

Chapter 785 Individuals

Ilea turned her attention to the Paladin, the look on his face suggesting he very much wanted to accept her challenge. The dwarves around them made space, moving away the food and drinks.

“We’re not going to fight on the table,” Ilea said.

“There is little space anywhere else,” Joori answered as he stood up, his sword lighting up with a slight blue hue. “Now face me, human. A Paladin of Henel, guardian goddess of the Taleen. May she stand by my side.”

Ilea remained seated. She glanced to her right and teleported a group of dwarves out of the way. Raising her left hand, she gripped onto the large table with her space manipulation before slowly raising it up. The dwarves watched as the heavy stone frame hovered to the side of the room before being set down with a light tap.

“Have you faced a three mark before?” Ilea asked as she stood up, looking at the dwarf a few meters away, his sword raised and pointed towards her.

“There is a first for everything,” the dwarf said as a helmet appeared on his head, the visor covering his whole face.

Violence! the Fae sent out, signaling the start of the bout.

Lights flickered as the Paladin charged, the short distance covered in the blink of an eye, his sword coming down in the next instant, power flowing through the length of the blade.

Ilea slapped the metal aside with a loud clang. She could feel some of the strange magic flowing into her. Mostly arcane, with a dash of light magic. She ignored the loud cheers and pushed the dwarf back with a very light wave of space magic. Creating a smear of paladin on the opposite wall wasn’t conducive to a diplomatic outreach after all. Nor did she feel he deserved that. Joori simply had no idea what exactly he was facing.

She let him land on his feet, watching him charge again, the dwarf more cautious than before. He came into range and fainted, going for her legs instead of her head. Ilea teleported beside his blade, moving along the length of it before she reached his form. She raised her arm in front of his face and used fabric tear to move his helmet away. Her space manipulation gripped the thing, her hand making a fist as the metal groaned and was crushed below her magic. She let go of the small crumpled up sphere, looking into his wide eyes.

He brought his sword back in a horizontal slash, Ilea stopping the blade with her outstretched hand. Ash swirled out from her arm and around the metal, gripping around the steel before she forced it to bend.

Joori let go of the groaning weapon before he staggered back. To his credit, he unsheathed a knife from his belt and crouched slightly. Ready to answer her.

Maybe I should give him Silent Memory to wield, she thought with a smile, her wings spreading behind her, followed by nearly thirty ashen limbs, all flowing out in slow patterns. Ilea held up her arm and formed an ashen copy of herself, infusing it with the command of knocking out her opponent.

She gripped the stone chair behind with her magic and moved it closer, sitting down as she teleported her mug back into her hand. Legs crossed, she took a sip and watched as her copy deflected the Paladin's knife and punched his chest. The metal dented inward, the dwarf raised up as he exhaled whatever air he had left in his lungs. He landed with staggering steps, coughing up blood, the knife clattering to the ground. He looked up, the ashen figure upon him with its fist going for his head.

Ilea dissolved the creation, looking at the bent greatsword she had teleported into her free hand. She took a sip of her ale and watched Joori heal himself with a hand to his chest.

The Paladin looked at her with a combination of anger and apprehension. "You win," he said in a raspy voice.

Ilea raised her mug, the onlookers breaking out in loud cheers.

A group of dwarves moved the heavy table back, loud scraping resounding as barrels of ale and more food were brought into the hall. A few of them had gotten out instruments, deciding on a merry tune after a few minutes.

Ormont walked over to her and leaned against the table. He moved in a deliberate manner, though his age didn't exactly show. "I was not worried about you."

A group of dwarves was helping Joori get out of the dented chest plate, enchantments flaring up a few times as they tried to pry it open. To his vocal discomfort.

Ilea nodded in response, drinking from her mug. *Did he expect me to kill him?*

She wondered how the Taleen handled their diplomacy. Did they walk into cities with the arrogance of a powerful empire? Or did they offer trade deals that others couldn't refuse? The few sources she had heard from in the past years didn't exactly praise them, but then she supposed others would've been envious of their technology and power. *Doesn't matter too much anymore. Not to me at least. What's important is how they act from now on.*

The positions at least seemed clear for now. The Guilds didn't openly ask for their machines back. The leaders seemed more worried about their people. Something Ilea could very much respect. Joori would come to understand that the One without Form was gone. What he and dwarves like him would do with that understanding was something yet to be seen. *Suppose I'm done here for the time being.*

"I'll return to Iz. There will be Executioners at the teleportation gate in the uppermost layer. Talk to them to meet the new Guardian," Ilea sent to Ormont and a few others she deemed sober enough not to freak out at a voice in their head.

"We will," Ormont spoke. "When will you return?"

"I don't know. Few days maybe?" Ilea said. "I'm sure you've got enough on your plate with informing everyone."

"Indeed. It's going to be quite a change," the dwarf said, smiling to himself. "Safe travels to you, Lilith."

