

Adam knew the man sitting in front of him could kill him if he wanted to. He knew the man was aware of what he had done in Ravenhall. And still he thought him one of the few people who would listen.

“Adam Strand,” Evan spoke, his voice deep, considering. No magic flared up, no rapier was drawn. There was no smile on his face either. “You return. From the dead I had presumed, but you seem alive. Haggard and tired but alive.” The man stood up and walked over to a small table that stood to the side, tea leaves and a pot ready with cups. “Sit while I prepare some tea.”

Adam watched the man’s back.

[Sand Mage – lvl ??]

Still higher. He sat down on the large leather chair, sighing at the simple comfort. The room was warm. Warmer than any of the caves he had slept in recently. He moved a finger across the leather, feeling the material against his back. A fragrance soon flowed towards him from the silent man, boiling water audible. He felt calm. A quiet he hadn’t felt in years. The feeling was so overwhelming he had to focus to keep his composure.

Evan took his time, finally pouring two cups before he walked back to his chair, putting one down in front of Adam.

“Thank you,” Adam said and took the cup, feeling the warmth spread to his hands before he smelled the complex aroma. Cinnamon. He took a sip and closed his eyes.

Evan did the same before he talked.

“You have come to claim the favor that I owe, though you must understand that I have no obligation to protect you.”

“I am not here to seek protection, or forgiveness. More is at stake than just my life. I have found my daughter,” Adam said and looked at the man’s eyes.

“Octavia. I remember,” Evan said, a smile tugging on his lips.

“She had traveled to Kohr, the realm of demons, the realm of Ascended,” Evan said. “You remember what she was.”

“A divination mage. The reason an entire set of enchantments was added to our libraries. What news do you bring from that forgotten realm?” Evan asked.

“News of war,” Adam said. “And a request. Not for help, not from me. I only wish that she can speak and explain it all to you.”

Evan remained silent for a while, moving his cup in a swaying motion. His expression was unreadable. He took in a deep breath and sighed, taking a long sip from his tea before he spoke. “I had feared this day. Had feared they were not done with this realm. I will come with you to see her, and I will listen.”

“You know them. The Ascended, the war, the sun?” Adam asked, getting louder with each word.

“I am a keeper of knowledge, former Elder Strand. I collect, and keep knowledge,” he said.

“Then... then you know what this means, you know the threat. How did even the Shadow’s Hand not know of this?” Adam asked.

Evan remained quiet for a time. “You are young, Adam. You were ambitious, rose in power quickly. Even now after everything that happened, there is purpose driving you forward.” He stood up. “But you remain young. The threats lurking in the darkness, in the depths of the oceans, in realms unknown, they elude both me and you. And now perhaps, one such threat has set its eyes on these lands once more.”

Adam stood up as well, setting down his cup. “Do you think there is anything we can do?”

“Who knows? But the chances now are better than they have been for a while,” Evan said.

“What do you mean? Surely with Ravenhall...” Adam said, his voice stuck before he closed his mouth.

“Ravenhall was devastated, Adam. Due to your actions. A hundred thousand lives, snuffed out. But the Hand returned, retook what was lost. A lot has happened since you left for the Great Salt.” He paused and looked up at the ceiling before he looked back to Adam. “I will listen to Octavia, under one condition.”

“And what would that be?” Adam asked.

The man smiled for the first time during their conversation. “I will bring along a friend.”

Ilea rolled in the bed, using her ash to pluck the grapes from the remaining vines. They were ripe despite it being winter. *Magic is nice.*

She ate them one by one, enjoying the busy sounds of an evening Virilya. The Redleaf mansion was not in a particularly busy part of the sprawling city, but there was enough going on to provide some entertainment.

The woman in question had already left. A meeting with the Empress and high nobility, probably more annoying than one of her own talks with the Accords. It had been nice, to have someone in a somewhat similar position, though they were annoyed about entirely different sets of problems.

Ilea mostly with the amount of information in regards to laws, new settlements, teleportation network expansion, material acquisitions, scouting reports, and more recently the quelling of the resurging corruption in the North. Aki was doing an excellent job as far as the Meadow’s reports were concerned, Sentinels downright fighting each other to help and gain experience.

Of course the ancient or newly made Taleen machines were more than capable enough to deal with the problem, the levels of Aki’s higher tier machines were somewhat static. At the moment, being an adventurer wasn’t exactly as lucrative a profession as it had been before the gates and Aki, but

even a level three hundred human could challenge Praetorians. At level five hundred, they would likely be equal or more powerful than an Executioner.

Considerations the Accords didn't forget. In case of threats beyond the capabilities of the Guardian of Iz, it was nice to have some capable individuals around, like herself. But the goal was that Ilea wouldn't remain the only one to deal with dangerous four marks.

"Where are you! You're here!" Edwin shouted somewhere in the hallway.

Hmm.

Ilea opened a gate to the domain of the Meadow. She considered for a moment and closed it again. She had avoided the man for months already, Felicia mentioning a few times that he had asked for her. Nothing important, the woman had assured.

