

“What?” Ben said.

Isalthar hissed, the sound barely audible. “Of course. Hidden in plain sight.”

“Their records never spoke of Karth,” Asay said. “Did they really... well of course they did,” he added and snickered to himself. “Oh those devious dwarfs. All to protect their capital.”

“I mean it’s not that obvious,” Ilea said. “We’re far... and when I say far, I mean fucking ridiculously far underground. I’ve not been this deep down, ever. Didn’t always have a way to tell but I’m pretty fucking sure.”

“It matters little. We would not have found Iz without a gate and your ability to point to its location. Can you help us pin point it?” Isalthar said, summoning a map and floating towards the desk.

Feyrair moved away his legs and cleared his throat. “So we can just dig down in Karth?”

“The inhabitants of the caverns above are dangerous even to the likes of us,” Ben said.

“And yet we now know where to search,” Neiphato said as he joined them at the table.

“Millennia of troop movements, all placed in such a way to lead us away from this location,” Asay said. “I salute their foresight.”

“It also means there’s something they want to protect here, right?” Feyrair said and stood up while Ilea tried to determine the depth and location of their current position. “Probably that bright ball of gold,” Fey added and pointed at the thing hovering over the central abyss.

“That’s what they’d want you to think,” Ben said. “It wouldn’t be that obvious.”

“Why not?” Feyrair said. “You should think with some pride. It’s like a call. Come and challenge us.”

“Keep your shit together for a moment,” Ilea said, not taking her eyes off the map.

Isalthar glanced at the dragonling. “I agree. We must be patient, lest our enemy learns more of us than we can learn of them.”

Elfie had sat down on a chair, a few stacks of books sitting on a small table nearby. “Those who can read Taleen should join me, instead of sitting around uselessly.”

Feyrair hissed and walked over, grabbing a book and starting to read.

*He can read?* Ilea thought and stared at the dragonling for a moment.

He glanced up and met her eyes. “What?” he hissed.

“Nothing, proud of you,” she answered with a wink and focused back on her marks.

Neiphato searched through the drawers of the desk, pilling up a few booklets and letters, moving it all over to the two sitting Elves before he dumped it on their table. “Start with that. It will have more relevance than the books sitting untouched in a shelf.”

“That’s as best as I can place it,” Ilea said with a shrug.

Isalthar and Asay looked at the map. “That will be enough to find it again. The question is simply how to get here,” the former said.

Asay smiled and joined the reading group, grabbing a book as well.

Seithir remained with Ilea as both Ben and Isalthar joined the others.

“You and Neiphato are the only ones who can’t read Taleen?” she asked.

Seithir smiled and gently touched her shoulder.

“Sympathy,” he whispered and sent a bit of soul magic into her.

“Seithir get over here and help,” Feyrair hissed.

*Oh, so you too,* Ilea thought, looking at the elf who had now turned his head away from her face. *Even though your eyes are covered.*

She jumped over the desk and sat down in the massive office chair, summoning a barrel of ale and one of Keyla’s meals.

Neiphato joined her a moment later and leaned onto the desk.

“Want some too?” she asked between bites, taking a sip of ale.

He smiled. “If you would be so kind.”

She summoned a mug and used her ash to fill it with ale, moving over a meal too. “You can’t read their script?”

“No. I have not been a Hunter for long, nor has there been an opportunity to learn such things. Taleen writing is supposedly quite rare,” he said, his blue eyes gentle as he moved his braided brown hair to his back, lest it fall into his bowl.

Ilea smiled. “Well apparently not. We just found upwards of a hundred books.”

He nodded lightly, glancing at the group of hissing Elves, each of them taking notes from time to time or talking to each other about something they had found.

“It’s strange, I agree,” he said. “Maybe Iz was treated differently. Or the books here simply didn’t decay. I’ve not visited many of their dungeons myself but this place really does look different.”

“It’s much more alive, that’s for sure. The other dungeons that once were cities looked more like ruins. Forgotten and withered away,” she answered.

“Maybe it has to do with that sphere. I can feel tremendous power from that direction... though my senses are muddled by the dense magic,” Neiphato said.

“Everything here is bright as fuck,” Ilea said, her magical perception picking up plenty of sources just in their vicinity. She turned in her chair to look out into the city. “But I do wonder what it is. Maybe that’s the One without Form. Would be weird though.”

*Or we’ve just found the missing sun.*

“Why?” the Elf asked, looking out to follow her gaze.

“I mean it’s a sphere. That’s a form, or am I wrong?” she asked, glancing back at him.

Neiphato stared at her for a moment before he smiled lightly, closing his eyes as he took a swig of ale.

Ilea relaxed, enjoying the busy sight of the Taleen city, apparently once their capital. It reminded her of a modern city back on Earth. Well there weren't any sky scrapers but the largest structures certainly came close. *To think it's all abandoned, only machines left behind. What a waste.*

"Do you really think there are no actual Taleen left in this whole place?" she asked.

