

“I assumed you wanted to destroy this,” Ilea said, shaking the small vial filled with corruption, an ashen limb holding on to the thing.

Catelyn jumped out of her arms and landed on the table.

“The resistance training was more successful than we had anticipated,” Catelyn said. “One of the Fae has come here.”

“What did it tell you?” Ilea asked.

“That you were safe. That a powerful being had come to confront you in the deepest layer of the Descent. An Ascended,” she said. “We trust the Spirits of old and thus all efforts to break into left behind facilities in the Descent were officially discontinued. Scavengers likely breached those rules but we have not suffered an attack from the creature you faced.”

“We found more evidence. That the Ascended were behind the third sun’s disappearance. The specific goals they had are unclear... and now knowing that the creature didn’t come here or found me... maybe it really didn’t matter anymore,” Ilea said.

“You almost sound disappointed,” Catelyn said with a smile.

Ilea thought about it. “A little. It was a four mark mage, sapient and using four schools of magic. Blood, Void, Space, and metal.”

Catelyn giggled.

“What?”

“You’re annoyed to be dismissed as unimportant,” she said. “Be glad, any other way and either we or you would be dead. A four mark is not something we can face.”

“Maybe I am,” Ilea said, looking at the ceiling before she focused on Catelyn again. “I’m not so sure about the second part. I worked to gain third tier resistances to its magic. And I gained a third Class. It should be hard for that Ascended to kill me at the very least.”

“It may have simply played with you, especially if it dismissed you in the first place. I do admit that you are very durable. Neither the Sand Elemental nor Trakarov were capable of killing you after all. A being with four magic types available to it should not be able to match creatures with just one, naturals at that,” Catelyn said.

“I do think it tried to kill me. And it would have succeeded if it hadn’t been for a friend,” she said.

“The Spirit of old,” Catelyn said and grinned. “Either way, you survived. And either it has failed to find you or didn’t care to try at all. I’m not sure what would be better.”

“Me neither. What did you mean about being naturals?” she asked.

“I’m a natural at fire, because my species uses fire magic even when not sapient,” she said.

“Ah, yeah I figured it was something like that,” Ilea said.

Catelyn looked at her for a moment. “Three hundred and ninety. And a third Class. I do suggest you refrain from delving into the Descent again. Both for your sake and ours.”

“Don’t worry. I’m not here because of that,” Ilea said. “There are plenty of things I have to work on before even thinking about facing that monster.”

“I hope you’re here to meet a friend and reassure her that you’re healthy and alive,” Catelyn said.

Ilea summoned a cake and moved it slightly closer to the fox.

“Your attempts at bribery are misplaced,” Catelyn said.

Ilea added a second cake.

“Not even a letter,” Catelyn said.

Ilea didn’t mention the lack of postal service willing to travel north from the human plains.

A third cake appeared.

“I was sure you had forgotten about me,” the fox added, her voice lacking bite.

Ilea added two more cakes and took a step back.

The fox smiled as her body expanded yet again. Her voice rumbled through the Hunter’s Den with menacing power. “Consider your debt repaid.”

Ilea watched as Popi’s beautiful creations were slaughtered. Ripped apart, their screams silent and unheard, a merciless predator of fire devouring every bit of their writhing corpses.

“How have you been?” Ilea asked, sitting down on an ashen chair and summoning a meal for herself.

Catelyn had returned to her small form, the flames gone as she licked up the remaining splatters.

“I was stressed. Now I’m much... much better,” she said and flopped to her side, her face resting on her paws as she looked at Ilea. She closed her eyes slightly and purred.

“Don’t tempt me,” Ilea whispered, enjoying her own dish as she watched the fox.

Catelyn opened her eyes again and smiled, showing her teeth. “I always thought it hubris... wanting to pet a monster like me. But I suppose you’ve reached sufficient power to make it more reasonable.

“As to your question. Things have gone reasonably well. Elana and many others are a huge help taking care of everything. The first layer of the Descent is fully secured now, our efforts to find and eradicate the corruption in the highest four layers mostly successful.

