

Ilea first summoned the Taleen Key. “Make sure to check this stuff for trackers too. I guess this thing has one anyway.” A variety of barriers had already formed all around, the Meadow protecting them from interested eyes and ears in its domain. She assumed at least one copy of Michael to be around as well. “*And let me know if an Ascended shows up anywhere. Big metal guy, nearly three meters, four white eyes, metal, soul, blood, and space magic, maybe more.*”

“*I am. Watching.*” the tree replied.

She grinned at that. *Right. That you are.*

***[The Gold Key – Ancient Quality]***

“*It seems to be the real thing,*” the Meadow said.

“*Agreed,*” Ilea replied, feeling Violence land on her shoulder.

The creature touched her cheek.

*Help?*

“*With something, yes,*” Ilea said and stored the key. *Just one to go then. Though I suppose the location is a tiny bit of an issue. “I got a few more items from that vault, one being this.”*

She summoned the black heart, the thing much larger than that of a human. It pulsed with energy, the fabric around it distorted a little.

***[Heart of Verivyen – Faen Quality]***

Ilea glanced at the little Fae. “Faen quality? Any clue what it is?”

Violence shrugged.

*Heart*

“Yeah. I mean yes. But what is it? Who does it belong to? What does the quality mean?” she asked.

The Fae shrugged again.

“*Likely a gift given from a Fae to someone. Violence let me know that he wouldn’t necessarily know about gifts given by others. It can be a rather personal affair. As to the effects of this item, I have an inkling, at least partially. There is a lot of magic stored inside that artifact, including wood and life. It could serve as a way to grow things, though none other than the recipients would be able to use it efficiently,*” the Meadow explained.

“No recipient address listed I assume?” Ilea joked.

Owl raised an ethereal hand. “Hmm... there... is, something like that. I think. Cute brown tails, it says.”

“That doesn’t exactly narrow it down,” Ilea said and stored the strange heart again. “Violence, can you maybe ask around in your cluster? If it was a gift from a Fae to someone else, it’d be nice to return it.”

The Baron gave her a thumbs up with no thumbs.

Next came the spear, broken into seven pieces. Ilea expected the bits to fall apart once summoned but they hovered close to each other, wind magic keeping them connected.

***[Splintered Spear of the Black Leaf – Mythic Quality]***

“Mythic, damn,” Ilea mused.

*“A powerful artifact indeed. Wielded by an impressive figure. It would take someone at least as impressive to rejoin the pieces,”* the Meadow said.

“Goliath?” Ilea asked.

*“A wielder of the spear is required in this case, not the hammer of a smith,”* it spoke.

*An impressive weapon I guess, for someone else. “Let me know if someone comes up.”*

She stored the splinters as one and summoned the strange black sphere.

***[Crystal of the Veiled Ithom – Ancient Quality]***

Owl and Violence moved closer the moment she summoned the thing, making an effort not to touch it with anything but her ash. Even Ilea could now perceive the essence, her perception still limited to very close sources. A strange whisper resounded from the near head sized sphere, the darkness near void like.

*“A powerful soul has been trapped within this... terrible creation,”* Owl said and shook her head.

*Monarch*

“What?” Ilea said, turning to the Fae.

Violence pointed at the sphere.

“A king? Like within Twin?” Ilea asked.

*No*

*Monarch*

*Nelras*

*Ithom*

*Angry*

*Very*

*Violent*

Ilea glanced at Owl.

The lich shook her head. “I cannot communicate with the soul within. I have no idea how the Baron is managing that. Very impressive, Violence!” she said and patted the giggling creature.

“Can we get it out somehow? Would be interesting at the very least. Maybe they can tell us something about the Ascended,” Ilea suggested.

*“The device found within the Soul Forge should be more than capable. However I’m unsure if you would wish to move an unknown... apparently angry soul into a war machine or anything of the like,”* Meadow said.

