

Chapter 722 Taunting

“And what exactly do you need this piece for?” the Empress asked after Heron had placed the entirely black key onto the round table.

Ilea had wanted to follow into the treasury but after a short argument had decided to go there on her own time. There were sure to be some interesting trinkets, and thanks to her locator of the Taleen key, she had a good enough idea of where to look.

[The Obsidian Key – Ancient Quality]

“It’s part of a set, and I need it for later,” Ilea specified.

“That doesn’t explain anything,” Syrithis murmured.

“It’s to help the Hunters,” Ilea added. She wasn’t about to tell them about the One without Form. “And I doubt you had any use for it. I can pay for it too if you need me to.”

“It’s quite alright. Take it as a sign of our future cooperation,” Alyris said.

Ilea smiled and made the obsidian key vanish. *Four to go. I swear to fuck if any of these have been thrown into another bloody dimension, I’m gonna lose it.*

“I formally request to represent Lys in the tournament of Morhill,” the lizardman spoke, finally giving voice to his visibly growing frustrations.

“Some of the nobility will want to participate as well. I’m not sure formal representation will be an option in the first place,” Alyris said and looked to Ilea.

“I have no clue. I just deliver letters,” she answered.

“And unmask hidden secrets that have been kept from even the most tenacious spies,” Heron added.

“Well you don’t keep them very well,” Ilea said. “Any moderate space mage would perceive Ruler.

“We know that to be factually untrue,” Alyris said. “But it’s beside the point. You have proven to be trustworthy in many ways, Ilea. I do however hope that bringing the Meadow back from that ice covered realm will not cause harm to ours in the long run.”

“She knows what’s out there,” Ilea nodded to the half elf. “The Taleen alone could slaughter every single human on the continent. Why not get some allies that could actually help.”

“Yes. This coalition that is mentioned... who exactly is part of it?” Alyris asked.

Ilea smiled. “You’ll have to find out in Morhill, I suppose. Ah don’t look at me like that, I can’t tell you everything. The others will want to do some of the reveals themselves. I’ve had enough fun for one evening.”

“You do not wish to battle?” the lizardman asked.

“Ah no, I do. I mean like... reveal fun, not fighting fun. But I’ll be honest, you’ll need all the help you can get,” she said.

The large human growled.

“Yes, I do want to see you fight. Never fought a bone bruise before, at least I don’t think so. And the Shadow magic you use is something I want to figure out. Why don’t you all fight me at the same time?” Ilea suggested.

“You know that isn’t possible,” Alyris said and rubbed her brow.

“Scared you’ll lose?” Ilea asked with a grin.

“Don’t push it, I have an army at my back,” Alyris said.

“I’ve fought armies before,” Ilea retorted.

“You’re at the center of our power. Every wall is enchanted to repel a force of hundreds,” the woman said again.

“I have escaped the clutches of Audur. You do not scare me, human,” she said.

The Empress looked at her with tired disbelief. Her face slackened before she laughed. “It’s been a while since I felt this way,” she said afterwards, grasping the hand of Syrithis. “It’s downright... electrifying.”

“I know what you mean,” Ilea mused.

The half elf hissed.

She hissed back.

“I’m interested, Ilea. Your Medic Sentinels... is there more to them? More than the objectives known to the public?” the Empress asked.

“Not that I know,” Ilea answered. “Is it so surprising to form a healing organization with the goal to help people?” she asked.

“Their... reputation, isn’t the most shining,” Alyris said. “I will believe you. And thank you, for adding this asset to humanity.”

“Thank my friend Trian,” Ilea said.

“The Alymie survivor,” Valarienne mused. “Unfortunate events, and within our very lands. I apologize on behalf of the Lys nobility, they can be more barbaric than the tribes of the north.”

The large man growled, this time aimed at the storm mage.

“Ah hush, you know it’s true!” the woman said and looked away.

“We will come to your tournament, Lilith. But know that the Lys nobility isn’t as unified as the people in this room. I hope those gates work,” Alyris said.

“They work. Better than the Taleen ones even. And it won’t be the only thing to sway opportunistic minds,” Ilea answered.

“It’s not the opportunistic minds I worry about, Ilea. It’s those chained to traditions and old power. Tell Claire and Sulivhaan they have to put a lot of weight on the Shadow’s Hand, it’s the one Order older than all my court, with a reputation that may even precede the very Empire of Lys. Are the Elders still lost?” Alyris said.

“We’ll get a few of them to be there. All but Adam,” Ilea said.

“The demon summoner,” Heron said. “I had never thought him to be tempted by such madness.”

He didn't exactly seem mad to me, Ilea thought but chose not to mention it. The man was responsible for thousands of deaths, and if she ever met him again, he would not get away.

"I didn't mean to have a pissing contest before, by the way," Ilea said. "I assume it gets pretty boring for people of your power, sitting around, defending against low level assassins. When's the last time you've been seriously challenged? I didn't see you out there during the siege? You were coordinating from in here to be sure, too important to risk. Baralia probably hoped to bait you out.

