

Chapter 818 Wasteland

Cold winds moved over the salt stone of Kohr. The skies were clear for once. A rare occasion, one that allowed for sight of the moon, though even the celestial body seemed dulled and gray.

Adam shivered.

How long had it been since he had last seen the moon? A week? A month? Time seemed to pass at a different pace in this wretched realm. At first it had been a simple realization. His first week here enough to tell him about the lack of sunlight. By the end of the first month he had hated it. A simple thing to bear at first, but one that felt heavier with every passing cycle. Days, nights, whatever one wanted to call them. None had a meaning here in Kohr, the hellscape always the same. It looked the same. Smelled the same.

He set down the corpses, summoning Rosie, a spirit of fire he had found at the edges of the Isanna desert. A crooked smirk came to his cracked and dried out lips. How he had hated being in that desert, and now he wished for little more but to see the suns of Elos.

Rosie appeared at his command and set alight the mangled demon corpses. Spawn, he had learned. The weakest of their kind. Easily slain when in small groups, better avoided in larger ones.

The flickering flames caught his attention, the man meditating as he watched. It helped. Sometimes he watched Rosie, but it didn't feel right. She was there to fight, to burn, not to be watched as some sort of distraction.

Distraction from the guilt he felt.

Distraction from his failure to fulfill his task.

He had betrayed his Order. He had betrayed Ravenhall. Thousands would have died, at best. He did not want to consider the worst. And yet he had. Many times.

Don't give in to the thoughts. Don't ever give in. You came here to find her. To save her. She has called for you, and she is out there still.

He took in a deep breath, the warmth of the fire welcome in the cold environment. Soon the demons would come, those who could perceive the light of flames.

Adam kept an eye towards the skies, in case one of the horrors came his way. Incomprehensible beings of the beyond. Worse than anything he could've dreamed up back in Ravenhall. He knew there were high level creatures out there, but seeing them, seeing what they could do. Humanity could do nothing but hide from this kind of being. Of that he was certain.

The Shadow's Hand. A farce. A bitter memory. Humans fighting against what lurked in the wilderness, what hid below the surface. They were children, all of them. And he was the most foolish one.

Thinking to find his daughter in a realm unknown to him. A realm inhabited by monsters. Months it had been, since he had found the last Ascended facility. Little had he found but traps, enough to nearly kill him. And yet another friend had he lost. Few remained now, of the beings he had brought from beyond. New ones joined, all abominations. Demons, wretched bone and flesh.

All that kept him sane was the single thought of Octavia.

The daughter he had lost. Another failing, to add to the pile. Had he pushed her too hard? Had he kept her hidden for too long? He had only wanted to protect her, had only wanted her to... to. He sighed. Too long had it been.

And when she called for his help, how could he have refused?

Thousands died.

He shook his head. There had been no other way.

For years had he researched. For years had he planned. He would have killed everyone, if it meant for him to save his daughter.

You didn't save her.

"I tried," he said, his lips trembling.

You are lost.

Alone.

You will die here.

He didn't even fight back anymore. But neither could he give up.

Not after everything he had done. Everything he had invested. He had come to the realm of demons, as Octavia had asked. The voice still fresh in his mind. A voice he had never heard, and yet he knew it to be hers. He had searched, but he had failed to find her.

How many times had he asked himself all these questions? He didn't know.

Looking to the left, he saw the unending darkness. The deep, still, oceans of Kohr. He had seen, things. Things moving in the depths. Perhaps it was best to join them? He sighed, ripping away the leg of a demon. The flames were mesmerizing as he focused and meditated, the meat downright rotten. He gagged, hearing his stomach rumble. *For fish... just to get some fish*, he thought, glancing once again at the still waters. He felt the darkness pull him in before he ripped himself away, once again staring at the flickering light.

He finished as much of the meat as he could stomach, standing up before he summoned one of the flying demons he had killed and taken in. He did not give them names.

Stepping on its back, he commanded the creature to fly low, and not too quickly. Ambushes were common, especially with Mind Weavers. He had to be prepared, always. The direction he chose was random, any leads to find anything but more demons scarce, and all they led to, were dens of monsters, long forgotten metal ruins full of traps and technology he failed to truly comprehend. Teleportation rooms that led to nowhere. Imprisoned demons, most long dead. Corpses of a war millennia past.

Octavia had written about it. Had asked him to investigate, to look for books, for hints, anything. Hubris, he had thought, ages past. What would a child know of ancient wars not recorded by history, even Dagon stumped by her questions, by the runes she had shown them. He knew now that she had been right. About something. About this realm existing. About the runes, some of them he had seen in the metal ruins.