She summoned some ash onto her body when the man stuttered in his step, visible in her sphere as his teleportation spell had been prevented. She frowned. *"You should knock before entering a woman's room. Anyone's room really."*

"Ah don't give me that shit, as if you knock at everyone's door before rudely interrupting, space mage," he sent back but did knock.

He knew she would just teleport him back out if he entered without.

"Yes," she said, moving a few more grapes into her mouth.

Edwin entered, clad in his armor, helmet in hand. There was dried blood on it, his face and hair covered in sweat.

"It's winter, why are you so sweaty?" she asked.

He looked at her and shook his head. "It reeks of sex," he complained, walking to the window before he ripped it open, turning around before he leaned against the sill.

"You're pissy today," she said.

"Nobody fucking talks to me," he said, pointing at himself. "For months now I've tried to reach you, or get anything out of Felicia. The Taleen? The dwarves? What happened?"

Ilea rolled on the bed before she moved to the edge, sitting up. "Oh that? Kind of old news really. Aki is now the Guardian of Iz, in control of all the Taleen machines, and their facilities. Have you not seen all the mass produced products? Sound boxes finally," she said with a smile. "Though still not nearly as good as a smartphone."

"The Guardian... of Iz? What does that mean? All Taleen machines? And the dwarves themselves... where were they?" he asked.

"You know, if you would become an instructor at the Ravenhall Academy, you'd get access to more information than just being an adventurer," Ilea said.

"I'm the brother of Felicia Redleaf, for fuck's sake! And I know Lilith, the Lilith, the great one, the revered one, the immortal, oh praised be her name," he said and raised his arms towards the ceiling.

"I'm flattered," she said. "And busy, as is your sister. There's not much to know, Edwin. The world is moving fast. The Accords are uncovering secrets and forging new alliances. You should get with the times. Perhaps you want to join the Sentinels? Or train with Aki? Plenty of options in various cities."

He calmed down, looking at the helm now held in both his hands. He shook his head. "I feel left behind."

Ilea smiled. "Your self awareness is striking. Incredible really. Bravo," she said and clapped her hands.

"Fuck off," he said.

"I can," she said and summoned a gate.

"No," he said. "You know what I mean. I'm sorry."

"If you want something, talk to Trian or Kyrian. They should be at the Sentinel Headquarters. Or I can get you in touch with Aki, if you want to train," Ilea said.

He stared at his helmet before he sighed.

Jyraiui rushed up the stairs finally, puffing as he entered the room. "Apologies, Lady Lilith, I couldn't-

"I think I can defend myself from the ruffian," she said. "Edwin, If you want to be in the loop, stop fucking around."

He looked up and nearly growled. "All you do is fuck around."

"Yes, but I'm the one who creates the loop you want to be in," she said with a grin, her ash armor layering on her body before white flame flared up. "I can do what I want, Edwin. You should too."

He just looked at her, his head slumping a little.

"Ilea. A request from a friend. Join me if you can, as fast as possible. Do not attack anyone," a voice came to her mind. Evan's. He had never contacted her through the mark before, though had agreed to carry one. Both for their bouts and for emergencies. Her involvement with the Cerithil Hunters and Isalithar specifically had earned her more than a little trust with the founder of the Foundation of Glass.

Interesting. And he's asking me not to attack anyone.

"I just got a request," she said. "More urgent than the two of you, I'm afraid. We can go drinking sometime, talk about our feelings and dreams. Sound alright?"

Edwin shook his head.

She snickered. "For old time's sake, Edwin, deary. I meant it, you know. Trian is a noble, like you, and he's gone through pretty rough patches. Talking to him might help," she said.

"Like with Roland," he asked. "Am I really that sad?"

Ilea shrugged. "Getting some help from time to time isn't sad, it's natural. Except if you have mind healing like I do," she said and tapped her head. "Go talk to the guys, or stay miserable. Your choice."

She activated her third tier transfer, glancing at Jyraiui who had tried very hard not to move during the conversation. "Hi," she said with a wave.

"Hello," he answered with a slightly awkward smile right before she vanished.

Ilea appeared next to Evan with a grin on her face. A grin that dropped almost immediately as she perceived the entire cavern through her dominion. Her eyes moved to the two humans, one in particular.

The disheveled man had lost some weight. His black and gray hair not quite as well taken care of as the last time she had seen him. His cheeks had lost color, and he slouched ever so slightly. He looked at her but recognition didn't seem to pass his eyes.

Elder Adam Strand. The man responsible for the demon summoning in Ravenhall, and the subsequent deaths of well over a hundred thousand people. Citizens of Ravenhall, Lys, and even beyond. The man she had followed to Kohr, had fought alongside Trian. He was back.

[Summoner – lvl 338]

And he was stronger, though he did not look it. Not in the slightest.

His look somewhat quenched her anger, coupled with Evan's request to not start hostilities. A part of her calm reaction was caused by the rest of the people in the cavern.