"But I'm not King Baron... you know me," Ilea said and grabbed the Fae from her head, holding it by its large head as it dangled in the air. She helped it flip before it landed in her palm. "I've been flying around the Plains all day. I'm bored. Please, Empress, indulge me."

Valarienne was surprised when the Empress gestured for their opinion. A rare sight from back in their adventuring days. The storm mage immediately approved. She didn't think the fight would be easy. A three mark human, especially a healer, but she wanted to see what Lilith could do. And what she had said was true. They hadn't faced a direct challenge in quite some time.

Perhaps Alyris was annoyed about the mention of the siege. Five Generals had to convince her to stay inside the central district, and to keep her Guard close while her people were slaughtered in the streets. *Ilea is not a ruler. It's only natural that she would blame her. But Alyris blames herself most of all.*

Malkorn approved of course. He perhaps was the closest to Ilea in character but Valarienne could tell with a glance that he would be ripped apart by her in seconds. Heron too approved. *Has he truly not seen her fight before? Maybe you are growing old.*

"Are you sure this is wise? She has faced the Taleen alongside some of the most powerful beings I have known. She is a three mark human. It will be a hard fought battle," Syrithis said.

The Bone Bruiser growled and motioned his approval.

"She will not harm us. We might embarrass ourselves here, but when again can we test ourselves against a threat such as her? If anything, it will help us prepare," Valarienne answered.

"My friends seem to be in agreement," Alyris said. "I too must say that I'm interested in the myth that is Lilith. You must understand that I am a little rusty," the Empress added, the silver in her dress flowing out to form a smooth set of armor, her face as of yet uncovered. The silver in her eyes glowed with magic, power far beyond her level emanating from her person.

Ilea smiled. "I'll go easy on you, don't worry."

Malkorn growled, the sound deep and guttural.

"We will use the Hall of Ancients," Heron said. "It should mask out battle to the outside world."

The group stood up and started towards the door when Lilith snapped her fingers.

“Which direction?” she asked.

Heron raised a brow. Alyris gave him a nod. He pointed.

Valarienne saw blue eyes lock with her own before she vanished. They appeared in a dark corridor deep within the Halls of Eternity. *Through all the enchantments. Us included.*

Heron pointed again. “About another sixty meters.”

Once again they vanished and Valarienne could tell they tried to resist but all of them failed. All but Ruler, the Fae appearing a moment later, giggling into their minds.

‘ding’ ‘Space Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 4’

Even a second tier resistance failed to stop her spell. They had trained with Ruler but the small creature couldn’t procure the same power as someone at level three hundred, and it generally disliked attacking them, even for the purpose of training.

“Your resistances are quite impressive,” Lilith said, still leisurely sitting in the chair she had brought from their hall.

“You’re trying to taunt experienced adventurers, Lilith,” the Empress said as she made some distance, magical lights flickering to life above and around them, the large hall enchanted to the brim. An ancient training facility for the higher nobility and Emperors that ruled Lys in the past millennia. A helmet flowed around her head before silver lines formed a winged skeleton behind her back. Spears flowed into existence, their tips glowing with radiant power, her eyes the only thing visible on her body.

Lilith gestured behind herself. “Seems to work on that guy.”

Malkorn walked with his claws poised, each breath rugged as he paced from side to side. He had the wisdom not to answer.

Heron had vanished entirely and Syrithis hovered a hundred meters off in the distance, the air around her vibrating.

“I should get some distance too then,” Valarienne said with a smile and started floating. She stopped around fifty meters away in the air and formed her defenses. She focused on a supporting role and on defending herself, though she assumed the woman would let them get in a few hits at the start. *Let’s see if we can get her to take us seriously.* Under normal circumstances, Valarienne would’ve thought the battle healer arrogant and naive, but with her reputation and all the reports they had at their disposal, it simply wasn’t true. She knew that. The others knew it too. Alyris may pretend that Lilith’s taunts had failed but they were here, facing her in a test of magical power. They had lost to her taunts before she had even arrived.

“What’s your name anyway? Do you even speak Common?” Lilith asked when the large man walked in front of her, his body now covered in half a meter of tough bone, four meter long horns on his savage helmet modeled after something in the middle of a boar and a bear. Valarienne was never quite comfortable seeing him, but she didn’t question results.

“My name. Is. Retribution,” he spoke, each word forced out as if they caused him incredible pain.

Lilith smiled. “Then show me what you can do, Retribution. And don’t hold back, I’m *quite* durable.”

Oh don't say that to him, Valarienne thought, glancing towards the floating Alyris. Nobody interrupted, nor did she herself say or sign anything. They all wanted to see.

And so they saw.

The ground cracked and splintered where the large man had stood, one step enough to reach the single chair. His now near three meter form slammed into and through the chair, the bent form of a woman around his large bone and spike covered fist. They came down in a crash thirty meters beyond. His arms blurred as he slammed them down into the healer, the speed and power increasing. The shock wave of his fast start reached Valarienne. Splinters of wood now reached the stone floor, heavy impacts resounding in quick succession.