Adam did not know where she had found them, where she had learned about all this. *If only I had listened.* Too arrogant. Too focused on his own research, his own life and worries.

She was your daughter. And you weren't there.

For days he flew, not a single being besides spawn visible on the fractured landscape. A good stretch, as no more dangerous horrors showed themselves, and at the same time he grew more frustrated. *Nothing.* This realm. The endless salt. The dark oceans. The single moon.

Where are you?

Where. Are. You?

"Adam," a voice spoke into his mind.

He turned, moved his head in the direction he had thought the voice had come from.

A strange voice.

His own?

You mad old fool.

"Adam." There it was again. A whisper. Quiet like the winds. Strained. Different. No accent he had ever heard.

"Adam Strand? You are him. Are you not? Eyes the color of the ocean when the moon is brightest. Pale flesh but pink, unlike spawn. Clothing made of delicate fabric. You are not of this realm," the voice spoke into his head.

He turned but couldn't make out the source.

"Answer me, Adam, and I shall bring you to the Teacher of Kasak Uruun," the voice spoke.

"Show yourself!" Adam shouted through his mind, his eyes taking in the salt rock and stone of Kohr. A wasteland. A sign. Or a trap. *"I am him you seek. Show yourself!"*

He saw a single form float up from a crevice. A hooded being, dressed in rugged leathers. Its face was dark, two large spheres of nothing where its eyes should've been. A Mind Weaver. He braced himself for the mental attack, steeling his mind for what was to come, his own magic flaring up as he prepared to summon his allies.

Yet nothing happened.

The being floated and remained unmoving.

"What do you seek in the Great Salt, Adam, you who hail from lands of dirt," the being spoke.

They never spoke. Not like this. Arrogant mind mages with the single purpose to kill and recruit into their personal horde. Adam had thought them monsters for nearly a year, until one of them had used its telepathy to talk into his mind. Intelligent monsters, but monsters nonetheless.

"I seek one like myself," he spoke, tired, exhausted. Whatever this being offered, it was change. Something new. Whoever or whatever this teacher was, whoever this being was, it knew of his name.

“Then come, and follow me, before the great devourers find us,” the being spoke and turned, floating down towards the ground.

Adam watched. He shook his head with gritted teeth. *Fuck. Will I follow a monster like that?* It surely was a trap, the being somehow grasping his name through mind magic. And yet he found himself following the hooded figure.

Hope was a wretched thing.

Adam landed near the creature, several meters away, his black winged demon standing near.

[Mind Weaver – lvl 238]

Far below his own level, though mind magic was tricky. He was glad for the resistance he had, the highest in the second tier. And still, if more than a few of the creatures worked together, he was not sure of victory. He looked around to find the spawn, the other monsters it surely controlled. But there were none.

The Mind Weaver glanced at Adam before it walked towards a chasm in the salt stone.

He followed the being, down into a deep crevice, entirely dark. Adam summoned Rosie to provide some light, the spell alerting the being in front of him.

“The light is bound to attract those we do not wish to follow. If you wish to meet the Teacher, send away the being you have called,” the Mind Weaver said.

“And leave myself in darkness? I don’t trust you,” Adam said.

The being paused, glanced up and then towards the flames of Rosie. It seemed to come to a conclusion as it looked back to Adam. *“This one’s name, is Varehn.”*

Adam looked on, waiting for more, but that was it.

“Is that supposed to change something?” he asked.

Varehn made a strange noise, almost like grinding teeth. *“Sharing one’s name, is a great sign of trust, Adam.”*

“But you already know mine. Now we’re even. Who is the Teacher of Kasak Uruun?” he asked.

“The Teacher has called for you, and others. On this realm and beyond. By chance we meet, and while it pleases Varehn to find Adam,” the being spoke and paused, raising its head ever so slightly. *“You are rude.”*

Adam stared at the creature before he laughed. The sound was strange. Foreign.

He coughed and snapped his fingers, Rosie gone in an instant.

He had been an Elder of the Shadow’s Hand, once priding himself in the fact that he was no battle obsessed barbarian. He would not be called rude by a mind magic monster in the realm of demons.

“I apologize,” Adam said. The words came easy. He had wanted to apologize many times in the past years, to many people. Not that it would make a difference. Here perhaps, it would.

The demon made another sound and continued walking.

Dim light, but enough for him to follow. Still he pressed a hand against the salt stone wall, the ground uneven but he had a few flying beasts in case he got stuck or fell. He still thought about the possibility of it being a trap, but as they walked in silence, Adam realized something else.

He had been lonely.

The beings he summoned. They were at most pets. Simple creatures. Varehn was real. A thinking being, and he felt the telepathic connection remained.