“Monarch. Wait, you mean an elven Monarch?” Ilea asked, her eyes going wide as she looked at the giggling Fae.

It nodded.

*Monarch.*

“Shit,” Ilea murmured, looking at the sphere. “Don’t suppose we have a toaster with a speech module or something?”

*“What is a toaster? If you’re looking for a device capable of speech but with no combat effectiveness, I’m afraid not. However based on the Soul Wardens I’m sure Goliath, Owl, and me can figure something out. Something safe. To communicate and find out more about the Soul stored within. Violence can only perceive surface information, or so he claims,”* Meadow spoke.

“Nelras Ithom you said,” Ilea said and wrote it down. She added a section of things she remembered the Ascended saying, including his name. “We’ll figure something out,” she said and sent as well, aimed towards the sphere before she stored it. “This is some absolutely insane stuff.”

*“Who exactly did that vault belong to again?”* the Meadow asked.

“Ker Velor,” Ilea said.

None of them reacted in any way.

“Yeah. I’ve got no clue either. I’ll look into it though,” she said. “Last item, this one has to do with the Azarinth somehow.”

The necklace appeared in her hands, the yellow crystal flowing with magic. She felt strange touching the thing, a connection similar to the heart, but different at the same time. *It’s my aura.*

### ***[The Azarinth Star – Mythic Quality]***

“What do you think of that?” she asked.

A giggle moved through the black grass. *“Not a spear. You should try to infuse it with your healing magic, Azarinth Healer.”*

“Sure it’s safe?” Ilea asked.

*“Yes. Absolutely,”* the Meadow answered. *“Not only used by someone with similar magic to your own, but I can feel a familiar school in this one too. It should prove useful for you too, granted you study and learn.”*

She sighed. *Even more shit to figure out.* Reconstruction flowed into it, the necklace floating out of her hand and moving around her neck. It remained a few centimeters away from her body, Ilea looking at the tree, the Fae, and Owl.

Iana and Christopher arrived now too, as did Goliath. “What’s happening?” the woman asked, whistling when she saw the floating necklace. “Holy, is that a mythic item?”

“How do all of you know about that stuff?” Ilea asked, instinctively letting the necklace move around her neck and close. It settled on her skin, a surge of magic flowing into her.

“Legends mostly?” Iana said.

“Yeah, I thought it was all made up until just now. Answers some questions but opens up a lot more,” Chris added as he moved closer to see the thing.

***‘ding’ ‘You have bonded with the Azarinth Star’***

***‘ding’ ‘You have learned the General skill [Mythic] – Azarinth Barrier – lvl 1***

***Azarinth Barrier [Mythic] – lvl 1***

***Channel your mana through the Azarinth Star to form healing infused golden barriers of arcane magic around you.***

Ilea tried it out immediately, a number of large near golden shield like barriers appearing around her. She could move them around too. They followed as she took a few steps back but she could leave them behind too if she willed it so.

“I mean sure, but I doubt they’ll be very useful compared to my ash,” she said when a wooden root broke out of the ground and slammed into one of the barriers. Golden sparks were sent flying, cracks slowly forming as the root pushed more and more. Ilea wasn’t pushed back in turn. Three rock spears slammed into another one of the barriers, all of them deflected.

“*There is a reason mythic artifacts are seen as fabrications by most of those standing near you,*” the Meadow spoke.

“You hardly used your full power on that. We’ll have to test more,” Ilea said and used her own ash to attack the barriers. She broke through eventually but the resilience was ridiculous for a level one ability, let alone a non Class skill without any bonuses.

*Which means Ker Velor found or took this thing from an important Azarinth Healer. Did he set it as a trap for Order members looking for the item? Would it be important enough for them to go and look for it in the deep north? If they even had a way to locate it. But didn’t he know that the Order was no longer around?*

She moved a hand through her hair. *At least he should assume I went back to Elos, I showed my ability to use space magic after all.*

“This Ker Velor knows what I look like. He knows I’m Lilith,” she said. “The last Ascended I fought didn’t come looking... so far, but I have a feeling this one won’t just let me keep all of these items,” she explained to the others. *Although he did say he didn’t have time for me.* She tapped her leg a few times.

