

“Dozens have died in an effort to destroy her,” Nes spoke, shaking her head. She balled her fists.

“We can try to stop him,” Ilea suggested.

Nes shook her head. “It would take the Unity, and even then it would not be certain. These are not events that run on the scale of human time, young Azarinth healer. What the Architect has set in motion, is rarely something that can be interrupted.”

“You were looking for yet another key in that vault?” Scipio confirmed. “What else did you find?”

Ilea smiled. “Fancy necklace,” she said and opened up her ash.

“The... Azarinth star...” he murmured. “It was lost...”

“You two know a lot more than you told me last time, hmm?” Ilea said.

“Of course,” Scipio said. “What else?”

“You know I don’t have to tell you that,” Ilea said and went on. “Some Faen heart thing, but I’m keeping that. A sphere, keeping that too, and a splintered spear,” she said, looking up as she counted off her fingers.

“None of those sound familiar,” he said with a thoughtful expression.

“The spear,” Nes said, her voice sounding tired. “May I... may I see it?”

Ilea looked at her and summoned the thing. Nes hadn’t seemed interested, instead she seemed lost.

As soon as the splinters floated in front of Ilea, the Ascended shook lightly, her hand extending ever so slightly. A strange motion, followed by her arms going to her face.

*Is she... crying?*

“Marva... of course,” Scipio whispered. “Perhaps you can store it once more,” he added, looking at Ilea before he checked on Nes. “This is a lot. We can focus on moving the facility first, take our t-”

“No,” Nes said in a loud voice. She composed herself and touched his arm before she looked at Ilea.

“You can have it, if you like,” Ilea said.

Nes made a strange sound. “Y... you would give it... what would you want in return?”

Ilea shrugged. “Seems like it’s important to you, and I have no clue what to do with it, not like I use spears.”

“It is... the spear of the Black Leaf,” Nes said in a baffled tone, as if to confirm.

Ilea nodded slowly. “Yes. Despite the name, I prefer fists, and sometimes hammers.” She summoned the thing again and used her space manipulation to move it over to the Ascended. “It’s fine. But we shouldn’t dally. I have a feeling the more time we give someone called the Architect, the worse of a time I’ll have fucking with his lair.”

Nes raised her arms towards the broken weapon, carefully receiving it. She looked at it for a few seconds, lost in thought until Scipio cleared his throat. “Yes... of course, apologies,” she said and

made the spear vanish. "I... words fails me, Lilith. Let us... move on. I will get back to you," she said and gave her a light bow.

"Don't mention it," Ilea said. "Wait, maybe you two could share some info with me once I need it."

"Of course," Scipio said. "If you bring us to Kohr, there is little I will even try to hold back from you. I give you my word."

"We should probably get somewhere else first, he could find this place otherwise," Ilea said and spread her wings. "Let's fly."

They left the hideout and flew down towards the northern lands, the ancient beings beside Ilea.

Nes broke the silence after a few minutes. "He didn't know you."

"Hmm?" Ilea mused as she turned her head to look at the being.

Nes' form was carried by the winds. "He would not have compared you to her. You are so much more."

Ilea felt the weight of the words but she had no way to relate them. *I have no clue who this Ravana person is.* She just gave the Navuun a nod.

"Busy... he said he was busy," Nes murmured. "He would not waste a chance to dissect someone like you."

"Don't want to sound rude, but I do believe he tried," Ilea said. "I'm not an Ascended but I have a few tricks up my sleeves."

"I don't question your ability, Lilith. I have seen the Azarinth at the prime of their power, and I'm sure you're beyond even that. I merely question the words and actions of the Architect, why he seemed so eager to be rid of you," she said.

"He was not happy when I refused his offer," Ilea said with a grin.

"That makes you smile?" Scipio asked from the side.

"Yeah," Ilea said. "Just something fun about telling ancient assholes to fuck off." She gave him a meaningful glance.

He looked back. "Fair enough."

*Hmm.*

"I believe we are far enough away to make it unlikely that someone will find our facility," Nes said, flying towards the arcane storms on the ground.

"I agree," Scipio added.

Ilea landed last. "If he's there, let me have a go at him alone."

"I'm both a space and barrier mage, and I have fought Ascended before," Scipio said.

"This is not about our capabilities, Scipio," Ilea said, looking into his eyes as white fire started to burn on her ash. "I don't like to be treated like a research animal."

Nes touched the man's shoulder. "We will stay out of it. Call for our help, and we will be there."

“Sure, let’s see if this even works,” Ilea mused and opened the gate to Kohr. Space shifted just like when she opened a gate to another location in Elos. She flew through and found herself just outside the Ascended facility, chunks of scattered salt rock still indicating her rough exit. Bits and pieces of demons lying nearby.

Nes and Scipio followed behind, the latter now clad in black armor, golden seams flowing through the strange fabric not quite metal, leather, nor cloth. He wore an elaborate helmet modeled after a stag, though the antlers weren’t quite as pronounced as the set Ilea was more familiar with.

“I see you take after your king,” Ilea said.

