

## Chapter 759 Keys

“I do apologize for the state of our affairs,” Ben said, now sitting in a white garden chair. “Neither sanitary nor welcoming.” He poured some steaming tea into a cup, porcelain all, a matching table summoned too.

“I’m just fucking with you, Ben. I don’t really care how you live down here,” Ilea mused. “But I do appreciate the tea.”

“She burnt our dinner,” Farthorn murmured.

“That she did,” Elfie confirmed.

They stared at her, barring their sharp teeth.

Ilea summoned a few plates of food. It really was unlike her to destroy someone’s food, but the definition here blurred just a little bit. “Here is something better than questionably fresh meat.”

“Humans and their need to tamper,” Elfie said and grabbed a plate nonetheless. “I suppose some change is fine, from time to time.”

The others did the same, elfing down the food with varied success at masking their enthusiasm.

“Any word from the others?” Ilea asked, sipping from her tea as she leaned back in the creaking garden chair. Very well made indeed.

The elf shook his head. “Nothing yet. Isalthar is preparing for an assault on Iz. Young Hunters won’t do and those who could help are neither easy to contact nor to convince. However the location should help with the latter.”

“I thought he was kind of important in your community, can’t he just call for the others?” Ilea asked.

Ben shook his head and hissed. “It’s not that simple. There are Hunters who would see him dead, for what he has done. Others begrudgingly accept his existence, and yet others see him as competition.”

“How many of you are out there anyway?” Ilea asked.

“It’s impossible to know. Surviving in the Taleen network isn’t something done easily,” he said.

“And we’re not the only ones informing young Elves. There are those who choose this way on their own.”

*I would’ve hoped for them to organize themselves a little more, with a base of operations, shared knowledge, training and all that. He could just not be telling me everything but maybe they really just do things differently. More instinctual?*

“I found the location of one more key,” Ilea said, looking at Ben. “I do recall you said you were born in the Still Valley?”

He sipped on his tea with his eyes focused entirely on her. “That I was.”

She nodded slowly. “It’s there. Somewhere in the middle of the territory.”

Ben set down his cup and crossed his arms. "Are you sure?"

"Largest valley I've ever seen, covered in a white mist as far as the eye can see. What looks like roots of ice growing up to the surrounding mountain ranges. Arcane storms to the north," she said.

"That does sound like my birthplace," the elf said in a whisper, hissing strangely.

"You want to go into the Still Valley to retrieve one of those keys?" Elfie asked, leaning back now that he was done with his food. Farthorn hissed.

"How important are those keys anyway?" Asay asked. "The risk is... considerable."

"That is a grand understatement. No invader has ever left the Still Valley," Ben said.

Ilea rolled her eyes. "Sure. None you know of. None they would've told you about. I've escaped from the domain of a dragon."

"Space magic might change things," Asay admitted with a thoughtful hiss.

"Space magic remains to be just that. Magic. The guardians of the Still Valley do not tolerate those who would invade their realm. The mists are one thing... the forests another, but if their attention falls on you, the very mana flowing in your veins will be frozen," Ben said. "I perhaps could find a way to resist but the mists will not let me go, nor could I hide from the Elves inhabiting the frozen forest."

"I can get a third tier Ice Resistance," Ilea suggested.

"An absolute requirement. If you wish to go in there," Ben said. "I would dissuade you but you have eclipsed my power and that of many Elves. I believe it is impossible now, to determine the true extent of your abilities, human that you are."

Ilea selected the resistance, still a few points left.

**'ding' 'Ice Resistance reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 1'**

***Ice Resistance – 3rd lvl 1***

***You have endured the biting cold of ice and lived to tell the tale. One of the deadliest climates and magics will now be less dangerous to you with this skill.***

***2nd stage: Freezing temperatures no longer affect your body. It is not advised to jump in front of flying ice lances or to anger the spirits.***

***3rd stage: You have faced creators that bend and shape the laws governing the very state of freezing cold. Your existence has evolved to bypass such limiting laws in turn. Learn to move when there is no room for movement, learn to breathe where there is only frozen air, move through frozen water as though it was liquid.***

"Should probably train it up a bit before I make an attempt though," Ilea mused. "I can now move through ice... and apparently bypass certain... limiting laws?"

"It is why no predator has managed to invade the Still Valley, not even Elves at the height of Monarchs. The Elves of the domain of Ice may not match the sheer brutality of those in the Fire Wastes, or the magical prowess of the Sky domain, but within our lands, none shall live," Ben explained. "How is your Soul Magic Resistance?"

"Soul mages around too?" Ilea asked.

“No, but the Essence of living creatures acts strangely when ice magic of such authority is being cast. It would do you well to be resilient in all aspects of yourself,” he explained.

