

“We did wonder if you were still alive at all,” Ilea said. “But seeing you now, and the power you wield. Where were you?”

“You suggest I should’ve ruled all of humanity like some Emperor? The thought did cross my mind, but then that could either end in my murder, or growth. Murder leads to death, and growth leads to more work. And all of it lies with me. Neither something I wished for, nor something I deem sustainable. Despite my magical knowledge, I cannot be everywhere at once. I cannot control an army of a hundred thousand beings, and I cannot remain in one place to protect those within from external attacks. There are things that magic allows me to accomplish. Just like you, Ilea. But I remain one man, as you remain one woman, or so I assume.

“I traveled the realms, whenever an opportunity presented itself. I learned from strange and ancient beings, visited cultures of wonder. I learned of their failures and their pride. But most of all, I learned of magic. I returned here and there, to check on things, to make sure everything wouldn’t fall into chaos, but things seemed stable enough. A war here and there was unavoidable with our nature. Over the millennia, I have visited most of the cultures found in this realm, but I suppose I failed to make the same impression as you have. A few trade agreements here and there. A few diplomatic actions. Perhaps the world was not ready, perhaps there was a need for a common purpose yet again, perhaps it is happenstance, like you suggest, or you are just better suited to convince beings of grand ideas.”

Ilea did wonder what would’ve happened if she had appeared in Elos with her current powers. Would she have interfered with the politics of the Plains? Would she have found the Cerithil Hunters? Iz? The keys? Would she have joined the Shadow’s Hand, and formed the relationships she had with the now rulers of Ravenhall? She had no skill in law making, governance, food production, administration, trade, let alone enchantment.

And still, with that kind of power, she would’ve felt a lot of responsibility. “I can see your point. It certainly was a journey.”

“With beings like these two here, I believe a lot could’ve been possible. But now they are here, and a lot has already been accomplished. You have sought my knowledge. What can I do?” Erik spoke.

*“You know of Ker Velor, and our reason for concern. You know some things about the extent of our own resources. What are your thoughts? And what can you add?”* the Meadow asked.

“They are as I explained to Aki. Though now I don’t believe finding a facility of Ker Velor is near as impossible as before. Still, we will need an Ascended to help. Their runes can be learned, but without metal creation abilities it is tedious, let alone trying to make sense of anything the Architect has set up,” Erik spoke.

“We have an Ascended working with us,” Aki said.

“Really? Who?” Erik asked.

“First, we need to know who helped you build the Haven,” Aki said.

“I’m afraid I promised not to share that information. However, I asked out of interest more than anything. Getting the Ascended I know involved would’ve been my next suggestion anyway. And

we can still do that. Two of them instead of one will increase our chances against the Architect significantly. Next, you'll need a team of the best infiltrators seen in existence. Infiltrators that can get any creature, any perception skill, and any defensive runes. The best of the best, if we so much as hope to get any actual information out of one of his facilities."

"We have that team ready," Aki said.

"You have?" Ilea asked.

"You're not a part of it," he spoke.

"I'm hurt," Ilea replied.

"They're training against the Ascended on our side, coupled with a few teams of enchanters and the Meadow. I cannot judge if that is comparable to Ker Velor, but it's the best we have," the Executioner spoke.

"That is a part of it, but we will need a way to get the Ascended in after the infiltrators have found a central Varitan sphere," Erik said.

"That is where Ilea comes in," Aki said.

"Oh, so I was included in the plan?" she asked.

"There may be alternatives, but your presence would allow for some leeway when it comes to tampering. We will have to test your new Shift, once the Meadow agrees to see your... fire," Aki said.

Erik glanced at her. "That thing I feel from you?"

"I can show you," Ilea said.

"I would love to see," Erik said, a sparkle in his eyes. A real one, of arcane nature.

*"Please do that later. Somewhere far away,"* the Meadow sent.

"We find a facility, infiltrate it, find the connection to the other parts of the mesh, go out and strike the other locations. That would disable the attempt at Extraction, would it not?" Aki asked.

"Yes. You should try and strike as many locations as possible at the same time. Any delays would give the Architect time to react, and we want as little as possible of that," Erik said.

"Say we do all that successfully. What happens after? Leaving the Architect alive seems unwise with how much he has invested to set everything up," Aki said.

