force. I assume you're aware of my third Class," she said.

"Space magic, it is said. Though you're giving us too much credit. The reports on this are unclear. You just confirmed them," he said. "Your Taleen treasure... where did you meet the Ascended?"

"In a dungeon called the Descent. You might be familiar with the facility. It existed when Rhyvor was still around," she said. "It appeared at the very bottom of the dungeon, spoke of an intruder and attacked me. It didn't take me seriously and I managed to escape, just barely."

"It didn't reveal anything about its presence in Elos?" he asked.

"Not exactly. And the facility was destroyed afterwards. He was a metal creator and he did mention the Azarinth order," she said.

"Which means he was around during the war. This is concerning news. I had hoped they had given up on this realm but it seems some of them remain. As to my theory, I think it's possible the Ascended have removed the knowledge of the event we have discussed before," he said.

"For us to forget the threat?" Ilea asked. *Nes said she didn't think anybody still cared about Elos. What are the chances that she was wrong? The one in the Descent seemed mostly there to catch an invader into one of his testing labs.*

"Potentially, though other possibilities exist. And even my Seekers cannot find or enter their facilities. It would require someone of your power to even just survive. Though finding them remains the main problem, and the Taleen are gone, their knowledge lost. Hundreds of years of searching," he said.

Ilea wasn't quite as convinced about an Ascended threat. Evan didn't seem to have a direct Ascended source, nor did he even mention Khor or the Navuun. He assumed they didn't exactly lose but he didn't know about the internal conflicts. The main reason the forces of Elos weren't entirely destroyed upon their invasion.

"You seem quite interested for someone that stays so far removed from the Plains," Ilea said.

He sighed. "I am tired, of conflict. I have always been tired of it. I grew up trying to survive, trying to find a home, stability. I thought that once we could achieve such, that harmony would prevail. My arrival here proved such idealistic notions wrong. Immediately. I have no interest in the struggles for power, not beyond the documentation of history itself. So that future generations may learn, so that we may stay on the path. We have watched the balance of the world, have seen nations rise and fall, have seen monsters spill out of dungeons, laying waste to entire cities. I have seen... dragons, Ilea. Never will I forget their roars, the very ground shattering as they clashed in fury. And yet nothing has come close to that day, when the sky darkened and the very fabric of magic itself felt as if ripped apart. It affected all. Life itself in this very realm. An intrusion into the natural order so unholy, even the Elven domains moved, working with humans and dwarfs to fight this threat. And everyone agreed. For a time,

"Yes, I am interested. To know if this ancient threat remains, and to know if there is something we can do to prevent another event such as it was," he finished.

"I'll keep an eye out," Ilea said. "But as you said, it's not exactly easy to find these underground facilities. Even just Taleen dungeons are more something randomly stumbled upon than searched for," she said.

"Indeed," Evan said. "Though we have records of many of their facilities, should you be interested in that. Perhaps you could find further knowledge on the Ascended."

"Are you hiring me as one of your Seekers?" she asked with a smile.

"I wish I could, though I believe you understand the potential threat. Your Medic Sentinels are proof that you are not entirely absorbed by power," he said.

"Thanks. I'll have a look at the locations you have," she said. *Maybe some are no longer part of their network or not accessible through it.*

Evan motioned with his hand and one of the doors opened.

A man clad in the same sand colored robes entered, holding a chest with both hands. He set it down on the table and bowed before he left.

Evan opened it to reveal one of the Taleen keys. "I assume this is what you were looking for?"

[The Bronze Key – Ancient Quality]

"Yes, that's one of them," Ilea said.

"You offered me some things to consider. I believe we have nothing to gain from withholding this artifact, though if you will, I have some questions," Evan said.

"Go for it, I'll let you know if I know something or if I can't answer," she said.

"The metals Ravenhall has been buying in all of the Plains. The expansion of Morhill... can you tell me anything about that?" he asked.

Don't see why not. "We figured out long range teleportation gates. Morhill is to become a hub of sorts," she said. *Good way to find out if his faction will get involved as well.* "I'm sure your Foundation could be included as well."

The man looked at her for a moment before he started laughing. "Oh... this is... even bigger than we expected. Secrets uncovered in the north?"

“Not really. I met a very powerful space magic creature on my travels. It helped us quite a bit in understanding the technology,” she said.

“The realm you entered from Baralia?” he asked.

“You know of it?” Ilea said.