Neiphato hissed thoughtfully. "I don't know. But it's said that no Hunter has met a living Taleen dwarf. But I doubt many have found this city either."

"Some must have. Maybe they just failed to escape, or they found the challenge too much and left," Ilea suggested. They had found a gate leading to Iz in a random Praetorian facility. And she had been teleported here before, maybe on accident, maybe on purpose. However if any place was well connected in a teleportation network of a species, it should be their capital.

Neiphato continued his meal. "Maybe."

"Shall we scout the city?" Farthorn asked, closing his book before he looked at Asay. "I'm sick of reading Taleen recipes and furniture sales reports."

"I am however quite fascinated with this find," Asay said. "I shall remain here."

Ilea glanced over. "I can join you, I can't read after all."

"Yes. An illiterate human who hasn't heard of the word stealth yet, is exactly who I'd want to have by my side while I scout the capital of our enemy," Farthorn said.

"Perfect," Ilea said and joined him, patting his shoulder when he rolled his eyes. "Come on, I can heal and teleport you around. They know someone's here already anyway. Not much we can fuck up here."

"There is a lot we can, fuck up, as you call it," Farthorn said. "But very well, follow and try to be as quiet as possible."

Ilea put a finger to where her mouth would be behind her armor. "Neiphato?" she asked.

The elf shook his head. "I shall remain. My magic isn't suited for this kind of work."

"I see, well enjoy yourself," Ilea said, pointing at the ale she left behind.

He raised his mug and smiled.

Farthorn vanished, Ilea following the ripples in space, appearing by his side a moment later. He looked at her, tensing up ever so slightly.

*Surprised?* Ilea thought and smirked to herself. *I'm Lilith*, she thought with a deep voice in her head.

The Elf continued, teleporting down into the city and into a random building.

Ilea could already perceive eight machines in the vicinity, all of them motionless and waiting. "Can you see them?" Ilea asked in a quiet whisper, her ashen limbs pointing at each of the creatures.

Farthorn nodded. "We should look for documents, books, and anything else that could be useful to the others," his whisper just as quiet as hers. A normal human wouldn't have heard either.

Ilea checked the house with her sphere, looking through parts of the adjacent buildings as well. She displaced the few books and papers she could see in front of her, putting all into her bracelet.

Farthorn looked at her, his brows rising a little. “You don’t cease to impress, human.”

“I have a name Fart horn,” Ilea said.

“As do I, Ilea,” he whispered, vanishing into the next home.

Ilea followed, the two of them slowly working their way through the dwarven city, collecting books and documents where something had been left behind.

Farthorn held up a hand when they arrived in a rather spacious entrance hall to what seemed like a government building. It reminded Ilea of a few structures she had entered back in Iztacalum. The elf pointed at the bright light flooding in through a large window to their right.

Ilea glanced over and pointed up to the second floor. Both vanished, sitting behind a large desk to avoid the light coming in. It moved up to their floor, scanning over the walls opposite them.

“Did it see us?” Ilea whispered.

“Magic perception?” Farthorn asked.

Ilea relaxed, watching the bright light sway from left to right. “Maybe. Let’s wait for a while.”

She soon heard tapping noises from below, seeing a few Guardians enter through the open double doors and into the entrance hall. “We’ve got company.”

“Stay quiet and wait,” Farthorn said, moving a little closer to her before he weaved a spell, void magic flickering to life, enveloping them in a thin haze.

Ilea deactivated her resistance to his magic and retracted her ashen limbs to make a smaller visible target.

The Guardians rushed into the room a moment later, three of them slowly stepping around and over the furniture to find what the flying machine outside had apparently spotted.

She watched as one of them moved past the desk they were hiding behind, its blades hovering past her shoulder before it turned to the side. The guardians weren’t a problem but if they started a fight here, half the bloody city would be upon them in the span of a few minutes. They could escape with teleportation, but she doubted the machines would give up quite that quickly. For now they knew about one intruder, if at all. And that intruder should’ve been down in the dungeons.

And so they waited, the guardians leaving again a few minutes later and with them the light flooding in from outside.

The void magic vanished. “We should wait another few minutes with teleportation.”

“Or we can try to use my space magic only. I know it gets around some enchantments, maybe it helps against them too,” she suggested.

Farthorn looked at her. “It may be worth a try.”

They waited in silence for a few minutes, Ilea displacing various documents towards her, the spell not attracting any obvious attention from the surrounding machines. When she got everything she deemed useful, she displaced the two of them into the next building, right into the attic.

“No machines on the roof, but we have a Centurion on the second floor,” she said.

“How are your eyes?” Farthorn asked.

She scanned through the home with her sphere. “Good for a few hundred meters,” she answered.

The elf nodded. “Better than mine then. Maybe you can check our surroundings from the roof.”