"It depends on his reaction. I have never fought him. I don't know what he would do. Perhaps this is just one of many testing grounds, one of many set ups to gather a Source. Perhaps it's meant as revenge," Erik said.

"There was a mention of him bringing back the First Ascended," Aki said. "Ravana Vor Itar."

"Oh," Erik said. He looked lost for a moment, then sat down in his chair. He stuffed his pipe once more and set it alight, dragging deeply before he exhaled. "Then this could be personal," he said, his voice having lost the casual edge from before. "If she is involved. There may be a chance he will be more aggressive. Ilea. You fought him before. How confident are you, that you could hunt him down and kill him?"

“He has used a way to obscure his realm travel, but if he can’t do that as a fast thing in the moment, I don’t see how he could escape. Meadow?” she said.

*“I could not escape your space magic abilities by now. If we get the chance, you will be the one to face him,”* the Meadow spoke.

“And in a direct fight,” Ilea said and shook her head. “He’s done.”

“You understand that he will lead you into traps prepared specifically to kill you?” Erik said.

Ilea grinned. “He already did.”

“Then they will be more dangerous next time.”

“He fought me some time ago. My four mark evolutions are *very* recent,” Ilea said with a smile.

“Even I doubt he could create anything close to what a dragon would wield. And you survived that,” Erik said. “And if Ravana is remade. I can only hope the combined power of the Accords would stand a chance. We must find the Ascended I know, and perhaps after that, I could help with a missing link in your alliance. The Vampire Courts have always been wonderful hosts, and they’re quite long lived as well. Perhaps even immortal.”

“A diplomatic in would be phenomenal,” Aki said.

“I’ll go too!” Ilea said. “I want to see the tech they have.”

Erik laughed. “There should be a representative of the Accords.”

“You should be even more effective now as an envoy, except perhaps with the Feynor,” Aki said.

“Awesome,” Ilea said and grinned. “So let’s find your Ascended friend, then it’s off to Vampire lands.”

*“There was one thing I wanted cleared before this goes on. Were you the one to remove any records of the first Extraction?”* the Meadow asked.

Erik looked to the sky, smoking from his pipe. “Yes. To hide the Source within the Haven, nobody could know, lest they claim it for themselves and attract attention from beings and powers we could not hope to face. From this realm and beyond.

“I masked it first, as a way to promote stability, and reduce fear. With the first iteration of the current Lily. History can be shaped, and information can be controlled. Of course some would remember, would tell their stories. But in time and through the generations, this knowledge, something everyone had once experienced vividly, turned into legend. By now I would imagine it to be an obscure tale, among many others. It took considerable resources to achieve that, but most of all, time. Time and the fact that such an event seems entirely unbelievable, without having been there. Having seen it, for oneself.”

“You were there, right,” Ilea said. “Do you remember it?”

“Like it was yesterday,” he spoke. “The Ascended like to pride themselves to have achieved feats beyond even the divine. Since that day, I know such to be true.”

“Sounds like something I’d love to see... without all the horrible demon transformation and death of course,” Ilea said.

“We cannot help it, can we?” Erik spoke with a smile on his face. “But as humanity, we must be better. One Source remains with us, and it must protect life, instead of being a mere tool for experimentation and power.”

*“He doesn’t know about the Source in Iz?”* Ilea sent to the others.

*“No. And we should keep it that way for the time being. He has removed the removal of a sun from history. We don’t know what else he has hidden,”* the Meadow replied.

*“Right,”* Ilea sent.

“Do you have a way to contact your Ascended?” Aki asked.

“We’re not exactly best friends, and while they are a wielder of space magic, my own abilities to travel and communicate through the fabric are downright non-existent,” he said and rubbed his beard. “I can think of something though.”

Ilea appeared on the Taleen gate at the south eastern edge of the Northern lands. Next to her appeared Erik Anderson, also known as Eregar. She held one of Aki’s watchers under her arm.

Erik knelt down and touched the platform. “I can’t believe you cracked them. After all that time.”

“All you needed was a strange space tree from beyond,” Ilea said.

He glanced at her. “Of course. I seem foolish, now that the answer is here. What of all these Taleen ruins?”