Nes glanced at the chunks of flesh, averting her eyes a moment later. The gate vanished behind them.

“Let me remember a time long past, for no one else will,” he spoke.

“Elana is literally sending out expeditions to uncover your cities,” Ilea said, seeing him raise his brows at that. “*I’ll keep this connection active,*” she sent to both, once more eliciting a visible reaction from the duo. *Never gets old.* She grinned and dived down into the drilled out tunnel, quickly reaching the metal wall she had burned through before. The makeshift entrance was shut, steel present as if it had always been there.

“*He shut it again,*” she sent to the others. “*Stay back while I break in.*” A touch revealed several powerful enchantments protecting the facility. *Same ones as before, just repaired,* she surmised, spreading her flames onto the steel before she started punching, Archon Strike and Tempered Seal flashing up as the enchantments were shredded apart. The vaults in Baralia were nothing against this but Ilea wasn’t quite the same anymore.

*Defensive enchantment destruction crew, has arrived.* A bright flash of magic flared up when the connections were severed, her domain once more reaching into the facility below. “Hello. I’m back,” she murmured, her burning ash drill creating a shrill sound as she set it against the steel. It didn’t take her long to get through.

Ilea moved past the slightly glowing tunnel and into the still lit facility, orange red light mixing with bright and cold magical lamps.

She poked in her head and looked around. “Might as well.” She charged heat as her ash spread into the hall beyond. When her healing started to struggle against all the energy in her core, she spread it out through her ash and turned away, plugging her ears more as a gesture than due to an actual need before the entire hall exploded in a flash of bright flames and heat.

The walls were on fire, much of it dented, all the lights broken and gone. “*I’m good, that’s one hall done,*” she mused and started charging heat once more. *Let’s check on the imprisoned monsters.* Her wings moved, bringing her down into the burning hall.

Her domain cut off the moment her form had entered past the steel, a mesh of space magic flaring up in intricate patterns on the walls. Ilea had no time to think, bright light gathering all around as metal shifted, spheres covered in runes floating out of the ground, walls, and ceiling. Her perception of time slowed.

She could tell it was light magic, and she could tell it was too much. Her gates failed to find a connection, her teleports bringing her only to the metal walls, spheres floating out from all around.

*Well. Shit.* Ilea raised her arms, forming as much ash as she could, burning walls connected to her form. The Azarinth Star shimmered with magic, shields coming to life all around as the fabric splintered, Primordial Shift activating just as everything turned white.

Ilea barely managed to perceive the next split second, light burning into her eyes as a wave of magic hit her walls, the flame of creation burning with a storm around her locked form, her body not quite part of the fabric but not quite gone either. Tendrils of flesh and space mingled with light and heat before she could feel it, a strange sensation, all enveloping.

Her flesh was gone. Her bone was gone. The fabric moved, bits and pieces of her flesh remaining within the overwhelming spell of light, consciousness replaced by a strange understanding. Magic flared up as the fabric itself came to life around her, spheres of wisp like energies exploding out to counter the external pressure, the bits and pieces that remained of her strange self exploding in unnatural growth. Limbs of flesh moved out, blinding pain mixing with an unfamiliar overpowering strength as two dozen eyes opened to see the dimming lights, barriers of space itself fading away.

***‘ding’ ‘You have survived – One Core Skill point awarded’***

Primordial shift ended, all eyes seeing as the ground came closer at a rapid pace. Ilea landed with a wet impact. She wanted to scream, closing all her eyes as she focused on recovering mana. Any mana. All of it went straight into her healing, the core bits that remained of her bursting out from within the large sphere like chunk of flesh. Her brain was back, ash cutting through her own protective growths to sever the connection to the maddening organs. Her domain came to life, her skull and spine reforming within the flesh before she broke out on top, ripping free of the bloody chunks. Lungs reformed and were sealed off. Now she screamed.

Ilea opened her eyes, gritting her newly formed teeth as her mantle slowly flowed around her blood covered and regenerating form. “Where. Are. You.” Her voice was raw. She looked up, an ashen limb slapping away a massive chunk of falling rock. All around, the walls were crumbling. All of the metal was gone, burned away by whatever spell the Architect had prepared for her return. His entire facility was gone. Turned to nothing. Moonlight shined down from the glacial skies of Kohr, loud impacts resounding hundreds of meters away, the crater stretching farther than the facility had reached.

Nes appeared nearby, her arm raised before powerful healing slammed into Ilea.

She just glanced at the Ascended, ripping her leg out of the horrific spell that had saved her life. “I don’t need your healing,” she murmured, cracking her neck before she balled her fists, ashen wings spreading as she instead absorbed a chunk of mana from the spell used on her. She couldn’t find him.

Scipio appeared as well. “We shouldn’t stay,” he said.

Ilea hissed. “Then go.” She flew up and towards the center of the crater, checking every bit of the remains, the skies beyond, the ground below. Her domain scanned everything, heat vision, Eternal Huntress. There was nothing. This place might as well not have existed at all. *You piece. Of fucking. Shit.*

She shuddered, the feeling of her spell still lingering. *Primordial flesh indeed. Motherfucker.* A few teleports brought her back to the pair now flying near the top of the crater, entire cliffs having formed from the powerful detonation.