"See you," Ilea said with a wave, standing up as she downed the rest of her ale. She teleported randomly through the structure a few times and summoned a gate to Iz. The magic vanished behind her after she appeared, her wings spreading as she took in the city. It seemed cold compared to Io.

Wouldn't be the worst if a few hundred thousand dwarves came back to bring a bit of life into these ruins. She wondered if the city was still classified as a dungeon now that Aki had taken over the machines. Perhaps more awakened inhabitants needed to return before that happened.

Ilea flew over the city and towards the main guild hall, seeing the small forest that Naradan had added to the town.

"Back earlier than I assumed. Good news?" Aki sent.

"Probably. Met the dwarves. Plenty of different reactions but I think they mainly care about protecting their people. Ormont, Joori, and Hatta of the Maker Guild will probably contact you through the Executioners in the coming hours or days. They're open for negotiations, worried about the Cerithil Hunters, and I think the ones who actually knew what the One without Form was are glad something else replaced it," she said.

"That is a relief. Thank you for laying the groundwork. I'm sure you left an impression," Aki sent.

Violence!

"It's quite clear their magical power isn't near where it was. And you basically took over their entire military," Ilea said. *"I just hope we can actually integrate them into the Accords without them trying to get everything back."*

"They are resilient and resourceful. These machines and teleportation gates may be impressive, but the Taleen are the people who built it all. They not only can but they will do similar things again, I'm sure of it," Aki sent. *"The competition will push others to rise to the challenge. Or so I hope."*

"Right. I guess it's good that they weren't wiped out or outright vanished. The elves will be a somewhat touchy subject for quite a few of them, but that's to be expected," she said, landing in front of the Guild hall, a few Praetorians turning her way. They bowed.

"Appreciate it," she sent with a smile.

"I will make sure to try and keep the dwarves hidden for the time being. Until I have learned enough of each Hunter to make sure they wouldn't cause issues," Aki said.

"Sounds like a good idea," Ilea sent as she entered the hall. Some of the elves were still enjoying their feast. She grinned at an ice mage cocooned to the ceiling. *I guess old habits die hard.* She wondered if the Ash Waste elves liked lava baths as much as she did, or if they preferred some other form of relaxation.

Claire and the others had joined Isalthar and a few of the older and higher leveled elves at the long central table.

"How's it going?" she sent to Trian, the man not currently talking.

"It's... difficult. They're old, proud, and set in their ways. I think the only thing that keeps them here is the fact that they don't know what they want to do themselves. Did you meet the dwarves?" he sent back.

"I did. A little more promising than what you're saying," Ilea said and sat down.

"Why should we form a Domain of our own? There is no Oracle with us, nor is there a need for us to stay in one place," one of the elves spoke.

"Not a Domain. Just... a place, to stay. To find each other. To organize," Jomraa said.

A few of them hissed.

“With no Oracle, I see no reason to have one. Isalthar has gathered us, has he not?” the same elf said.

“It took months,” Feyrair said. “Now that we can use the teleportation network of the Taleen, it would be simple to claim one of their old ruins as our...” He glanced at the ceiling. “Town? Hometown?”

More hisses.

“You would stay in these ruins, even now that there is no reason for us to do so?” another elf spoke.

“I would stay where the Monarchs do not dare enter,” Feyrair said. “The network will allow us to move quickly. The One without Form has set up hundreds of nodes near the Domains. Gates we used to destroy, but are now left intact. We can use them for our own purposes.”

“I would rather travel through the lands myself than continue to use this cursed magic,” the other elf spoke.

Fey hissed, as did a few others.

Ilea smiled, looking at a few of them.

Fey showed his teeth.

Her smile broadened.

“Have you a suggestion then, Lilith of ash?” he asked.

Plenty of them glanced her way.

“It’s just amusing,” she said. “You’re not exactly the organizing kind.” She thought for a moment, ignoring the annoyed hisses. “Why not something like the Descent. The lower layers have some powerful magic no normal elf could shrug off. Aki could add a few teleportation gates there, right?”

“The plans are available to me, as are the materials,” the Executioner at the table confirmed.

“The Descent?” one of them asked.

“Ancient dungeon in the north. Plenty of space, lots of layers with different magic and environments. I’m sure everyone here would find a comfortable area for themselves. You don’t have to stay inside of a city, and it’s within the Meadow’s domain still,” Ilea said.

“It is not of Taleen make,” Fey confirmed.

A few approving hisses came from the others.

“Those who would not wish to use the teleportation gates can just travel normally, though it’s close to Hallowfort.” Ilea said.

“What about this Meadow? Would it not require treaties like these humans and the Dark One have suggested?” one of the elves said.

Zori hissed. “Are you afraid of an old tree?”

More hisses.

“A safe haven of sorts, perhaps protected by the Meadow, and by the Hunters that are present,” Isalthar said.

“And what would we need protection from, Val Akuun? Are you not prepared to face the Monarchs who would hunt us Cursed?” one of them asked.