“Third tier. I don’t think my soul can be destroyed,” Ilea said.

“Good. You truly are quite... tough,” Ben said as he leaned slightly forward. “If you wish, I can try to help with your ice resistance. And I will tell you of my birthplace. A treacherous land, barren, and cold.” His voice had a tinge of nostalgia as he spoke, a thin smile on his lips.

“I’d appreciate it. A map of the place would help too, even though I have the locator,” Ilea said.

Ben looked at her for a few seconds before he spoke. “You will need more than a map. And I would not trust any magical locator within the Still Valley. Others have tried. It may be beneficial even for you to familiarize yourself with ice magic itself.”

Ilea formed a sphere of ice above her palm, a wide grin on her face as the Elves hissed.

“How?” Ben whispered. “A Class?”

“Benefit from an evolution. Got these too,” she said and showed her Earth and Lava manipulation skills in turn.

“Humans,” Asay murmured whilst hissing.

Farthorn complained in elvish.

“It’s remarkable. To wield this many different schools of magic is... at your age. I would’ve thought it impossible,” Ben said.

Ilea put both of her hands below her chin and smiled. “Well you lads don’t go out much. The world is changing. We have teleportation gates now too. I did want to ask what you think the Monarchs and Oracles will do once they find out about that.”

Farthorn left, still hissing. Elfie grinned before he started laughing.

“I would like to see them,” Asay said.

Ben considered, looking at the other Elves. “What do you think? I don’t see a reason for any Oracles to get involved.”

“No. Some of the males might get offended or annoyed, but that depends entirely on how far into the west you will build these gates,” Asay said.

Ilea smiled. “I’ll let them know about the risks... but you know humans like expanding, and settling in whatever places they deem hospitable. But it sounds like Elves won’t be a problem for a while just because of the gates, not more than they were before.”

“The machines have kept the Fire Wastes busy for the past few years. Though large attacks and the subsequent destruction of Taleen armies creates lulls from time to time. Lulls that allow young Elves to travel and explore. A great time for us to recruit new Hunters, but the species living in the surrounding territories are usually not quite as content,” Ben said.

*Entire cities wiped out, yes. And that’s just from a lull in battle. We’ll have to prepare the western cities and everyone who would protect them. She sighed. Which would only make them more attractive as a target.*

“Isalthar promised our support, should we reach a conclusive victory in Iz,” Elfie said. “Elves who would encroach on your territory should not be the same as those ruling in their domains.”

“Ben did not finish his explanation,” Asay said in turn. “Three centuries ago, the destruction of a large Taleen army and subsequent years of lacking warfare supposedly led to three Chosen being killed in the Fire Wastes. The rulers of the domains have remained largely unchallenged. The Taleen armies have certainly contributed to that.”

*The one without form might have done better just not attacking at all, with how bloodthirsty and anti organization most Elves seem to be. Guess you don't get to that idea when you're made by dwarves with pretty much the opposite kind of societal structure.*

“We have to consider Elven attacks anyway. With or without Taleen. Not just Elves either. There are plenty of dangerous beings out there, capable of destroying entire cities in mere minutes,” Ilea said. Another large scale demon summoning in Ravenhall would be shut down near immediately, but the same couldn't be said about Riverwatch or Dawntree.

She paused and considered. “I will train with you, and learn what I can about your domain, if you would have me.”

Ben smiled. “Of course, Guardian of Cerith. Show me then, how much you understand. Of ice, and frost.”

Another regular location, added to Ilea's growing schedule, and yet another reason not to sleep.

A few days later, she made some progress with the second key, the first one off limits until Ben judged her capable of surviving the Still Valley. Unable to reach the depths indicated by the locator, Ilea used her drill to simply dig down. It took nearly a day in total but she finally reached a familiar surface blocking her way.

For once it wasn't of Taleen make but instead dull gray metal. *Same as in the Descent.* She couldn't feel any enchantments on the surface of the metal or within, however if it was anything as the one in the Descent, it would take some time to get through.

Ilea set down the tip of her burning drill, already seeing some change in the top layer of the metal. *Not quite the same anymore as I was back then, hmm?* Her tool started spinning, the loud grinding noise accompanying her for the next twenty minutes as she burned and drilled through the thick layer of metal. Her domain perceived through into the simple rooms beyond but she decided to make a physical entry, just in case her teleportation would be restricted at a latter time. Either due to enchantments, traps, or an Ascended alerted to her presence. This time she didn't have a Fae with her. Nonetheless she felt much more confident, both in fighting one of their kind, and in escaping.