“Most were built by the One without Form, serving the war. Others had previously served the Taleen on their own military ambitions,” Aki said. “This one is empty for the time being. Like many others. There are plenty of ideas but our resources are devoted elsewhere.”

“And you said the Taleen now work with you?” Erik said.

“I have studied their history, and understand your disbelief. But their people have been imprisoned in Io for millennia. They are not who you knew,” Aki said.

“I mean, he might know a few,” Ilea added. “Like Ormont.”

“Ormont... of the Makers, was he not? We never had the pleasure to meet, and the alliance between species was short lived as it was. Though the worst stories related to the Taleen did not pertain to him, I’m sure of that at least.”

Ilea wondered who else the man might know. “It’s pretty crazy to think that you’re literal thousands of years old,” she said as they made their way through and out of the small ruin.

“It’s different when it’s a human. I understand,” Eregar said and laughed. “I’m just as surprised to see something as powerful as you are, while somehow still with two arms and hands, a head of hair, and only two eyes!”

“Yeah. They all have so many eyes,” Ilea murmured. “Or one really big one.”

“Garonoth only has two,” Aki pointed out.

“They’re bigger than me,” Ilea countered.

“Garonoth? The Guardian of the North?” Erik asked.

“You know him?” Ilea said.

“Not personally, but he was one of few known dragons in Elos. I came across some records of the Feynor, eight, or nine centuries past,” he said.

“Anything about Audur? Guardian of the West?” Ilea asked.

Erik thought for a moment, then shook his head. “Not to my knowledge. I was unaware of a Guardian of the West. I thought the Domains fulfill that role.”

“Guardian of what exactly?” Ilea asked.

“Balance,” Erik spoke.

“Balance?” Ilea said when they came out into the open, magic emanating from her companion before he started to fly. She made her own wings appear and joined his side, adding a layer of her armor to the Watcher under her arm.

“Yes. The balance of all things. Of life itself. Of magic. Of course there are considerable philosophical considerations when it comes to the definition of balance, and thus conflict is born. However with the Domains and something as ancient as Garonoth, time itself supports their version, and time has made things settle where they are, balance a part of them, and they a part of balance. However you would argue, removing Garonoth or the Domains would cause considerable chaos for a considerable time.”

“So our expansion as the Accords is causing a lot of chaos?” Ilea said.

“That depends. If you invade and destroy, perhaps. If you build and protect what is already in your territory, I would argue, the Accords could very well become the Guardian of the Plains. If we think in such crude terms. Of course reality is far more complex. The term Guardian and similar words in other tongues are often used for ancient and all powerful beings. Perhaps beyond gods, or gods themselves, though gods can be perpetrators of chaos, whereas I believe Guardian is universally used as a force that imposes stability. Here of course there are still different examples within that I would deem good and bad.”

“You’ve thought about this stuff a lot, eh?” Ilea asked.

Erik chuckled. “One as old as I must find avenues of interest. Thinking is just one of them.”

“How’s your flying?” Ilea asked instead.

“I’ve seen faster,” Erik admitted. “I must apologize if I don’t meet your standards for a fourth tier human.” He smiled. “But I’ll do my best. Do follow close, and don’t fret if you cannot keep up.”

“You’re way too humble for the power I can feel radiating from you,” Ilea said.

He waved her off. “Humility is always favorable compared to arrogance. The arrogant do not learn for they believe themselves superior. And the strong show their true character when faced with humility.”

Ilea smiled. “I just don’t like the attention I get for my power.”

He smiled at her, then closed in and gently touched her shoulder. “Many place expectations and responsibility on those with power. You are one woman. Do not treat yourself too harshly.”

Ilea huffed, then smiled. She looked away, then back at him, his eyes staring right back. “Thanks,” she said.

He smiled back and turned in the air, arcane energies flowing around him as if both him and his spell were a mere part of the environment. “Now come fly with this old man, and show me what a Dragonslayer can do.” He shot off into the distance with a streak of blue light.

Ilea rolled her eyes and followed. “*Humility also seems to allow you to claim you never intended to compete in the first place.*”

He looked back at her and sped up, laughter echoing through the mountainous valleys below. “*Precisely.*”

Ilea stopped and charged her wings. “You better hold on tight, little Watcher.”