“*We will inform the relevant people. And you, in case he shows up again. How dangerous is he?*” the Meadow asked.

“Four mark, close to one thousand. The way he fought... similar to the last Ascended I faced. Almost in a way to test me. He didn’t seem vicious... instinctual... not like a warrior who’s been in constant strive for years on end, more just someone wielding a tool. Or in his case several tools. I don’t know how I would do against him outside of his enchantment covered facility, but I don’t think it would be quite as one sided,” she surmised.

“Enchantment covered?” Iana asked.

“I’ll go back later, but nobody is coming with me. It’s far too dangerous,” Ilea said. “If I find anything, I’ll bring it back.”

*First, I need to talk to someone.*

“No trackers? Other than the key?” Ilea asked. She wondered how much Ker Velor knew about Iz and the One without Form. Did he care? Did he set the trap to find someone who had more keys? Was he looking for the source? *He would be, or someone would be. On the other hand, it shouldn't be too hard for a four mark being to go out and look for the keys, creating a locator device and finding them all.*

The fact that most of them remained in ancient ruins strewn about Elos made her think the Ascended might not know quite as much as she assumed.

“*Nothing I could detect,*” the Meadow spoke. “*Your domain is a well protected space, Ilea. No second rate space mage could breach it, perhaps not even me.*”

“*Good,*” she said briefly. “I’ll be back later. Things to check.”

“*Be safe,*” the Meadow sent as her third tier transfer activated, aimed for the far north, and the hidden facility belonging to Nes and Scipio.

She trusted the Meadow, Fae, and Owl, including her own perception abilities and space magic knowledge to make sure the Ascended couldn't just find her in the wild. Her allies would be informed soon enough. Worst case, she would have to face an Ascended with the help of Owl, Aki, Kyrian, Fey, and potentially Nes and Scipio. She hoped her own abilities already dissuaded the Ascended from seeking a fight, though she worried nonetheless. The damage he could do was catastrophic.

A few teleports and a short flight brought her to the hidden area, Ilea pounding on the gate three times before Scipio showed up a few meters away.

“You're not supposed to show up unannounced,” he said with his arms crossed in front of his chest, his golden eyes taking her in, a long sleeved black shirt covering his torso.

“Might be important,” Ilea said. “I just fought an Ascended. In Kohr.”

“You... what?” the man said and looked around, casting a few spells to check the fabric. “You didn't come here immediately, did you?” His voice was agitated now, turning from annoyed to serious.

“Made a stop at the Meadow's. I wasn't fleeing exactly. Well I was fleeing his facility, but he didn't follow me to the surface,” she said.

“An Ascended facility in Kohr... how did... come in first, I can't detect anything worrisome,” he said, the mention of the Meadow visibly calming him down.

The gate shifted, opening for them to enter. “No more space magic until you leave again,” the man said.

Nes was already waiting. “An emergency?” she asked, looking at the two of them.

Ilea gave them a quick rundown of the vault, the activating space magic, and the resulting arrival in Kohr. “He called himself Ker Velor.”

Both of them looked around the hall, another set of spells activating as they scanned everything. “He is alive,” Nes spoke.

“You assumed as much,” Scipio said.

“I had hoped he chose some other realm and stayed there. His presence in Kohr is worrying,” Nes said.

“He would’ve come here already if he could,” Scipio said.

“We should move the facility nonetheless. The risk is too great,” Nes said.

Ilea stood between them. “Who is he?”

“Ker Velor, the Architect, one of the key minds behind the creation of the first Ascended and one of our fiercest adversaries after the Unity was broken. Did you learn anything of his dealings?” Nes said.

