

“How accurate is this map?” Arwen asked, his gaze studying the large sketched map of the ‘planet’ his Plane found itself merged with.

“I’d say the accuracy is around eighty percent, my Lord Regent,” the bespectacled man standing next to Arwen said easily. He was the chief cartographer of the Adventurer’s Guild in Starhaven, Sebastian Raum, and being a vampire the man had probably been doing his job for longer than Arwen’s family existed. “Of course, it is ... challenging to accurately depict an ellipsoid in two dimensions so that is the best we could do. There is an alternative though, if I may?”

“Please go ahead,” Arwen said, motioning for the elderly man to do as he wished.

Raum held out his hand above the haphazardly spread out pieces of paper covering the majority of the room’s floor. The sketches on it glowed a dim yellow for a moment, then as Raum moved his hand up the glowing map of the world floated up and above the papers.

The man made a fist and the glowing lines, depicting continents and oceans, swam through the air and condensed into the rough shape of a sphere.

Raum stepped back, examining his creation with a critical eye before giving a huff, as if to say ‘it’s good enough I suppose’.

“This should be the most accurate representation of the celestial object we now find ourselves upon,” Raum said, another flick of his wrist making the mountain ranges poke outwards and deep craters and indents form in other places which were quickly flooded with illusory water. “This here, is the Starhaven continent as I’m sure you’re aware of.”

Arwen of course *was* familiar with it, but he still saw some changes. For one, there was a gigantic fucking rip piercing towards the core of the continent that had *not* been there before. A side effect of having a flat plane transposed upon a sphere, apparently.

At least none of our cities got swallowed up by the ocean that came rushing in.

“As you can see, we are in the middle of the watery expanse the locals call the ‘Atlantic Ocean’.” Raum made the body of water light up. “We are bordering almost all other continents of the planet here, all of which are at most half the size of Starhaven. Our

continent, just by itself, makes up for 46% of the planet's landmass. It is a ... favourable location, I might say. Though there is one downside."

"Which is?" Arwen asked, watching the slowly rotating orb spanning at least five metres from end to end. He read the labels, the Americas, Africa and a tiny peninsula called Europe were closest. He momentarily wondered which of those might Gabriel be heading towards.

"The Primary Leyline of the planet, the Dragon Vein practically runs around us," Raum said, his face twitching into a grimace for a short moment. A glowing arcane pink line lit up across the globe, running in a circle around the world. "Starting at this continent in the south pole, Antarctica, it runs all the way up to the north pole on the western coast of the Americas then down to Europe and across the set of mountain ranges the locals named the Alpine Belt until it reaches the island of Australia, from which it connects up with the starting point at the south pole."

"That is unfortunate," Arwen said, though he wasn't all that worried. They just had to swiftly conquer a small piece of land where the Dragon Vein ran to gain access to it. "But not a huge loss, especially with ... how many was it? Five new mana wells forming around the continent?"

Having the possibly Rank 5 Dragon Vein running right under their continent would have sent the mana sphere into even more of a frenzy than it already was in, and the initial mass of Rifts that would have spawned would have likely crippled their society for a short while, a week maybe. Not *starting* with it underneath them had distinct advantages.

"Seven now my Lord Regent," Raum amended, making seven points of the same pinkish light glow up on Starhaven. "The latest opened up right underneath the city of Bramwell, swallowing up half of it in the subsequently created sinkhole."

"That's plenty," Arwen said, tapping his fingers on the hilt of his blade, a nervous tick he never bothered to get rid of. "With the locals being new to all forms of magic, we can easily leverage our knowledge to gain the upper hand. Even with the Ranks of our fighters being restricted."

"As you say, my Lord," Raum said, not all that bothered by military matters. The man was an explorer at heart if the report he got were to be trusted, and had been aching to

learn more about this 'Earth' even before Arwen granted him control over the Scryers and Divination mages under his employ.

"Thank You, Lord Raum," Arwen said, looking over at the ancient vampire lord. "That will be all for now. Would it be possible for you to leave this illusion as it is?"

"It would," Raum said, his mouth curving into the hint of a sneer. Even amicable and worldly as the old vampire was, having what could be interpreted as his skills in magic being questioned stung his pride. Arwen reprimanded himself inwardly for the blunder. "I'll require a Rank 4 Arcanite of at least the size of my fist, preferably attuned to Light or Illusion mana."

"Of course." Arwen held back a grimace, waving at the Shadow standing guard in the corner. He was pretty sure old Raum could have done what he requested without using up an item as valuable as a piece of Arcanite that large, alas he was being petty. "Get what Lord Raum asked for from the treasury."

The Shadow bowed and disappeared, flickering back into place a few seconds later with a fist sized gem held in his hands. Arwen took it, taking a moment to appreciate its beauty. Arcanite was crystallised mana straight from a Dragon Vein and a Rank 4 one would need to have been harvested from a Major Plane. Furthermore, the yellow tint it had, presumably from being attuned to the colour's associated Light element, meant it was even more valuable.