*Nowhere near the Meadow after all. Or so I hope,* she thought, finally breaking through. A messy tunnel led up to the stone, kilometers of digging necessary to reach the underground facility. Metal glowed with a dull red color, some of the white flame still flickering in the darkness.

Ilea spread her wings as she entered the facility, everything in perfect darkness. Her flames were enough for her eyes to sustain visibility, even now that she dismissed them. Coupled with her domain, she wouldn't miss much. *Looks like a research facility. Smaller than what I've seen before.* The air was stale but there was no dust, every surface spotless, most of it made entirely of metal. Hundreds of runes were engraved into panels, metal tables, and floating spheres.

*I could show this to Nes and Scipio, she thought, slowly floating through the halls. She noted the high ceilings and broad entrances, though not surprising with how large the Ascended were that she had met. Ilea decided not to touch anything, more likely to trigger a set of traps or alert someone than to find anything useful. Just strange that this thing is down here.* Her sphere pierced the walls but so far she found no indication that the facility was connected to any cavern. It was hot too, as far below ground as it was, perhaps even deeper than Iz.

*Not a dungeon either. And at least three times the size of the Soul Forge.* She examined the various rooms in the darkness, no magic seemingly active in any of the runes. She knew even Iana had little knowledge of the magical language the Ascended liked to use.

Her locator out, Ilea found the item in question in the central hall of the ten story structure. Various artifacts were stored floating above strange metal pedestals, weak sources of magic pulsing from the steel. She could place only one of the five items in the room, looking at the familiar triangular shape of the Taleen key. This one looked golden to her, though it was difficult to say without any residual light. Another piece looked like a black sphere, swirling with dark energy. She could feel a powerful source of soul magic coming from the piece, though it felt strange, subdued in a way.

The third item was a splintered silver metal spear, seven pieces floating above the pedestal with the leaf tip at the very top. It too emanated power, though she couldn't place the school of magic. It felt more visceral than anything she had seen before. The closest thing was the devour magic used by the mantis queen but it fell short compared to the shattered weapon in this hall.

Next was a pulsing black heart, veins of white moving along the length of the artifact. Ilea instantly felt a connection to the item, the magic not only resonating with the fabric but it felt much like the fires of creation themselves. It was undoubtedly connected to the Fae, perhaps taken from, or created by them, the entire feel more than a little familiar to her.

Last was a simple amulet, metal with a yellowish crystal connected to the links. It hardly looked impressive but the magic resonating from it made clear why it remained in such company.

Ilea looked around in the room, back to the items, and the runes lining the pedestals and parts of the ground.

She was sure there were defensive enchantments in place. Something that would trigger once one or several of the items were removed from their stands. The question was if the place was some sort of underground vault left behind, maybe used as a base in Elos or just as a research facility, or if it was an active trap. *Why would they leave behind these items? And make sure they would still be floating like that?*

One thing she was sure about was the presence of some defensive mechanisms, magical in nature but not comprehensible to her due to the rune language. *This could be really fucking dangerous, even for me.*

*One the other hand, when have I let some traps dissuade me? I've survived a literal Dragon.* The artifacts were there and even if she managed to convince Iana, Nes, or Violence to come down here and examine the traps, she would rather face the dangers alone. *Not like they could make a guess at my chance of survival anyway. Let's find out what this is about.*

Hands outstretched, she left the room and focused on all the items at once, using Fabric Tear to rip them from the pedestals. Magic surged instantly, all around as walls lit up with orange red lights and steel beginning to shift. The items appeared near her, stored within her domain the instant they

appeared. Ilea could feel a powerful spell manifest around her as she tried to teleport out, her ability failing to manifest. The fabric was already shifting. *There you go.*

Bright light now shined from all around, the ten story structure shifting, twisting, and turning as the ground rumbled. Ilea tried her spell again but it failed, instead now focused on the shifting magical barriers. She stood with her senses focused on the patterns, not exactly surprised that she had found another capable space mage. Her gates failed to manifest as well, though she had yet to try her third tier of Transfer.

The trap itself was a beautiful creation, the other floors and walls having shifted into rings now floating around the central platform. A dozen barriers had lit up the moment they had arrived, behind the shimmering lights a massive steel hall with surging orange red light floating from ground and ceiling towards the central point, the magical prison sphere summoned to this unfamiliar place.

They were in another realm, though Ilea did not know which one. She dismissed the possibility of the barriers messing with her marks, knowing how they behaved under the Meadow's tampering. This was different, perfectly aligned with what she had experienced in Erendar. *And the architecture.* She looked up at the ceiling, ready to place a bet that she had just arrived in Kohr, the Great Salt, and home to the Navuun, Demons, and Ascended.