“Rumors only. Lys is not easy to gain information from. And everything on this was top secret. Though I understand the gate was closed yet again, which makes me think a space mage was involved,” he said. “Or someone very versed in blood rituals. Michael Elyse was said to be, and I quote... furious, at the closure of the gate. I doubt it was him.”

“Well, it should be more or less public knowledge soon enough but yes. I brought back a powerful being from Erendar,” she said.

“That is quite a risk to take. And why we most certainly won’t be agreeing to a teleportation gate in or close to the Foundation,” Evan said.

“Understandable,” she answered. “I’m sure your Seekers have trained a long time to be able to navigate and survive the desert.”

“Indeed. Our location is one of our greatest assets, and the main reason we’re still around after all this time,” he said. “However, teleportation gates are certainly going to change things in the Plains. I assume other species will become interested too. As to my next question. What do you know of Elven kind?”

“I know they remain within their Domains most of the time. I know they have something called Oracles, which seem to be the highest ranked in their societies. I know the Elves that attacked and destroyed many of the independent cities in the west were young inexperienced idiots who don’t exactly consider human life worthwhile,” she explained.

“And how exactly have you come to this information?” Evan asked.

“I met an elf in the north. One that did attack me but was open for discussion once he failed to kill me. He... struggled, with his place in their society and the world,” she said.

“Does this artifact have anything to do with that?” Evan asked.

You already know the answer to that, she thought. “I’m not going to answer that question.”

He grinned and shoved the chest over. “If you are helping the Cerithil Hunters... I hope you understand the potential ramifications among your human allies. Wars have been started over less.”

He might not know of Syrithis then.

Ilea didn’t comment on his potential speculation, storing the key within her domain.

“Who is the Azarinth Healer that you mentioned?” she asked instead. He had deemed her information enough to hand over the artifact. They were even once more.

“He split off from their Order. I know they tried and failed to apprehend him, even their most experienced hunters unable to even locate the man. Not until he started taunting them. We received a letter... a long time ago, mind you. A letter stating that the Azarinth Order was no more, the last First Hunter putting down his title and declaring the end of their existence. He had won, it seemed, and he wanted it documented by the oldest library in existence,” Evan explained. “Where he

remains or if he truly is still alive, I don't know, though I'm rather sure the latter is a given. They were notoriously hard to kill."

"I get that often," Ilea mused.

"I was wondering if you ever found Scipio," Evan said.

"I did, but if you know him, you know that he travels around a lot. I met a girl, from the same realm as the one I'm from. He had protected her, always interested in realm travelers," she said. "I believe he was around back before the war as well."

"And he was involved in it, as far as I remember," Evan said. "More than I. If you ever meet him again, let him know I'd be interested in talking."

"I will," Ilea said. Though she didn't think the man was particularly keen on meeting Evan. "Have you heard of Audur?"

"The name is not familiar," Evan said.

"Self proclaimed Guardian of the West. A dragon. I had hoped you could offer some insight," she said.

"Those who meet dragons rarely survive, let alone learn of their names," the man said. "I appreciate your addition. Did you fight it?"

"Her, I believe. And I can't exactly call it a fight. She was playing with her food. Wood and life magic were her preferred magics," Ilea explained.

"Peculiar, though what we know of dragons is that they're more individual than most other species. Their overwhelming power is documented somewhat well however. Even among four marks they hold a high rank, perhaps the highest," he said.

"Yeah. I haven't exactly seen something stronger," Ilea said. She genuinely didn't know if the Fae was as powerful as Audur. Neither had shown her much of what they could really do and both their levels were pretty much off the charts. "What about you?"

"I would love to say I have, but at that stage it's difficult to discern or compare. Even with four marks of a similar level, the differences can be staggering," he said.

"True. Evan, you're the first three mark human I meet. I know you said you disliked conflict, but are you interested in a fight?" Ilea asked.

He smiled. "I had expected the question earlier, with your reputation. And I don't consider training one's magical ability to be conflict. It's become more of a... let's say pastime. And I certainly understand your frustration. It's difficult to find someone worthy at this stage, and teaching students is not quite the same."

"So you're the one training the sand and bone mages?" Ilea asked.

"Well, I started. At this point my responsibilities are not quite as extensive as they once were," he said and stood up. "Let us move to the desert. I doubt we can truly test ourselves in any of our facilities. Azarinth magic has a way with enchantments after all."

"You seem to know it well," Ilea said.

"Well, I studied it for a few centuries. I even possess a few skills that were... inspired," he added with a smile.

Ilea raised a brow. "You do?"