“And we’re expanding too, trying to take over much of the ruins lying between Hallowfort and the Descent,” Catelyn said.

“You mentioned the resistance training? The Ascended had called it a failed experiment for a war that had long ended,” Ilea said.

“Yes. The healers we have profited greatly from our efforts to train extended resistances against Blood Manipulation. Other services are now available to train common defenses. It’s still best to face monsters but healing abilities are rare,” Catelyn said.

“I founded a healing organization in Ravenhall,” Ilea said.

“You did?” Catleny asked, prepping herself up slightly.

“Yep. And we’re getting closer with the Taleen gate technology. I do hope you’re interested in an alliance with Ravenhall,” Ilea said, quickly explaining the progress of the Sentinels and informing Catelyn about Ravenhall’s independence.

“The council will have to vote. As I imagine yours will have to. Though a safe haven... in the south. Mana density may be a problem for some but that can be solved to an extent with Arcane magic resistance. I doubt anyone will be able to resist such an alliance. Do you really think the long range teleportation to be viable?” the fox said.

Ilea shrugged. “I’m pretty sure. We’ll get there. Plus I have a master of space magic to help with the last stretch.”

“You convinced the Fae to help?” Catelyn asked.

“No. No I doubt they’d be interested in that honestly. Meadow is a four mark creature from Erendar, another realm. It contacted ours because they have a problem with a kind of world ending eclipse and Astral spirits. Some cultists from Baralia were able to interpret and answer the call, creating rituals to try and breach space to get to Erendar.

“Well it worked in the end and now we have an open gate to that realm. Which brings me to the reason I actually came, next to finally seeing you again and bringing you gifts of cake, of course. I brought several Dark Ones to Tremor but they don’t speak Elos Standard or anything else we could understand. Their bodies prevent them from living in the human plains and they’re the last ones of their species. I hoped you could take them in,” Ilea finished.

Catelyn blinked a few times before she curled up into a ball. “You’re not making my life easier.”

Ilea appeared next to the fox, petting her gently as she sat on the table next to her.

“Any Dark One is welcome in Hallowfort, as long as they understand the rules and adhere to our laws,” Catelyn finally said. “The last of their species...,” she sighed. “You just don’t stop, do you?”

“Hey, I have to keep moving, otherwise I’ll end up having to govern some kind of city or kingdom,” Ilea said.

“It’s not as bad as you might think. Stability and safety should not be taken for granted,” Catelyn said.

“I do try to provide that to others. Don’t forget that I’m not quite as old as you are,” Ilea said.

“Don’t start with that again... humans are crazy. Now tell me more about this Meadow and the species you brought to these lands,” Catelyn said.

Ilea watched as a dozen Dark Ones tried to communicate with the residents of Erendar.

Catelyn had allowed her to bring them into the town, with the first goal to establish communication.

“It’s somewhat similar to Krazveri,” one of the more insect like dark ones said after a while, addressing both Ilea and Catelyn. “I think we should be able to have simple conversations in a few weeks.”

“That’s awfully quick,” Ilea said.

“There’s only so much complexity in clicks,” the dark one said and laughed with a gurgling sound. “Efficiently that is. It’s obvious that these are experienced warriors. I’m sure they’ll fit right in.”

Catelyn smiled. “Good, then see to it that they’re welcomed.”

The insect creature nodded and turned to one of the beings again, slowly clicking.

Ilea felt that the survivors had already opened up more in half an hour than they had with her.

“Language really is a huge barrier, hmm,” she mused.

“It’s the foundation of Hallowfort. It’s fortunate that Elos Standard was not lost here. Quite a wonderful language really, easy to learn and pronounce, with dozens of different sound organs,” one of the dark ones said excitedly.

Ilea looked at him. “Fair enough.”

“Not an enthusiast I see... I’m sure you have your own talents,” the heap of tentacles said.

A wolf wreathed in shadows stepped over to the creature and talked in an ethereal whisper. “That is Lilith, the ashen clad savior.”

Something happened in the tentacle creature but Ilea had no clue how to interpret it. Her sphere did inform of some discomfort.

