

Ilea knew her time would soon be up, pushing farther into the expansive complex as she looked through the confusing mesh of interior design choices. She was about to send a message to Verena when she appeared inside a large study. Like many of the other rooms, it was well furnished, carpets covering the steel floor and a hearth crackling away behind a huge wooden desk.

Behind the table floated a large humanoid currently hunched over a set of books and papers. The fiery light of flames danced over its steel surface, an intricately designed and decorated white robe covering most of its torso and legs, two eyes shining with dim white light. An Ascended.

The being didn't react at first, murmuring something to itself as it turned a few pages, taking a note inside of a massive tome.

***[Nature Mage – lvl ???]***

Ilea could tell it wasn't the same creature she had met before, not only because of the identification. The interlinking metal plates looked similar but not exactly the same, the design flowing in a different way as if a separate armor model made by the same smith. Its head lacked the same adornment the other Ascended had, instead wearing some sort of half ring set atop its steel scalp. It seemed a little more slender, but Ilea wasn't sure if she remembered the other one well enough to be sure.

"And who might you be, curious human?" it spoke, producing sound instead of using telepathy, the steel in its face moving slightly to suggest cheekbones and jaws. Its voice sounded distinctly female, the being yet to use a spell.

Ilea watched it, making sure to keep an eye on the mesh of enchantments around them. She was still thinking of a reply when the Ascended spoke again.

"I would prefer, if there were no battle. There is research here dating back millennia, its destruction a loss to all beings alive," the Ascended spoke. "I am sure, we can find some sort of agreement."

"That sounds acceptable," Ilea answered after a moment. It was not the same Ascended after all, or so she assumed at least. If a fight could be avoided, she would certainly accept. And if it turned out to be inevitable, she would only benefit from more information. "I didn't expect an Ascended here in the north," she said, her wings moving lazily, her body tense to allow for a quick departure.

The creature looked at her for a moment. "Does that mean you did not come for me?"

"I didn't. But now that I found you, I'm certainly curious. I don't plan to destroy your research, but if you attack me, I'll make sure to leave nothing but ashes behind," Ilea said.

"I am well aware of your capabilities, human. There is no need for childish threats. We have established our position," it said and paused. "I must warn you, there is one more within this facility, a human much like you." Its eyes glowed a little brighter before it spoke. "Have you killed them?"

"You're the first living creature I have found," Ilea said honestly. She decided to risk it and sent a message to Verena. "*Stand down for now. Do not attack until I call.*"

The Ascended made a whistling sound. “Amusing. One able to traverse the mesh, without notice. You are a space mage then, a capable one at that.”

Another person materialized next to the Ascended in the same instant, the mesh around them vibrating with power.

Ilea didn't move, seeing the person and smiling slightly as she charged her heat and Archon Strike, just in case.

He was human, just like the Ascended had informed, wearing a long sleeved buttoned black shirt and pants, his black hair rather long and open, with gray streaks visible. His near golden eyes looked almost reptilian, glaring at Ilea with power vibrating around him. Several spells seemed just about to be cast but he held them, for now.

**[Barrier Mage – lvl 442]**

“Long time no see,” Ilea said with a grin. She ignored the slightly confused expression in his eyes and addressed the Ascended instead. “I didn't come for him either.”

“Who are you? How did you get in here?” the man asked.

Ilea sighed. “I left that little of an impression. Albert, was it?” she said, remembering her talk with Elana and Maro. She decided not to mention any of that quite yet. The present tension was quite obvious.

Recognition seemed to spark in his eyes. “The ash mage, with the Shadows. You made me relocate,” he mused, with a slightly annoyed tone.

“Those traps killed plenty of people,” Ilea retorted.

He touched his chin lightly, clean shaven now. “I faintly recall telling you that it wasn't me who built that place,” he informed. “How is the girl? Cless.”

Ilea smiled. “She's doing well. Busy with lessons and painting. Who knows, she might just be sketching the both of us right now.”

He breathed in deeply, most of the tension in his body leaving as his eyes softened a little. “Even if she advanced at a pace as ludicrous as yourself, her divination would not be able to penetrate the barriers in place. You on the other hand, slipped through. Which means you did more than advance your ash and healing.”

“A little,” Ilea said. “I expected another tomb or dungeon here...,” she mused. “There are so many things I wanted to ask you, and you for that matter,” she said, glancing to the Ascended.

“Remember when you cut off my limbs in an attempt to stop me?”

“I did what had to be done,” he said.

“I fought better barrier mages than you and no, you could've easily done something else. I was at level two hundred,” she said.

The Ascended sighed. “You really are a Shadow. Come, let us move into the lounge, we hardly ever use it these days. I'm sure your tensions will be settled with some tea and baked goods.”

“No need to patronize the flesh beings,” Albert said.

“Shush, go on, and disable the barriers while you're at it,” the Ascended said.