“What if a flying one spots us?” she asked.

“There are none close by, it should be safe,” he answered.

Ilea didn't wait and displaced herself onto the mostly flat stone roof. Most of the buildings in the city lacking any tiles but it looked like some of the builders did add their personal flair. Though the general idea seemed to be a focus on functionality.

She could see the massive furniture production building behind her, the glass front of the office barely visible in the distance. And yet they had barely come closer to the central parts of the city, Guardians and Centurions standing guard on various roofs, the flying versions patrolling the city with their floodlights.

Ilea followed the movements of one, its elongated body reminding her of an upside down scorpion, the tail hanging down and sometimes moving around. Its body was covered in steel, angles and shapes instead of a more organic look that a monster might have. And yet it could move single parts of its carapace as it floated over the many houses, no eyes visible on its front but a single bright floodlight shining down. Its armor glimmered in the same green metal that most Taleen creations were made of.

She vanished when one of the flying machines turned towards her direction. “We're super far off the center, but I doubt we'll get anywhere in less than a week to be honest. There are ten of the flying ones closer to the sphere for every one in these parts.”

“Same with the machines on the ground?” Farthorn asked.

Ilea shrugged. “On the roofs, yes. I couldn't see the ground.”

“It's likely to be the same,” he said and sketched something into a notebook.

“Agreed. How far do you want to go? We could also try to ignore the documents and go straight towards the center?” Ilea suggested.

Farthorn knitted his brow. “I would normally suggest I try that with Asay... but your space magic might just be more efficient. We've avoided detection so far after all.”

“Then let's go and see how far we get,” Ilea said. “Just keep your void thingy ready.”

She displaced them both into the next building, repeating the skill whenever she found an empty floor or room in any adjacent house. With her quick teleportation cooldown and sphere, the two progressed towards the center in no time at all.

A few minutes later, the machines however became too numerous for Ilea to just displace through. They had to take detours to push further in, her sphere swarming with machines. By now she even saw Praetorians and special variants patrolling the streets and sometimes even staying within halls or clinging to roofs. Without the houses, it would've been impossible to stay hidden from the many Hunter Praetorians on the roofs of the larger buildings. And they were barely halfway to the golden sphere.

When an Executioner started moving through the air and towards the attic they were hiding in, Ilea called it quits and displaced them back. It proved even more difficult to navigate the patrolling machines on the way out but they managed with a few risky longer range displacements.

“That was close,” Farthorn whispered when they had reached a less machine infested area of the massive city.

“Did it detect the spell?” Ilea asked him.

“I have no idea. Maybe our auras were enough?” Farthorn suggested as Ilea brought them back into their office and current base of operations.

She vomited all the documents and books they had found out onto the large desk. “Center is too crowded to sneak past.”

Both Asay and Feyrair went to look at the pile of new information.

The dragonling grabbed a few of the letters and hissed. “At least you get to do something interesting. For how rare Taleen writing is, they apparently loved putting everything into books. Just like humans.”

“Helps with retaining knowledge when you’re not immortal magical creatures farted out by all knowing Oracles,” Ilea said and tapped her brow.

“Then maybe you should read more,” Feyrair said with a wink.

Ilea looked at him with raised eyebrows. “Ah but you see, I am an immortal magical creature. Just so happens that I don’t have mommy issues.”

Ben started laughing at that, the rest of the Elves either ignoring the conversation or looking at her with a confused expression.

“The flying machines can somehow detect magic but we don’t really know to what extent so far,” Ilea supplied. “Did you find anything?”

“Writing of the war and their creations but nothing about the sphere or the being that communicated with you,” Asay said. “Hopefully the documentation from those a little closer to the center can reveal a little more.”

“Key warden, was it?” Feyrair said. “I think I just found something,” he said and motioned to the letter in his hand. “... *the iron key was supposed to be entrusted to us. The Warson family has no right to take this honor from the Armorer’s guild. You must speak with the king. Too long have we stood in the shadow of the guard...*”

“Doesn’t sound like they’re talking about a random iron key,” Neiphato said.

“The one I have is called the Tungsten Key,” Ilea said.

“... *not one of the twelve would be given to the Armorers. It cannot stand,*” Feyrair finished. “Twelve keys then. Important enough to make that Taleen thing talk to you.”

“Should I take it out? Maybe that would prompt some form of reaction,” Ilea suggested.

Isalthar stood up. “No. Revealing that key should be the last thing we try. We have much to gain while we stay hidden. The time for battle will come, do not despair,” he said and looked at each of them for a few seconds, lingering a little longer on Feyrair and Ilea.

“Hey, don’t look at me like that. I can control my impulses. Unlike some people,” Ilea said with a shrug.

Feyrair hissed and grabbed another few letters. “At least I can read,” he murmured to himself, hissing again as he sat down with a glint of fire in his eyes.