“I... didn’t know... apolo-”

“Don’t mention it,” Ilea interrupted. “My reputation is getting kind of annoying.”

“It’s tedious, isn’t it?” Catelyn said and walked away. “May we have a word?”

Ilea looked at the dark ones and smiled. *They’ll figure it out.*

She could see the excitement in their bodies. A place not filled by sand or ice. Just a bunch of arcane storms.

She followed Catelyn.

“Your proposal...,” the fox started. “I’m not sure about it.”

“Didn’t you say all Dark Ones are welcome?” Ilea asked.

“Yes. As long as they adhere to the laws. With a four mark... there is no way for us to enforce them,” she said.

“I understand. What about a nearby dungeon then? You could get to know it?” Ilea said.

Catelyn didn’t say anything until they reached her den again.

“Elana has helped us define our laws, she’s brought a lot of structure to our council and made our decision making more efficient. The trade agreements with the Dark Protector were drafted by her and may be the reason we have maintained our independence as their forces have grown,” Catelyn said.

“What are you trying to say?” Ilea asked.

“You got her out of that tomb. I trust you. My vote alone will not be enough to sway the council but I can get them to meet this Meadow of yours. If it’s a reasonable distance from here,” she said.

Ilea smiled. "That's good enough. I can be naive and trust too easily. It would be best for you all to meet and have a talk."

"You said it's presence was necessary to close the gate. How will you bring it here?" Catelyn asked. "Will it cross to Elos for the closure?"

"An entire city would be destroyed if that happened, no," Ilea said. "I have another idea."

"Do inform us once it has arrived," Catelyn said.

*Didn't even question it,* Ilea thought with a smile.

"On another note, your Elven friend has been pestering me for two months now," Catelyn said.

"Did he now," Ilea said.

"Yes. Yes he did. I won't repeat his words due to the lack of respect he showed me but if you could visit him in the near future, I would very much appreciate that," Catelyn said.

"Did he find anything special?" she asked.

"He found several things, none of it of importance to Hallowfort. However he mostly seems to wish for a meeting with someone," Catelyn answered.

"The Hunters, yeah. I promised I'd introduce them. Well I'm sure he can level for a little longer, if there's no existential threat to all of Elos," Ilea said.

Catelyn rolled her eyes. "There isn't but he does have a flair for being dramatic."

"He does, doesn't he?" Ilea said. "You mentioned Elana before. She didn't try to take over Hallowfort yet?"

"Her influence is obvious, and growing. Should she prove to be the most qualified single leader, we will accept her as Queen. However there are reasons this town has never seen such in its whole existence. A council of the most powerful and wisest is necessary for balance and continued prosperity. Our goal will never be conquest or war. Natural growth and expansion is difficult enough in these lands. Elana knows that.

"She has pressed for more exploration and specifically expeditions to ancient Rhyvor ruins. She may be human but her place lies here, in the north," Catelyn said.

"Just don't forget that she's human," Ilea said, glancing at the fox.

"Don't underestimate the cunning of non humans, Ilea. Your species may be notorious for a lack of honor but the structure of our anatomy does not make us who we are," Catelyn said.

"I know you're right. I just don't exactly feel that way most of the time," Ilea said. "You mentioned the Dark Protector. Is the war with the Feynor still ongoing?"

"It's not a conflict that will be decided anytime soon. The simple act of finding a battlefield is treacherous. Our strongholds are built for survival, each living creature here capable of fighting. Large groups of moving creatures will attract predators neither side is capable of defeating. Nor do we seek the destruction of secure caverns," Catelyn explained.

"Didn't seem to be the case in Lisburg," Ilea said.

"A few destroyed houses are hardly the destruction of entire caverns," Catelyn said. "But we digress. In the last months there was more pressure from the Dark Protector's side but the agreements have provided some air."

"I see," Ilea said. "Well let's hope you remain independent until new allies become available."

"If your teleportation gate works... I can't even imagine the possibilities. The benefits would be ludicrous. Almost as incredible as a potential four mark ally to protect our city," Catelyn said. "Is it agreeable to you if I discuss these options with the council?"

