

Chapter 903 Amends

“Not exactly,” Aki spoke and floated out of Ilea’s arms. “Sentinel of Akelion, Protector of the Accords, and Guardian of Iz. I greet you, Verillion Carn, First Vampire of the western Courts.”

“You replaced it. How?” Verillion asked. For the first time, he seemed in disbelief.

“Found the capital,” Ilea said. “Worked with the Cerithil Hunters. Walked through an insanely hot hallway. That’s most of it.”

Verillion remained quiet for a while. “That’s a lot,” he said as a knock resounded from one of the many doors in the hall. He snapped his fingers, people entering with plates of food and drinks alike. An entire feast, made not for a vampire.

“There’s quite a lot more, I’m afraid,” Aki spoke.

“Please. Let us talk over a nightly meal. You are my guests. Do feel at home,” he said and teleported to the other side of the table. “I hope you brought your own seat, Ilea. I’m afraid these will break.”

A matter of fact, she knew, and still, she kind of wanted to test it out. Instead, she formed a chair of volcanic glass and took a seat, teleporting a few plates in front of her and filling a glass with wine using Fabric Alteration. “Thanks for the meal. I’ll try not to interrupt too much, Aki.”

The silver machine flew closer, the single eye focused on the First Vampire.

“News of an ancient conflict,” Verillion said as he swirled his glass of wine, his eyes unfocused for a moment before he looked at Aki. His expression had changed, the casual demeanor gone. “I appreciate your warning. And your offers. There is a lot to be gained, for your people and for mine.

“An inclusion of the Courts, into your alliance, is of course impossible. You represent order and authority, where I always strove for something a little less strict and defined,” he said and drank from his glass. He set it down. “However. Trade and travel can surely be arranged. You may buy whatever technology is made by those within these lands. There are no rules against it, though I would appreciate consideration in any offers you may make in return.”

“We will have to discuss within the Accords, and have representatives meet, before anything would be arranged. That isn’t a concern,” Aki said.

Verillion nodded, though it was clear he wasn’t particularly focused on any trade or travel agreements. “Ker Velor. I will help in your search, and I wish to be personally included in this endeavor, no matter who your allies may or may not be. The Ascended have taken too much from this realm already, and like once long ago, we will have to show a united front, if we hope to stop them.”

“Talks have already started in our lands. We will be ready to talk specifics in a few hours,” Aki said. “And we offer to meet you here, in your lands. If that is what you wish.”

“If Erik brought you here, there is little need for too much caution, though it is appreciated. You will be guests, and no harm will come to you and yours.” He sighed and shook his head. “Two Four

Marks in my land. Or three perhaps,” he said and looked at Aki. “I will have the Lords and Ladies informed. Those who wish, will take part in the talks. With how we are organized, you’ll have to make a lot of individual deals.”

“That is not an issue,” Aki said.

“The One without Form. It has eluded me for so long,” Verillion said. “And still, it kept the Elves at bay. Have you seen increased attacks in the Plains?”

“There is more internal strife among their kind. Some attacks, but no coordinated efforts or any three mark elves, so far,” Aki replied.

“You were there, then,” Ilea said, looking up from her ongoing meal. She wiped her mouth. “A friend of mine told me something a while back... First Vampire... are you the First Hunter?”

He looked at her and smiled. “What a peculiar question. How would you know that title?”

“It was my first Class Evolution for Azarinth Healer,” she said.

He raised his brows. “No... the Order couldn’t be around anymore. You are so unlike them.”

“I found one of their temples. Would’ve starved without the grass.”

He grinned now, then laughed. “Ah, now that crowns it all. It gives me great pleasure, to know that you have taken from them, what they have guarded most. I hope you did not take their teachings to heart.”

“I honestly don’t remember much. Mostly focused on the stances. So who’s the First Hunter now? Me or you?” she asked.

“I do believe we have both vastly outgrown the Azarinth and what they stood for. I no longer hold claim to that title. Do you?”

She drank from her wine, then smiled. “I have so many titles by now, I think I’m good,” Ilea said.

“Then let it be that way. From one former First Hunter to a former First Huntress. The Azarinth are no more. May they be forgotten, once and for all.” He raised his glass, then drank.

Ilea shrugged and raised hers too. “We did kind of create a new bluemoon grass though.”

“Of course you did. Of course,” he murmured. “They are no more though, are they?”

“We formed a new organization. Medic Sentinels. Happy to show you around in the Headquarters and introduce you to a few of them,” she said and smiled.