Near two hundred Mind Weavers, looking at Evan and her. And a single woman, blue eyes the same as Adam's. She was clad in white furs, a cloak covering parts of her face. Fangs exited her mouth. She was thin but not frail, and she sat crouching, a dead animal in front of her. Lizard like, common by the looks for the outskirts of the Isanna desert. Her blue eyes tore into her.

"You should stop that, if you plan to live for longer than two minutes," Ilea sent to her as soon as she felt the magic brush over her.

'ding' Divination Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 15'

The incursion stopped.

[Divination Mage – lvl 512]

"You have come, thank you," Evan said to her.

"It's certainly an interesting party," Ilea said as she took another look around, her eyes stopping on Adam. "Long time no see, Elder."

His brows rose but he seemed confused.

"Nearly got you, back in Kohr," she said. "But I suppose you're here now."

His eyes narrowed before he shook his head. "I... impossible... you couldn't have..."

"What? Survived? You did, and you got stronger. I suppose we both had interesting journeys. Care to explain why you let thousands of people die to get to the Great Salt?"

"I am at fault," another voice spoke. Through telepathy, and not through the link she had established. The woman clad in furs. *"Great Lilith. You are difficult to grasp, but your power is unquestioned. It is I, Octavia Strand, who has called for my father's help. I had not intended for the sacrifices caused by his method of travel. What is done, is done, and I shall atone for the deaths, and make right, what I can."*

"I think that time has long passed," Ilea sent, to everyone as well.

“I grew up in Ravenhall. Many of those who have died, I would have known. I do not take this lightly. Should we live through all this, I will spend my time to help,” Octavia said.

“Why am I here?” Ilea asked, looking at Evan. *“And why should I not kill him right now?”*

“Because there is a greater threat,” Octavia said. *“And Evan Trayne of the Foundation chose to include you. For your power perhaps, or the influence you wield, I do not know.”*

“She is just a Shadow... only been one for a few years,” Adam spoke, eyes wide as he looked at her.

Ilea smiled though she knew her eyes didn't show it. *“You've been away for some time, Adam. I am Lilith of the Accords. What is that threat, tell me.”* She glanced at Evan.

“I have just arrived,” he said.

“Beings called Ascended,” Octavia spoke. *“They hail from the realm of Kohr and have been-”*

“I'm familiar with the Navuun,” Ilea spoke. *“And with the Spawn and Mind Weavers that came of them. What do you know?”* A ripple went through the beings watching, movement introduced to the previously petrified watchers, their abyss like eyes familiar to her. *Now who exactly are we dealing with.*

Octavia remained silent for a moment. *“You know much, Lilith.”*

“Spare me the flattery and tell me who's coming, and what they want,” Ilea said.

The woman moved her chin a little higher. *“An Ascended they call the Architect.”* She said and paused, considering her for a moment.

Ilea moved the mantle from her head, a grin coming to her face. *“Ker Velor,”* she spoke, the pitiful remnants of Elder Strand already near forgotten. *The Architect was coming? “What did you learn of his plans? And how?”*

Octavia remained silent for a few seconds, opening and closing her mouth a few times. *“Is that his true name? How do you know him?”*

“I fought him. In Kohr. Some time ago,” Ilea said.

“And yet you live to tell the tale. How can I be sure your claims are true?” Octavia asked.

“I'm not happy about it. His facility exploding nearly killed me. I have a debt to pay,” she said, giving Adam a glance.

He took a slight step back, the lightning elemental by his side moving forward.

[Young Lightning Elemental – lvl 523]

She just looked at the being. *“Not quite as impressive as the real deal,”* she said out loud.

“Then you consider yourself his enemy?” Octavia asked, ignoring the distraction.

“That depends,” Ilea sent. *“You didn't answer my previous questions. Why do you think he's coming to Elos? What does he want?”*

“The Architect wishes to finish what was started thousands of years ago. The realm is aligned, and two suns remain. Vengeance, opportunity, chance, I do not know of his motives but the signs were clear to me. It is why I went to Kohr, why I sought to learn of the Ascended, and where I discovered those left behind in their destroyed realm,” she said, gesturing to the Mind Weavers all around.

“Teacher,” a few of them sent, to Ilea as well.

“That’s quite a claim. Sadly somewhat believable. What’s in it for you? Why come back now, and not earlier?” Ilea asked.

“This realm is dear to me. The Mava, Humans, Dark Ones, beings I’ve met. I do not wish for their demise. And with what has happened in Ravenhall, there is a debt as well. But... the beings you see here, Navuun once... I wished to bring them here, to show them this realm. A realm of life. A realm of grass, of trees, of sunlight. I do not wish for another Kohr. It must be prevented. My father was to help, as was Evan, though he was brought you. We have the Mind Weavers you see here, and our personal power. I do not know of the Accords, or of you, Lilith. Is there anyone I could inform, allies that could help?”

“Well, you did talk to me,” Ilea said with a smile on her face. “It depends on the timeline we’re working with, but yes, I can think of one or two people.”

Evan exhaled audibly next to her.

“Maybe a tree and a dagger too,” she said.