Still, if this is what the old man wants for appeasement, then so be it. We should have a dozen more. Arwen handed over the gem, hiding his grimace as best as he could.

Raum took it without a hint of shame, appreciation or even respect for the precious item. Arwen had the sudden urge to punch him in the face as a slight smirk twitched at the edge of the vampire's lips.

Alas, that would be a fatal mistake. Lord Raum was a council member of the Adventurer's Guild's Starhaven branch. Him being displeased with the Lord Regent could be enough for the Guild Master to stop coordinating his efforts to explore the outside world with Arwen. Furthermore, losing the cartographer's assistance could push all of his plans back.

Raum's mana seeped into the gem, condensing into a nail-sized chunk of it at the side which broke off a moment later. The tiny piece of glowing Arcanite floated up to the centre of the illusory planet, then sucked it all inside of it before floating back down to Raum's outstretched hand.

The vampire gave the newly made artefact a cursory glance before he flicked it over to Arwen, then he pocketed the remaining chunk of Arcanite without even a twitch of his lips. "You do know how to use a basic light artefact, correct? My Lord Regent?"

"I do," Arwen said, letting a little flick of Ki brush against the small gem. A moment later, the globe sprang back into existence before him, though at a much reduced size.

"I made it so any new discovery will automatically appear on the artefact," Raum said, and one wouldn't be faulted to believe it was a simple matter to accomplish with how offhandedly the man spoke about it. They would be dead wrong, of course, but perhaps to a millennia old vampire it really was the truth. "It should also get progressively more accurate and detailed as time goes by. Now, I believe that was all for today, My Lord Regent?"

"Yes, it was," Arwen said as politely as possible, even though doing so felt distinctly uncomfortable to someone like him who spent more time among Adventurers than Nobility. Strangely enough, technically Raum *was* an Adventurer, even though he acted like the most stuck-up nobles of the Aethernum Plane. "Thank you for your assistance today, and in our explorative efforts, Lord Raum. If you wish for any other compensation beyond what we've discussed already, I'd be willing to accommodate you."

"As I've said before," Raum said. "Getting to be part of the push to explore and map out this strange new world is immeasurably valuable to me. Nothing else you have interests me. Have a good day, Lord Regent."

"Likewise, Lord Raum." Arwen gave a respectful nod, which the vampire returned with the unnatural elegance of one who'd been practising that exact nod for centuries. When the vampire was far away, and the door behind him snapped close with the sound dampening enchantments back in place, Arwen waved the Shadow over again. "Get Commander Markal."

The Shadow bowed, then another one appeared next to him and the first went back to guard the entrance of the room.

“You called, My Prince?” Markal asked, standing upright and levelling an impassive gaze at Arwen. His eyes, like depthless pools of amethyst, stared at him in a way that unnerved the prince.

Those were the marks of at least a Major affinity for the Illusion element, an advanced element of just about any element capable of creating illusions, such as Water, Light or even Arcane. It was a complicated element to get ahold of, more so than most advanced elements were, but the benefits it provided were consequently just as outstanding.

Along with Darkness, Illusion was the best at concealment spells and remaining unseen, unheard and undetected. In the hands of one as proficient in its use as Markal, it could also be used to cast *every* spell in existence by using Illusion mana to act in place of other elemental mana types. The resulting spells would only be at most half as potent, but the variety of attacks and spells it gave an Illusion mage were terrifying to anyone having to face such a mage as their foe.

“Markal, with almost a week having gone by since we sent out the first scouts to survey the outside world, I’m sure you have at least a preliminary idea of what the world is like, correct?”

“Yes, My Prince,” the man nodded, glancing over at the globe spinning before Arwen. “Do you want to hear the report now? We only know the extreme basics at this moment.”

“Yes,” Arwen said, nodding. With another flick of Ki, he sent the globe flying back to the middle of the room and expanding back to its previous size. He then handed the artefact over to Markal.

“Alright,” the man said. If one looked at him, they would think he didn’t have a subservient bone in his body. Arwen heard the story of his coming to swear fealty to his father numerous times, but he still couldn’t quite believe it.

Apparently, it had been a bet between the King and Markal, who was the leader of a prominent guild of assassins, thieves, and information brokers at the time. A bet that whichever of the two lost a duel would swear a blood oath to the other.

The King had been a mere prince back then, and not even the crown prince, so Arwen could perhaps believe why his father risked it all to gain such a powerful ally — and Markal was powerful, even if he had been only a Peak Rank 3 at the time. It had paid off too, seeing as Arwen didn't have any uncles.

With that said, Arwen didn't have much actual power over Markal, even with being a Regent. His father made sure that while Markal would have to *entertain* the orders of a Regent, he wouldn't have to obey them if he thought those orders went against the King's own orders or best interest. Of course, Arwen also couldn't kill the man through the System's Faction Controls like he could the other Shadows.