“What are you?” he asked after a while, desperate for conversation just as much as information.

“I am Varehn. Mind Weaver of the Great Salt, disciple of the Teacher,” the being answered, the voice reverberating in his mind.

“You speak our language?” Adam asked.

“Many do, amongst our kind. As we do others,” the being spoke.

“How so? This is another realm, is it not?” he asked.

“And can knowledge of one realm not reach another? Written word is passed or taken from one to another, or given, from one to many. Language is but the code we use to express thought in voice. It is not my preferred way of communication, but it suits humans,” the being spoke.

“Is the Teacher a human?” Adam said.

“I believe so,” Varehn spoke.

Adam could feel his heart beat faster. There was a chance, at the very least, to meet another human. One of his kind. He gulped. Would they know of what he had done? Were they here to hunt him? Verena perhaps? She would be crazy enough to consider something like this. Not Pierce. That woman would hate being in a place like Kohr, even more than he did.

“Have you met many humans?” Adam said. As long as Varehn would answer, he would ask.

“Few,” the Mind Weaver sent.

“From the lands of dirt?” he asked, remembering the description Varehn had used.

“Some. Others not,” the being spoke.

Others not? Does he mean.

“You met humans from differing realms?” Adam asked.

“Is it so strange? The Great Salt, shifts in the fabric, its existence marred by the Old Ones. You too have found your way here,” it said.

“It wasn’t easy to get here,” he said.

“And it is yet harder, to leave,” Varehn said. *“Many of my kind strive for that goal most of all.”*

Adam gulped. If it was more difficult to leave than it was to come here, he was truly lost. Getting to Kohr had been a one way affair. He left anchors in Elos, as his research had suggested, but he was no scholar of space magic. He could not go back, not alone. It had never been a concern. Not with the words she had sent.

“The Old Ones... are there other names for them?” he asked.

“Tell me the one you use, and I will tell you if they are the same,” Varehn spoke.

Adam hesitated. What little he knew of the beings, he had learned from Octavia’s scribbles. *“Ascended,”* he said finally.

The Mind Weaver turned its head back for a moment. *“The name some Old Ones called themselves, it is said.”*

“Are they still here?” he asked.

“Perhaps. I have not perceived, nor communed with one such as them, though would a being such as they commune with one such as I?” the Mind Weaver spoke, a rhetorical question it seemed.

“You think highly of the Old Ones?” Adam asked. He knew Octavia had been interested in them. And she had asked for his help in fighting them.

“The Old Ones have left our realm in ruin. Our bodies, disfigured. Our minds, destroyed. Those few who remained had forgotten, but history is difficult to truly remove. I would curse them, if I could, for what they have done. For what they have chosen not to do. We remain here, in this wasteland, forgotten, abandoned, left to eat one another. Would you not condemn them?”

Adam remained silent. There were parallels in the words Varehn had offered that he couldn’t deny. *Would I not condemn them? Of course I would. But I do not know their reasons.*

“Perhaps they condemn themselves,” he sent after a while of silence.

The Mind Weaver made a strange sound. Laughter perhaps, but it could’ve just as much been crying.

Adam followed without another word, lost in his thoughts and guilt until they came into a cavern of sorts. The ceiling almost looked like ice.

“We are not far now. Come,” Varehn sent as it led Adam towards a dark tunnel, one of four.

He didn’t know how long they walked, but after several forks in the the tunnel system, they came out into an open space.

Adam had difficulties seeing, but just the sound of his steps made him aware of the vast space around them.

“We have arrived, Adam,” Varehn spoke.

“I cannot see.”

“If it is fire you require, then you may summon it. The Teacher accepts its presence,” the Mind Weaver said.

Adam focused on his spell, pulling Rosie before the spirit appeared, lighting up the cavern. A part of it at least. Not enough for him to see the ceiling or the walls. But he did see a few more beings dressed in leather cloaks, hooded and sitting. None looked his way, all of them facing a white tree about twenty meters ahead.

It was dead, branches withered. And yet it was the first tree he had seen in Kohr, larger than most even in Elos, reaching up beyond where the fire of Rosie illuminated.

At the base of the tree sat a person clad in white furs. Their head below a hood.

Adam took a step forward, his hand reaching out. He knew her.

The figure raised their head, flickering light reflected off of light blue eyes. A smile tugged on her lips, her mouth slightly agape, pronounced fangs visible.

He felt a connection to his mind before a voice resounded. A voice he had only ever heard once.

“*Rosie,*” she said.

“Octavia,” Adam spoke, the words reverberating through the hall as the Mind Weavers turned his way, black holes taking him in.

Octavia jumped up from the ground, floating for moment before she moved his way. “*You have come after all, father.*”