"If you trust them enough not to leak anything. I'm sure the Dark Protector would increase his efforts if it knew about the possibilities," Ilea said.

"Even if they try, we won't cave in as easily as that. Don't forget who you're talking to, Ilea. Despite the power of a long range teleportation gate, an alliance with Ravenhall would highly benefit both sides," the fox said.

"I'm sure," Ilea said. *Just an access to all the dungeons and the north itself for all her Sentinels and other human adventurers would shift the whole balance of power. Even an Elven attack could easily be repelled with the help of Hallowfort. Let alone the benefit of healers for all the Scavenger squads.*

"You're already a hero to many here. If your reputation in that human city of yours is anywhere near the one you have in Hallowfort, your will alone would be enough to make an alliance all but certain," Catelyn said.

"I don't want to be involved that much. But you'll like Claire. She's as or more capable as Elana but nice and without that air of royal superiority," Ilea said. "The other council members are quite capable too. Just don't mention the Elves, humans have a bit of a problem with them."

"Your friends are the only ones I have dealt with in the past centuries. The same applies to Feynor when it comes to us. They are generally not seen as potential allies, no matter the circumstances," Catelyn said.

"I don't think that will be an issue. If any relations with Feynor should arise, it will be with our alliance," Ilea said.

Catelyn giggled. "That would be something to see. With your presence, I have come to doubt the existence of impossibilities."

"I do my best," Ilea said. "Oh... before I forget. I have a way to mark people now. It allows me to find you and it's a way for you to call for me should you need my assistance. Would it be alright if I placed it on you?"

"Of course. It sounds very useful," Catelyn said.

Ilea smiled. "It is," she said and placed a mark on Catelyn.

"I believe it will be dissolved if I call for aid... no direct communication then. Well it shall remain useful, to call upon the monster it belongs to," the fox said.

"Right? It's like you're a summoner after all. But instead of some shit creatures, you summon me," Ilea said.

"A powerful Class that would be. To summon Ilea's at a whim," Catelyn said.

"If there's nothing else, I'll be on my way then," Ilea said.

"There are many things we could discuss but I understand your urgency. Be safe, and thanks for this," Catelyn said, showing her paw with the barely visible mark. "I shall discuss the news and possibilities you shared and we will be ready. Rest assured that the Dark Ones you have brought to

Hallowfort will henceforth be under our protection. They shall receive housing and opportunities to build their new life with us.

***'ding' 'You have secured the continued survival of the Pale Ones – One Core skill point awarded'***

***'ding' 'You have secured the continued survival of the Awakened Willows – One Core skill point awarded'***

***'ding' 'You have secured the continued survival of the Wildflower Ants – One Core skill point awarded'***

***'ding' 'You have secured the continued survival of the Rock Beetles – One Core skill point awarded'***

*Four points? Fuck yeah.*

*Wait how will that one Rock Beetle reproduce? Better not ask any questions.*

"I appreciate your support in this. I knew I could rely on you," Ilea said and bowed slightly.

"We're friends, don't treat me like a diplomat!" Catelyn said.

"As you wish, Lady Catelyn, blessed by fire and cake," Ilea said and bowed even deeper.

"I'll burn you," the fox growled.

"I'm afraid such is impossible, Empress Foxy. Your magic is simply insignificant to my defense," Ilea said, trying to sound as neutral as possible.

"Foxy..." Catelyn murmured. "I can't believe it. Be off then, child of ash. And let this old one rest," she added with a very toothy grin.

Ilea smiled and grabbed the fox, hugging her one last time before she left. "So soft."

"I could shed if you'd like the material. For a scarf or something," Catelyn said.

"Nonono. That's not what foxes do," Ilea said and let go of her.

"I'm not a simple fox. I'm a magical creature, Ilea. You just insisted on cal-"

"You're a fox. Don't shed. I'll go now. Hopefully see you soon," Ilea said.

"Farewell, Ilea," Catelyn said and giggled.