Bone cracked and splintered, blood splattered, and magic surged, more power flowing through the Bone Bruiser with each brutal punch. He wouldn't stop. Not until he was called back. *Is Alyris just gonna let it happen?* Valarienne thought, unable to take her eyes off the spectacle. *Was she taken off guard? Did Lilith underestimate him? No, she would've teleported away. She's just letting this happen?*

A smile grew on her face as she started weaving magic into her spells, dark clouds forming above her as runes started to glow on her arms. Incantations left her mouth in incomprehensible whispers as the ground shook with more impacts.

She was halfway through her third spell when the Bruiser stopped, his arm shaking as it was pushed back up. Valarienne saw the bloodied and broken form of Lilith stand up, her legs and arms snapping back into place as she held one mangled arm against the bone covered hand of her foe, the limb twisted around itself as a thick layer of ash flowed around her tattered clothes to cover her entire form. It formed around her head with two horns jutting out near her temples, aimed forward.

She looked up at the large form and sighed. "Good," she said in a slightly raspy voice.

His left fist slammed into her side. The ground below her left leg cracked. She didn't move. Bone spikes came into existence all around her much smaller form, pushing down and pressing against her armor. The grinding noise intensified as more bone came in from below, the woman entirely surrounded. A whirl of ash flashed out from her back, a dozen free moving black limbs cut through the bone with ease, the bits that had reached her already ground to fine powder, her armor left undamaged.

She took a few slow steps towards the slightly confused man, ducked under his punch and answered with her own fist. The impact resounded with a crack, a small shock wave spreading out over the ground as the massive form of Retribution was lifted off the ground, his entire chest armor cracked and dented inward as he flew through the air in a slow arc. He impacted the ground with a loud crash, coughing up blood a moment later.

"You're a tough one, I'll give you that," Lilith said, shaking her hand.

Nobody said anything. Even large three mark monsters couldn't just shrug off an all out assault of the level four hundred Bruiser, let alone send him flying with a single punch. *Can't be measured by monster level standards, as expected*, Valarienne thought and kept watching. The woman had yet to attack any of the others and Retribution was far from done.

He jumped up in an instant, his bone armor reformed as he rushed her with a roar.

Lilith moved at the last moment, near fluid against his savage strength. Three hits landed on his side, sending him stumbling. She stepped to his back and kicked against his right leg. The impact

made the ground crack, the bone inside his leg breaking through the armor around it. She aimed at his spine, three quick punches flashing through the man as he tried to turn. He went to his knees, power flowing through him as his magic pushed against the damage.

Ilea rushed forward and jumped past his head, her arms caught around his neck before she landed and pulled, a maneuver that normally required someone to be at least at a similar size and weight. And still the man moved, her momentum and strength pulling him forward by the neck, his legs raised above her before she brought his entire form down against the stone, shattering a large section in the process.

She took slow steps towards the groaning man and stomped down on his arms, then his legs, squashing the armored limbs as if they were those of an ordinary man.

“Good regeneration too,” she said. “But what if I rip off your head?” Ashen limbs moved above the man’s neck, forming into a single thick spike when Malkorn appeared behind the woman.

He stopped in the middle of his attack.

Lilith turned with one finger raised, the thick ashen spike turning to face the armored lizardman instead. He remained in the air, his muscles tense as he pushed against the force that held him.

“I had expected you to announce yourself,” she said, a blade of air striking her shoulder, followed by four more. They seemed to vanish into the dark ashen armor, creating thin mists of black before the thick defense settled once again. She flicked her finger and the lizardman was sent flying. He tumbled three times before he came to a sliding halt. His stance had changed.

Retribution was back on his feet. She had made her statement. They wouldn’t hold back.

Ilea tried very hard not to kill the weaker combatants. Malkorn’s technique was some of the best she had seen but he just didn’t hold up to her speed and destructive force. She generally just dodged and sent him flying with a single punch or space magic, as a courtesy to keep him in the fight. The Bone Bruiser reminded her of some high level undead she had fought. He could tank fully charged archon strike hits converted into physical force. She assumed he would burst like an overripe tomato if she actually used her mana intrusion but against physical attacks, he was more than a little resistant. His first barrage of attacks had nearly made her dizzy, the monster capable of dishing out damage equal to some four marks she had fought. Granted he had about the same finesse in his approach.

Syrithis and Alyris were careful with their ranged attacks, sliding them in whenever an opening presented itself. It was clear that they had a lot of experience fighting as a group but against her dominion, space awareness, and precognition, it simply didn’t matter. They had to overwhelm her, and they were holding back with allies in her melee range.

Let’s see what they can do then, she thought and vanished, spreading her wings and flying towards the half elf. There was enough distance between them that the mage had a chance to really show off her spells. Ilea hoped for something at least as impressive as the Storm Griffin, but maybe she should’ve dialed down her expectations. *Come on, daughter of Isalthar. Show off a little.*