“One day perhaps,” he said. “It has been thousands of years since I’ve traveled east.”

“Try to get a space magic Class. It helps,” she said.

He raised one brow. “I’ll keep that valuable piece of advice in mind.”

Ilea laughed. She supported her chin with her hand, then heard a slight crack from the table. Her ash fanned out to support it. “Sorry about that. Still getting used to the weight.”

He waved her off.

“So you were human before?” Ilea asked. “You must’ve been, or were the Azarinth actually vampires?”

He gave her a long look, then glanced at Aki. "I would answer you, but not the Accords. If you promise that you keep this knowledge to yourself."

"I don't think he can intercept telepathy," Ilea said to the vampire. *"Not yet at least."*

"I will leave the room and find Erik," Aki spoke. "Though I cannot open doors by myself."

An enchantment lit up and the door swung open. "Thank you," the machine spoke and hovered out, the door closing behind him.

"The Taleen back, their machines controlled by a new owner. Another Four Mark, and the Architect back in this realm. You really do that former title proud," Verillion said and summoned himself a drink.

"Oh, that's that Wyvern one," Ilea said, pointing at his choice of beverage.

"You know Zeriel?" he asked.

"Yeah," Ilea said with a wide grin.

Verillion raised his brows. "He's alive, I hope?"

"He's fine. Finishing up a personal project," Ilea confirmed. "Your becoming of blood story?"

"Yes. Well. I'll tell you for a drop of your blood," Verillion said and smirked.

Ilea rolled her eyes. "Sure," she said and cut into her finger, hovering over the blade of glass. "But if you lose your mind and destroy half your castle, don't blame me. And if you use it against me... well, that's on you." She grinned.

"I won't taste this here and now," he said. "There is a time and place." A small and decorated vial appeared in his hand before he let the drop of blood fall inside. He closed it and made it vanish. "But it does smell potent. No surprise, from a being like yourself. You are still human, aren't you?"

Ilea took a bite out of a cooked monster leg. "I'll tell you for a drop of your blood."

He laughed and drank from his cup. "Why would I give my blood away so easily? The rituals one could conduct with it would be dangerous, even to me."

Ilea looked up from her food, smiling.

"Only a fool would share their blood with a powerful being such as you. Or I."

"Try me," she said and continued eating.

He laughed again. "We will have our fun, Ilea," he said and bit into his arm. Again, he summoned a vial similar to the first and placed a drop inside, then offered it to her.

She teleported the thing into her hand and looked at it, then made it vanish. "I'm not a blood mage."

"I figured, but I'm sure the Accords has its fair share of powerful blood mages," he said. "A token of trust, if you will."

"I'm human, if you were still wondering," she said. "At least I think so."

"If you believe yourself a human, then that is what you are," he said and paused, taking a sip from his drink. He grunted, then coughed. "Your assumption about the Azarinth being vampires was not too far off."

“Really now?”

“It’s a little more complicated. The effort to invade what we later learned to be Kohr, was considerable. Only possible with the makeshift alliance of different nations and species. But of course our efforts were not coordinated, driven by revenge, by hate, and greed. It was an alliance based on need, not trust, or purpose. Splinters showed quickly, and many scrambled to gain whatever they could. We recovered much from Kohr. From facilities left behind, some trapped and others simply abandoned. Treasures the Ascended thought without value, for us, incomparable and impossible to understand.

“One such treasures was a substance based on blood, from one of their research facilities. First, we thought it a biological weapon, but later study revealed the complexity and versatility of the agent. There was much of it, and the research conducted to create it must’ve been extensive. It healed anyone and anything that drank it, but various experiments revealed other options. Change. Induced on beings, similar to an elixir, but far more potent than anything we had known.” He shook his head.

“The Red Church,” Ilea murmured.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“I’ve come across a substance like you describe. It came from an Ascended facility here in Elos. North of the Plains, in the former lands of Rhyvor. They experimented with it...”

“So we weren’t the first.”

Ilea shook her head. “No. I encountered a starved vampire in that facility. So that wasn’t one of yours?”

He shook his head. “Not to my knowledge.”

“We learned that it was a weapon. And a powerful corruption agent. It spread through the entire dungeon, infecting near every monster there.”