"Their power was once notorious. I had sources that claimed the Elders of the order had access to Bluemoon Grass without the same potential consequences but chose not to use it on their students. A way to ensure that commitment met expectations. I believe exactly that fear led to their near cult like fanaticism. It's surprising still that battle healers remain rare. Near unheard of in this age, up until your rise to bardic fame. Ancient healing orders that disdain the idea for reasons they themselves have forgotten or eradicated on purpose, only to spite the legacy of the Azarinth Order," he spoke and opened the door.

Ilea followed him back up again, soon reaching the same terrace they had talked on before.

If what he says is true, the Azarinth could've pushed humanity way past what they were before but instead they caused their own Order's collapse and a subsequent removal of battle healers. Bunch of idiots.

"The Sentinels are going to change that notion," Ilea said.

"Yes. I heard of your communication with the various healing orders. Some more subtle than others," Evan said and walked to the side of the terrace where his form dissolved into sand.

Ilea blinked before she spread her wings and followed the thin mist that floated as if carried by wind. She descended down from the mountain and landed on the sand, Evan sitting a few meters away. "Is that your preferred method of flying?" she asked him.

"I do find wings a little... mundane. But then I'm quite old, I do not mean to offend," he spoke.

"Well I am offended. Wings might be the best thing I got in this realm," Ilea said.

"Then perhaps we shall revisit the topic of flight in another few centuries," he said and stood up.

"Are you calling me immature?" Ilea asked.

The man smiled. "I am calling you young, Lilith, which is what you are." He pointed southwards. "That way," he said and dissolved again. This time the sand simply landed on the ground, his presence gone entirely.

Now that's more like it, she thought, trying to find out what just happened. No trace of teleportation, just a bit of sand magic when he dissolved but that's obvious. None of her skills showed anything else. She had to trust the direction he had pointed to. Exciting. Finally someone that doesn't rely on conventional teleportation. Maybe his opinion on wings is somewhat forgivable.

She flew off, soon seeing a dot in the distance. He vanished again when she got closer. A few minutes of flight later, the dot didn't move anymore.

"I believe this is far enough," he said when she landed.

Ilea looked back. The mountains were a tiny speck to her enhanced vision. "Probably. Yeah."

"Normally... I would offer a wager of sorts, to entice my opponent. You're not quite like my usual challengers," he spoke.

Ilea cracked her neck and formed her full mantle. "Let's just start slow, get a feel for each other." She formed fists and walked towards him. *Two humans who have killed four marks with their own power.* "Let's see if you hold up to my expectations."

“And you to your reputation,” Evan spoke. Bone started growing on his limbs and chest, his entire body quickly covered by the dense material. Three horns grew from each side of his helmet, runes etched into the bone mask that covered his face. He didn’t look much different to the guards she had seen before. The man raised his hand where a rapier of bone grew from his palm. He gripped it and changed into a fighting stance.

A test of skill then, she thought and advanced. Ilea didn’t try to run and maneuver on the sand, instead using her wings to close the distance at a very low flight. Her opponent remained on the ground. She first tried with speed along, adding feints here and there to get past his thin blade, his other hand to his back.

He kept up with her, sliding on the sand as if on invisible skates. The man didn’t just keep up, he soon pushed back, striking at her armor as he used the superior reach of his chosen weapon.

The exchange continued for near thirty seconds until Evan made some distance. They were close when it came to speed alone but Ilea had to admit his technique was flawless.

“You have precognition,” he said. “Or is it time magic?”

“Why do you think I use either?” Ilea asked, flying with a grin on her ash covered face.

“You’re not fast or good enough to avoid my blade. Your movements are skill driven. You’re using force and crutches where your experience fails you,” he spoke.

“You did say I was young,” Ilea answered. “And I wouldn’t call myself inexperienced when it comes to fighting.”

“You obviously are not. But I assume you have fought monsters more than sapient beings. Nor would you have had much need to adjust or improvise. Your sheer power is enough to overwhelm most. With your surely superior healing, you’d be difficult to slow down,” he said.

“I can’t say that you’re wrong. But I suppose it’s a little unfair if we both fight so restricted. And you’ve had a few more years to hone your skill with the blade,” she said, ashen limbs forming on her back.

“I did not mean to offend. I hope that is clear. Indeed, with our age if anything, my own power is an embarrassment. Though I came to enjoy calm meditation and tea more so than seeking another challenge in the frontiers of this world. Let us move on then,” Evan said as the sands shifted, his form firmly planted on a growing wave.

Ilea grinned as she advanced, either of them yet to land a hit or use teleportation.