*Are they?* Ilea thought, glancing between the two as Albert gestured for her to go through the door. *She did offer baked goods.*

Both of them followed her to the sitting area she had seen upon entry, Ilea not concerned by her walking ahead due to her dominion. If anything it would be a good test, to see if they would use a perceived advantage to attack. *What the hell is this guy doing up here with an Ascended?*

She really hoped they wouldn't just teleport away or try to fight her.

"Here we are," the Ascended said and summoned a few plates holding various cookies, the dough still warm. A chocolaty smell spread through the vicinity, Albert's stomach growled. "When have you eaten last?"

He sat down in one of the armchairs, displacing one of the cookies into his hand.

Ilea blinked her eyes at the spell. "Why not just do that instead of cutting me apart?" she asked, sitting down opposite the man and moving a cookie too.

"What do you mean? I can't move living creatures. Which means you can... what kind of Class did you get? You don't strike me as a studious type. In so little time... who are you?" he asked.

The Ascended sat down too, her arms and legs crossed as she did not summon a cookie.

"Ah to be trapped in a steel shell, unable to appreciate their own culinary wonders," Ilea mused, biting into the doughy chocolate chip cookie as she made eye contact with the Ascended, ignoring the enjoyable confusion coming from the old mage. *The very old mage*, she mused. *What did you do for so many thousands of years, not even a three mark? Or is there some kind of spell preventing me from seeing?*

None of her skills suggested such.

"What's that look for?" he asked.

"Please, why don't you tell us who you are, and why you are here," the Ascended said.

Ilea ate another cookie and smiled. "I'm Lilith, associating with Ravenhall, the independent one, and Hallowfort in the north. There is something here that I need, but I'm not quite willing to tell you what it is."

"The only thing intricate enough to be tracked through the barriers is that damned key," Albert said. "I told you we should've just left it somewhere in the ice. We're lucky a human of all things came to look for it."

The Ascended ignored his complaints. "Why do you seek the Copper Key?" she asked.

"I thought we were sharing," Ilea said.

The being paused. "I am Nes Mor Atul, Navuun of Kohr and a former member of the great Unity, Olym Arcena. You may know the Navuun as Ascended, though I do not abide by that name," she explained and gestured to Albert.

"Albert. We've met before. I don't feel the need to explain myself to an intruder on a treasure hunt," he said.

"It's good to meet an Ascended, or Navuun, that doesn't attack me instantly," Ilea said. "I'm interested to learn about your kind."

Albert chuckled. "What could you possibly know, Lilith? I have heard your name, heard you rose to power in the plains, that you fought armies and monsters. You are no different from the thousands that came before, and will come after. If you want the key, I'm sure it's as safe in your hands as it is in ours. Perhaps even safer."

Ilea looked at the man. *Safer? Than here? Why? Were they protecting it? Hiding it? From the Elves?*

On the one hand, she assumed she could have an interesting chat and be on her way with another Taleen key, but if she was honest, she knew terribly little about the war and the conflict with the Ascended. With what she had learned in the Descent, she deemed their kind far more dangerous in the grand scheme of things than a few Taleen machines or perhaps even all of Elven kind.

Not to mention it annoyed her, to be treated like some upstart teenager on a scavenger hunt.

"What could I possibly know?" she mused, smiling as she savored the annoyance in his eyes. "I can tell that you just want to get back to your research, Scipio."

Ilea made sure to burn the moment into her memory, his utter shock and confusion far more entertaining than most things she had experienced in the past days. And there had been quite a bit.

Nes Mor Atul glanced between them and snickered, using her hand to cover her face in a decidedly human gesture.

"And while I might be here to get another one of the Taleen keys, I'd also like to know how and why your kind took a sun from this realm," Ilea said.

Now it was the Ascended who was silenced near instantly.

Ilea gauged their reactions, the now somewhat self satisfied smile on Scipio's face, aimed at Nes suggesting they weren't currently planning to take another sun. Or so at least Ilea interpreted his reaction.

"It seems we both underestimated you. Gravely. Something that surely happens to you on a daily basis, being a healer and far above most humans in magical power. I suppose it's funny in a sense, that the two of us would be surprised with not your might, but your knowledge. I apologize for treating you without respect, Lilith," the man said.

"It makes sense that you would be interested, knowing what you know," Nes said. "What you learned of the Navuun you met, I hope to correct. Our peoples are split, those who remain seeking their own destinies throughout the realms."

"Your realm, what did you call it?" Ilea asked.

"Kohr," the being said quietly. "A barren land of ice and water. Mon... sters walking the surface. Nothing remains there."

"So it is the demon realm. The Great Salt, the mind weavers call it," Ilea said.

Albert grinned. "We understand. You have learned much."

Ilea poured herself some tea, taking a self satisfied sip of the hot liquid. "I've been there. Because some fuckwit of an Elder summoned a bunch of demons to get there. Still don't know why he did that."