“It is possible, with it originating in Kohr,” he said. “Though the... experiments conducted by the Azarinth Order, never yielded results quite as effective as you describe. Not as a weapon. It was in that time, that I started having doubts. About how the Order was led. About our purpose. The chaos preceding the invasion of Kohr, and the invasion itself... we lost a lot of people. Despite the treasures we brought back, I started to question if it was worth it, but the Elders were consumed. Most of our resources were soon focused on researching what we had found, on increasing our power, while the Plains descended into chaos and war, entire temples wiped out every week. There was no coordinated effort, no attempt at diplomacy.

“The Elders soon realized the potential of the blood substance, and hired blood mages to conduct experiments, soon starting to... employ dubious methods, when progress slowed,” he said and looked at her. “I didn’t do anything, Ilea. I watched. I let it happen. And I fought those who opposed us.” He took in a deep breath. “I thought that if we reached our goal, it would stop. That we could restore balance in the Plains, with the power and knowledge gained through the atrocities we committed.

“And then, the first vampire was born. A wild creature then. Nephar was his name. An Azarinth Juggernaut who had fought in the war, who had fought by my side. He was gone. Replaced by this... fanged monster, of blood. He killed two before we could put him down. I thought it madness,

thought that this, surely, would convince the Elders to halt their experiments, and to focus back on the lands we had already lost. But it only spurred them onward.

“Many had died, to fine tune the new elixir, and when it was perfected, the highest ranking Azarinth became vampires. Empowered by blood and healing. I too, was changed, became what I am now. I remember the day. Remember how I felt. The power in my veins, the blood I could now wield. I was elated. I knew that we had achieved something great. The next chapter of humanity. We could fight back, against the monsters plaguing our villages, could heal from the worst wounds. We could live off blood alone, and change our entire species into something more resilient. Something more powerful.” He paused, eyes unfocused.

Ilea took another bite and swallowed. “Let me guess. They didn’t stop.”

“They did not. And it broke me. Everything that I was. I could no longer deny what I had buried deep within. The Order I loved. The Order I would’ve died for.” He drank from his wine. “I slaughtered them. Everyone that I once revered. All those who had taught me. Who had given me shelter. Who had given me purpose.”

“That’s pretty fucked up,” Ilea said. “Fits with the First Vampire, I suppose.”

He smiled. “I suppose it does, doesn’t it? At the time I was devastated. I thought that I would be the last. That I would finish it, leaving only those not yet changed. But one thought kept me going. I had been there, had seen the pain and death brought on by this blood. It was still there. Would everything be for nothing? All the knowledge gained by the Azarinth. All the death caused by the new elixir? Another cult, corrupted by power, its members found, dead and devoured, somewhere in a cave. The legacy of the Azarinth Order.” He paused. “I could finish it, or I could find another way.”

“I’m glad you chose this path,” Ilea said.

“It was often close,” he admitted. “And it took years. I gathered those who remained and those few I trusted outside of my former Order. Mercenaries of the Hand, like you. Healers from other Orders. Merchants. Scholars. And I built something new. I had to. But we were known. Sooner or later, I knew, we would draw too much attention, we would be hunted down, to stamp out what remained of the Azarinth Order. Perhaps it was cowardice, or pride. A fear of death. A bit of everything, I suppose. I wanted to build something new, but already, history was catching up. What I needed was a new start. In a new place.

“I used all the favors that I could. Connections that I had made during the invasion of Kohr. The Taleen, before the One without Form took over, agreed to teleport me and those I had gathered far to the west. Past the Elven domains, into a land that had been changed by the removal of the third sun. It was a great risk, and the first decades were difficult. But slowly, we built something new. We agreed on the Four Rules, and settled, bringing with us knowledge gathered over millennia, our bodies changed to near immortality, and a purpose, to do what our forefathers could not.

“A selfish dream perhaps. Running away, from what I had done. From what my Order had done. Running away instead of sharing this new creation we had found. By the time I had come to accept most of my past choices, my history, my regrets, and my failings, we had built a new home. The Taleen no longer communicated, instead replaced by their machines waging a war against Elven kind. It took centuries until the first of our people managed to go east and return. And by that time, the world had changed. The Azarinth were all but forgotten. New kingdoms and Orders had formed. Wars waged for people and purpose unknown to me. A land faraway, with people I no longer knew. And I was here. Among those that I loved. Those who I wanted to protect.

“And so I chose. To remain. Perhaps now, with your arrival, with history once again, finding its way to my home, and with the Taleen technology soon available to our people, I may work to make amends. For what I have let happen. For what the Azarinth had done millennia past. And for my choice, to leave it all behind.”