“He wasn’t particularly interested in me until I survived his light beam and escaped his barriers,” she said.

Scipio glanced at her. Nes made a gesture with her hands. “To escape a trap of the Architect. Even a fellow Navuun would be impressed.”

“You can praise her later,” Scipio said.

“He called it his sanctum, offered to turn me into one of you, I think,” Ilea said.

“A human? Ker Velor?” Nes asked, her confusion obvious.

“Yeah, he didn’t seem keen on the idea but he mentioned the Union breaking. I suppose if there were any rules against that he doesn’t care anymore,” Ilea said with a shrug.

“No. There is more to this. Did you fight him? Or did you flee?” Nes asked.

“I fought him for a little while. He used blood and metal magic, then soul. I survived and fought back, until his enchanted beams became too much,” she said.

Nes shook her head slowly. “Do you remember what he said? Why he offered to make you into one of us?”

“Become gods, yadda yadda, perfect form, he was annoyed about me liking food for some reason, oh he also mentioned something about becoming gods ruling by her side. I reminded him of someone too apparently,” Ilea said, now looking at the few notes she took back with the Meadow. “Data is data he said, but apparently he was too busy to deal with me.” She realized Nes had stopped moving, the Ascended staring at her with glowing white eyes.

“You are... certain,” she said after a few seconds. “That he said... you could rule, by Her side?” Nes asked.

Scipio glanced between them.

“Yeah. Who’s her?” Ilea asked.

Nes paused before she sat down on one of the armchairs in the entrance hall. Scipio sat down next to her and touched her arm in a gentle manner.

“Ravana Vor Itar,” the Ascended said, every word laced with venom, her white eyes not looking at Ilea. “The first Ascended.”

Ilea sat down as well. “Yeah, I can tell that this is all very big news for you two but I have no clue who these people are. Is there any significance to her being the first?”

“She was chosen by the Architect himself. An exemplary Navuun. Intelligent and ruthless. A warrior and mage beyond compare. She was turned into what many thought of as a god. For a time, until others were made Ascended. Ker Velor has always looked at her with a certain... pride,” Nes said.

“So she was your ruler?” Ilea asked.

“No. Ravana believed in the Unity, and in our principles. She was among the ones to conquer the last frontiers of Kohr. Capable, even going as far as improving on various magical principles and devices, a driving force behind the fabric stabilizer. Yet she was... cold. Beings of flesh were mere beasts to her, to be controlled and used, herded, and killed if no need was found for their existence. It was not a strange set of views within the Unity but I always found her exceptionally... efficient.”

“Sounds like a fun lass,” Ilea said and summoned herself a bottle of ale.

Scipio shook his head lightly.

“What? I fucking fought the guy and nearly died,” Ilea said. “And I’ll go back and fuck up his precious facility.”

“You have a way to Kohr?” he asked, standing up as he stared at her with wide eyes.

“Yeah. I set down a gate, not that I should tell you about that,” Ilea said. “Why? I assumed you guys had ways to get back if you needed to.”

“Ways exist, though they are not easily hidden, nor easily achieved,” Nes said. “Without anchors, it is exceptionally difficult to travel through realms, even the stabilized Kohr. I would forget your debt for the information and Taleen artifact we have given you, if you instead bring us there. For a time. There are things I require.”

“Is it worth the risk?” Scipio asked.

“Lilith was attacked. Perhaps she could be convinced to protect us for a while?” Nes asked, her steel face changing into something akin to a smile.

“I told you I was going back anyway. And with the two of you, I’m even less worried about Mr Architect,” Ilea said. “Anything else I should know? Otherwise we can discuss it on the way. Don’t think we should waste any time.”

Nes slowly stood up, powerful magic surging around her form. “Perhaps one thing. Ravana Vor Itar was destroyed. I saw it with my own eyes. But Ker Velor does not entertain impossibilities. He has repaired her, or has a way to do so.”