"Demons," the Navuun whispered, folding her hands as she glared at the table.

“I heard about the summoning. Rather extensive. I was sure the southern mountains were gone, including whatever remnants were left of the Hand,” Scipio said. “How did you learn my name? It’s such an unlikely thing, I assume you actually found it here in a book somewhere.”

“Well, good thing we went back and retook our city,” Ilea said. “And if something similar happens again, we’ll slaughter those creatures before they can lay a hand on any of our people.”

Nes tensed up slightly, the steel links creaking a little as she looked at Ilea. “They’re not... just some creatures.”

“Have you seen them recently?” Ilea asked. “They slaughtered an entire city and turned the people into more of their spawn. I killed thousands of them because it was the only thing left for them. They were beasts, and nothing more. The humans they were before were gone. And so were whatever beings they had been before.”

“May we speak in private, outside?” Scipio asked quietly, standing up as he gestured to the steel gate.

Ilea stood up and displaced herself through the exit, waiting in the snow as she looked out onto the distant mists below.

The barrier mage appeared in the snow about half a minute later, walking to her as he glanced up to where the others were waiting, outside the barrier and unable to see inside.

“You didn’t come alone. Is that... Elders... and...,” he stood still before he sighed, walking to her side. “You’re working with the Cerithil Hunters. I could’ve expected as much. But I suppose it’s still better than the alternatives. You are aware that even if you find all keys, you won’t find the source. None have succeeded in all these thousands of years since the Taleen have vanished.”

“What source?” Ilea asked.

“The twelve keys open that which holds the source, that which was taken. Few of the Ascended know of this, and it’s better that way,” Scipio explained.

*That which was taken*, Ilea thought, her eyes opening a little wider. “The sun,” she said. “The third sun,” she said and laughed.

“All we know is that the dwarves took it, and vanished with it,” he said.

“How did you get a key then? And how do you know they used it with eleven others to lock away the sun?” Ilea asked.

He looked at her and smiled, a tired expression on his face. “Alliances are forged and crumble, but trust is not as easily built, nor is it quickly forgotten. I have known Taleen before they even knew about the Navuun.”

“You know what it’s used for then, don’t you?” Ilea asked.

“The machines they make still, at least that’s what I assume. Nothing else suggests a similar scope, especially if the assumption that they’re truly gone is correct. A weapon aimed at Elven kind, wasted against the Monarchs and Oracles in their domains,” he said.

“Not against their children,” Ilea said, not particularly surprised at his extensive knowledge.

He looked at her and smiled, remaining silent for a little while as they both looked out onto the ruptured north.

“We are more alike than I expected,” he said.

“They were Navuun before, weren’t they? The creatures we call demons,” she said.

He nodded lightly. “They figured out how to harness the power of the sun. Tens of thousands of years ago, the brightest minds of the Navuun, in their never ending pursuit for knowledge. They managed it. They ripped from the sky what they once deemed a god, perhaps becoming gods themselves. Kohr did not have the luxury of three suns, their lands going through a change far worse than what happened in some parts of this realm. Their cities were destroyed, their people changed.”

“To be fair, it doesn’t sound like the most reasonable thing to do in the first place,” Ilea said.

“As Nes would have me know, the decision wasn’t quite as unanimous as it sounds in hindsight. Nor did this happen with a single vote or lacking preparation. The sheer fact that their ruling class survived the process, their bodies changed long before but on their own volition. It should tell you what kind of a civilization they were,” he said.

“You admire them,” Ilea said.

“How could I not? They are walking gods. As are you for that matter, to many in the plains, I’m sure. But I do not believe in gods. They reached their capabilities through strife, work, and study. As did you,” he said.

“So they came here to take another sun? As a source of energy?” Ilea asked.

“They went to many realms, an accomplishment perhaps as impressive as their previous. But where wills and voices were divided before, well, you can imagine their great Unity after their entire realm was near fully destroyed, their people turned into monstrous creatures,” he said.

“I met one I think was called,” Ilea said and summoned her notebook, flipping pages until she found the name. “Vor Elenthir. At least the implication was there that it was his name.”

“Vor Elenthir. You were lucky it was him. He has little interest in the beings of this realm. What he seeks however, is the source. Or so we think. He was part of a fraction hoping to restore Kohr. We were prepared to fight him, if he ever showed up in search of the key,” he said.

Ilea smiled. “No offense, but you’re not even at level five hundred. Vor’s a four mark.”

“Have you not fought four marks before? I assumed you did. I have as well, though likely not quite as successfully. When a species pushes far beyond their norm, they can get surprisingly dangerous,” he said.

“And the Ascended are born close to being a four mark?” she asked.

“Ascended are not born. Navuun are born. Or were born, for that matter. The bodies of the Ascended are forged, though Nes decided not to share the intricacies of their make, and I have come to accept that,” he said.