Still, that was more than enough for him. Markal was competent beyond reason and honourable too, in a way, since he went through with the bet back then and had been serving the King ever since.

"Well, let's start with generalities then," Markal said, his casual tone and lax posture a stark contrast to Arwen's previous conversation partner. "This continent down south is a frozen piece of rock, swarming with all sorts of messed up monsters. I suspect one of the Dungeons was created right at the south pole and that it predominantly has eldritch type monsters. That's going to be fun."

Fuck. Arwen thought, grimacing at how close the southern shores of Starhaven were to the icy continent. With all of them being locked inside too, they couldn't even keep the damned dungeon from overflowing and vomiting out hordes of those horrors.

"These continents here, the *Americas*," Markal continued, running a hand over the twin continents locked by a thin land-bridge. "The southern continent is in anarchy, largely intact too, but with this forest here overrun with monsters. The northern continent ... well, all of our scouts have been killed except two. That goes for the southern continent as well. Every single local they came across had these curious little artefacts similar to the Coalition's hand cannons. Most of them got shot the moment they were spotted."

Unorganised, but dangerously well-armed. Arwen squinted, his eyes roaming over the vast northern continent.

"How intact is the northern one?" Arwen asked.

“Numerous cities on the southern coast had been ravaged by some cataclysmic natural disaster,” Markal said with a shrug. “The ocean swallowed them up, is what I think. Giant waves would do what the scouts described, or a Lord of Air rampaging through the coast. Further in though, it is mostly intact and with the same number of hand cannons among the locals as in the southern continent. Furthermore, even the armies in the region are starting to form back up and push back the monsters while establishing some semblance of order among their rowdy populace.”

Weather with comparable destructive power as an Elemental Lord? Well, that's quite something. And those damned hand cannons again, and more compact than the Coalition's, even if the firepower is not even comparable. This world had gone all in on technological advancement, which is understandable with magic not being a thing for most of their history.

“This continent, Africa ... I wouldn't recommend it as our foothold,” Markal said, making three regions glow up. A beige, a light green and a dark green in that order from top down. “All three regions shown here have various powerful magical beasts roaming them. I'm guessing even if we get a foothold there, a Beast Clan would knock us out the moment they gain access to the region's Obelisks. Several of the magical creatures are already forming smaller clans, and are extremely hostile to any humanoid creature.”

“I see,” Arwen said, nodding to himself. True indeed, why waste resources and manpower on conquering parts of that continent if one of the Royal Beast Clans from the Beast Realm would just stomp on whatever foothold they get the moment they arrive? “Which Clans do you see wanting to fight for control of it?”

“Behemoths, Titans, Leonids, and a hundred more, none of which will be particularly happy that this manaless new realm had reduced their kin to mere animals to be hunted by powerless human,” Markal said, making an illusion of his own appear in the air showing what were probably recordings taken by the scouts. A massive beast the size of a house with a thick grey body and a horn atop its head charged through a line of trees towards the screen, next a colossal humanoid form covered in silver fur used a tree to beat an unfortunate scout to a pulp. A few more such recordings flickered about, and Arwen found a resemblance in the magical creatures with all four mentioned Clans. “In my opinion, this last region would be the best target. Europe. It's smaller, but has the Dragon Vein running right through it and its climate is moderate, perfect for humans to settle.”

The image grew in size, zooming in on the peninsula. A dozen dots appeared on it.

“The one downside is that this one seemingly escaped the devastation of the natural disasters that destabilised most other regions.” Markal threw up another illusory screen. “Their cities are intact, their roads are in good condition, their billions of citizens alive and kicking and their armies are already clearing out the Rifts. I’d recommend the western coast of the Americas too, but we don’t have easy access to that part of the world just yet. That leaves Europe.”

“We could just go through those vast plains and reach the west coast,” Arwen mused. “If we managed to conquer the Northern continent while it was in disarray, it would give us a much more defensible foothold than this Europe.”

“True indeed, my Prince,” said Markal, shrugging as he stepped back. He threw the artefact back to Arwen. “The decision is in your hands. I’ve given my opinion. I believe both plans have merit.”

After another minute of thinking, Arwen came to a conclusion. He didn’t have to decide. Starhaven was massive. He had enough manpower to poke at both targets and see which gave easier. Furthermore, he could hand off sending an expedition into one of the continents to the Adventurer’s guild. Raum would no doubt be ecstatic to gain a chance to more deeply study either region.

He knew his time was limited, that soon enough the Obelisks would come back up and Users from outside the Realm, and from the Supreme Powers of the Six Realms, would come flooding in. Still, rushing could mean fumbling this opportunity. He couldn’t allow that to happen.

Even if it took precious days, weeks or even months to gain a better understanding of this new world. He resolved to not be hasty. After all, as everyone who had ‘system studies and philosophy’ classes growing up had been forced to learn: **Knowledge is Power.**

And Arwen was resolved to grab as much power for his kingdom as possible. With his father and brother gone, his sister having fled to only stars knew where, that responsibility fell to him.