“How in all that is holy did you survive that blast?” Scipio asked. He shook his head. “Never mind... we should leave this place.”

“Why? He just destroyed his only advantage,” Ilea said, looking at the devastated landscape.

“You’re more confident than I am,” he said. “But I’m not worried about the Architect for once,” he added, pointing to the distant skies.

Ilea saw the writhing mass, several somethings moving closer at a concerning speed. Screeches resounded from close by, though those she assumed were normal demons. “Those might be good experience,” she said, though her confidence wavered slightly when she felt their magic flowing through the vicinity, as if antennas of void itself. Four marks, and not on the level of a Bluetail. “I can come back when I’m recovered.”

Nes watched the strange creatures in the sky, most of their large forms shrouded in dark clouds. She moved when Scipio touched her shoulder.

“Where to?” he asked.

“I... away. We will have to cast spells to locate our facilities,” the Ascended spoke.

Ilea gave the creatures a last glance as they flew upwards, demon hordes flowing over the wild landscape of Kohr like waves of an ocean, guided to the light. Thousands.

*I guess now it's personal*, she thought, glancing at the expansive crater before she followed the two waiting people, the first flying demons already rushing their way, projectiles hitting barriers as they sped up.

They quickly left the pursuers behind, landing in the middle of nowhere, which to be fair was everything in the wasteland of salt and stone.

Ilea ignored the skill level notifications for now, grinning to herself at the fact that Ker Velor now likely knew his trap hadn't killed her. Either that or he didn't even know the trap had activated in the first place.

“Well,” she said with a smile, summoning a meal as she landed near the others. “I did fuck up his facility.”

Scipio glanced up, thin barriers moving around him on the ground to etch runes into the stone. “Technically, he did that himself.”

“Don't provoke her,” Nes said. The Ascended looked at her with bright white eyes, her arms crossed.

“*What?*” Ilea asked, her mouth full. Keyla's creation quickly reduced her anger to slight annoyance. The Architect would get his due, but first, food.

“Are you sure you're still human?” the being asked.

Ilea opened her mouth and closed it again. She shrugged.

Nes put her arms down and started to snicker.

Scipio smiled, shaking his head as he continued drawing his runes. “Nobody should've survived that.”

“It wasn’t pleasant,” she said. *Shouldn’t trigger another trap like that for six hours, hmm. I’m sure the Meadow would’ve like to see that. Wait fuck, I should’ve taken that chunk of flesh with me... no, but I should’ve burnt it. Disgusting.* She shuddered again, focusing on the food to get her mind off the sensations. *Freaky. Fucking freaky.*

**‘ding’ ‘Fear Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 3’**

*Yeah.*

They spent the next few minutes in silence, Ilea recovering from the experience as she healed her mind, the others slightly shaken too, both from the blast and her survival.

She watched the man work, assuming he had anchors in Elos, so getting stranded here wouldn’t be as much of a problem as it had been for her and Trian.

“Any clue what that spell was?” Ilea asked.

“Not one spell,” Nes said as she glanced over. “Thousands. Overcharging mana cores to create an effect greater than the intended use of an item allows. Self destruction in other words, and those were neither simple constructs nor were they charged with little mana. Either he was worried about your return, which I question if you say he made you flee with the intended use of his defensive constructs, or he left his facility behind. Either to prevent you from finding anything within, because he had time constraints, or because he no longer had a use for it.”

“Could be anything. I don’t even know if he was there when I arrived. You guys have teleportation gates too right? Realm spanning even I assume,” Ilea said.

“No. Though there are Ascended with anchors in various realms. I myself am not a space mage, though I can return to Elos with extended preparations. Or if I find a working transporter. Devices allowing travel to previously breached and connected realms. Returning to Kohr is the difficult part however,” she said.

“I might’ve used one of those before,” Ilea said. “Wait... breached... realms?”

*Does that mean?*

“Yes. Only realms found by the navigators are available. You have seen another familiar realm?” Nes asked.

“Maybe,” Ilea said. *Does that mean the Ascended went to Earth?* “These navigators... when they find a new realm, what happens to that realm?”

“It is merely added. Scouts may enter the realms and create reports on available resources,” Nes said.

“Any... side effects possible?” Ilea asked.

“It’s a theory,” Scipio said. “So yes, you might’ve arrived in Elos due to Ascended tampering.”

“I’m sorry,” Nes said.

“But I’m not sure about it. The fabric is fickle. I’d still consider the chance higher that it was a random shift, especially with you not being older than me. I assume,” he said.

“I’m definitely younger,” Ilea said. “You’re fucking ancient. When did you figure out I’m a realm traveler anyway?”

Scipio just shook his head in confusion. “It’s... obvious.”

Ilea just glanced at him. *I suppose it is?*

*So they did know about Earth, or at least found the realm at some point. Question is... do I want to find out more?*

She didn’t quite know the answer, summoning a second meal with healing still flowing through her mind. At least she leveled her Light Magic Resistance.