“I will face them, should the need arise. But I’m not sure... about the plans you have laid out. Attacking the Domains... more bloodshed now that we have removed the threat of the Taleen. What I know is that I wish to educate the young, in a more safe manner than taking them through the Taleen hordes. Perhaps such a place as this Descent would be beneficial to that cause,” Isalthar spoke.

Different hisses resounded.

“We should look at this dungeon,” Zori agreed. “And see if it is suitable.”

“It is an option,” Fey said.

“I do not think a treaty as you suggested is a possibility,” Isalthar said, looking at the representatives of the Accords. “Would this suggestion be reasonable? To stay in this Descent?”

Claire looked to Catelyn.

“I trust the Meadow,” Catelyn said. “Should the Cerithil Hunters choose to stay within the Descent, I won’t vote against it. As long as they don’t attack any of the delvers that choose to explore it.”

“We are territorial,” one of them said and hissed.

“Then you may communicate those territories so that any explorers know what places to avoid,” Catelyn said.

“What about prey?” one of them asked.

Ilea smiled. “Plenty. Worthy of a hunt. There are a few beings down there that I consider friends, but the Meadow will let you know about those. And otherwise... you’ll be in the north. Plenty of things to hunt.”

Violence, the Baron sent and nodded.

“And I don’t think adventurers will be too much of a problem. I assume the Hunters will stay pretty far down. Few would even get there,” Ilea added. “Plus you don’t have to stay together in one place. There’s plenty of room once you’ve culled the monster populations.”

A few of them hissed approvingly.

“And we are to stay in contact with this Meadow?” Zori asked.

“It is of the Accords,” Isalthar said. “Perhaps in time, we may find more defined ties a possibility.”

“I ask to be present too, to learn from the Hunters, and to share what I can,” the Executioner said.

“You may try,” Isalthar spoke. “You will be welcome in my territory.”

“And in mine,” Elfie said.

A few more hisses, some approving, others dismissive, a few outright hostile.

“Nar el Ceroth... for us to remain,” Zori said before he grinned. “Yes, I can accept that.”

“Then we shall share these plans with the Accords. No treaties will be signed, but we will discuss possible agreements and rules,” Claire said.

“Return when you’re ready,” Isalthar said. “We shall remain, for a time.”

Better get it done quickly, Ilea thought with a smile.

“Just so you know. Claire offered a similar suggestion before you joined. She was ignored,” Aki sent. *“You left an impression on them.”*

“I’ll make sure her headache doesn’t overwhelm her,” Ilea sent back. *“And yes. I don’t think they give a shit about resources, political power, influence, territory, or levels. Just magical power, applied directly to the forehead.”*

“It’s funny in a way. You may be the best diplomat we have to deal with the elves,” Aki spoke. *“Well, I would be better, were it not for a history of these machines hunting their kind.”*

“I’d argue that should actually help your case,” Ilea said. *“Maybe if the One without Form had been more successful.”*

“I much prefer this outcome,” the Sentinel sent as the members of the Accords stood up and prepared to leave.

“I’ll join you,” Ilea said and glanced at Isalthar. “Keep them here. The Descent is perfect for you. Forest, desert, poison swamp. What more could you ever want.”

“There is a poison swamp?” one of them asked with a joyous hiss.

To each their own, Ilea thought.

“It was an honor to meet the Cerithil Hunters,” Claire said. “Until we return.”

A few of the elves acknowledged her.

Ilea summoned a gate to the domain of the Meadow. *“Care to join us too?”* she sent to Aki. *“Not like anyone would know you’re different to before.”*

“It would reduce my travel time. Yes,” Aki sent, one of the Executioners joining the group.

They were out in the North a moment later, the space magic vanishing behind them.

“By the gods, what a disrespectful bunch of magical children,” Claire murmured. “Absolutely incredible. And here I thought nobody could top the diplomatic challenges of the northern plains.”

“They do not care,” Kyrian said with a chuckle.

“And you want them here? In the Descent?” Catelyn asked. She didn’t sound quite as convinced as she had before.

Ilea waved them off. “The Meadow can handle a few rowdy elves, right?”

“Of course,” the tree sent.

“I like that absolute confidence,” Ilea said with a smile.

“It is a first step,” Trian said. “There are reasons why any efforts to have talks with their kind have failed for centuries. Individual ties seem far more important. Shows of power. If we know where they are, we can approach, have bouts and talks. It will simply take time.”

“*Will the Hunters join the Accords?*” the Meadow asked.

“No. Ilea suggested they go live in the Descent, now that the Taleen threat is gone,” Claire said.

“*The threat is gone?*” the Meadow asked.

“No,” the Executioner spoke. “I am the threat.”

“*Aki. You are different... and... yes. Congratulations. Have you replaced the previous controller? The plan succeeded then,*” the Meadow said.

“Indeed. We have a lot to discuss, and a lot of blueprints to decipher. Do summon Iana and Christopher if they are available,” Aki said.

“So, how did your venture go?” Catelyn asked, looking at Ilea.

She raised her brows. “Ah. Right. The three hundred thousand dwarves.”

“*The what?*” Meadow asked.