

## Chapter 589 Some Lore for the Wiki

The group spent the next few days doing research, Ilea and Farthorn going off on their own to gather more documents from throughout the city.

They learned that Iz had indeed once been the capital of the Taleen, built as far underground as their magic and technology allowed. An effort that cost hundreds of lives, an expedition with the sole goal to dig below Karth, to go beyond the systems of caves belonging to the monsters lurking in the dark. To go beyond and find a place they would call home. A place unreachable for their enemies, only accessible through their secure teleportation network.

All the tunnels they had dug were collapsed behind them, dwarfs and machines dying in battle to ensure the rest of the expedition could go on. They did succeed in the end, the destined heroes, or as some of the Elves supposed, just the luckiest of the many expeditions they had likely sent out on a one way trip. It had been a desperate attempt by the weakening dwarfs, their territories contested, their mines running dry. Technology and knowledge they had but they could not compete with their enemies, be it Elf, human, or dwarf.

And yet their desperation had led them here. To the cavern that would later become Iz. The many kings of the Taleen led their people to a new home. Hidden they prospered while their enemies found abandoned cities and outposts, taking over or looking to challenge another foe. The Taleen and their technology developed, and yet their gates remained inactive, forgotten, and silent.

Few remembered who the dwarfs were when they returned, just one people amongst many to come and go. Their technology had been sought after, their knowledge and ingenuity nearly leading to their downfall. But when they deemed themselves ready, their Centurions and Praetorians overran those who had taken their cities. Gates reignited and an unending tide of machines controlled by the guilds of the Guard, the Builders, and the Makers swept through the underground and the lands above.

Few could stand against their will. The Taleen rose from a forgotten people to a power capable of challenging even the ageless Domains. Treaties were forged, trade routes set up, the dwarfs having little interest to live on the eastern plains or to send their creations against the Elves in the central lands. Nor did they have any intention to share their closely guarded secrets. Long range teleportation and single mages capable of controlling a hundred machines.

Growing internal struggles slowed their conquest, the various Guilds growing more powerful with every passing year, the territory and numbers the Taleen commanded expanding rapidly.

“And the war started five centuries later?” Ilea asked, enjoying a bottle of ale as Elfie summarized the knowledge they had gathered.

The group had been forced to move into an underground basement in the outskirts of the city, the machines not letting up with their search for the intruder they had yet to destroy.

Elfie rubbed his temples and hissed a tired hiss. “There were so many wars, Ilea. Against both monsters, men, Elves, and others. Some of the records even suggest a few conflicts with dragons, however even their own historians call those endeavors foolish, the guild members delusional or fanatics. But yes, the great war in the five hundredth year after Bothor the Maker had initiated the Reclamation.

“Monsters started to change, creatures thought harmless slaughtering whole villages of humans, breaking through enchanted dwarf made walls where they had failed for centuries before. Dungeons harbored beings that were impossible to defeat for the adventurers in the region. And runes were found. Runes that bent both space and void, magic so powerful even the Taleen were quickly becoming interested.”

“The Ascended,” Ilea said, smiling at him.

“Precisely. They seemed to have been the sole focus of the Taleen for decades before the Domains even took note of their existence and their invasion into our realm. Facilities were found and taken, destroyed, and contested. The enemy were few but powerful enough to challenge armies on their own, their magic summoning demons and monsters alike, fighting restlessly at their whims. And yet the Taleen machines did not relent, their capital and many cities secured and protected, the builders making a hundred soldiers for every ten they lost.

“Ilea it’s really quite fascinating to learn about all this... you know how little we write down, but this is history that concerns all of us, not just the Taleen,” Elfie said, an excited glint in his eyes.

“History written by the Taleen,” Feyrair said, looking up from the book he was flipping through with a bored expression. “Of course they’d be the first ones to face the enemy, and the only ones to win their battles. It wouldn’t have come to their alliance if the Taleen were as mighty as they claim to have been.”

“It’s not about the power of the Domains, or the armies any other species could have put on a field. It seems to be a matter of interest. Why would the Oracles send Elves into battle against an enemy that does not interfere with their domains? An enemy that does not engage in open battle when left unchallenged? The Ascended came here with a purpose, one they sought to fulfill underground, where no humans and only few Elves dwell,” Elfie said. “I understand that these sources are to be treated with necessary doubt, and yet it makes sense to me that these dwarfs understood the threat of the Ascended long before any others would have.”

Feyrair hissed and continued reading.

“Only when the lands were ruptured, entire cities swallowed in the wake of their reach, only then did the surface dwelling species understand the enemy they had to face. And the Taleen were there, providing information, targets, locations of critical facilities that no other even knew about. I’m sure there were efforts made by other species, but with their teleportation network and incredibly far reach, again, it just makes sense to me,” Elfie explained, glancing at Feyrair who didn’t dignify him with a reaction.

“Here is where things become unclear,” the elf continued. “Despite all the writing they did, all the documentation and rigorous planning, well there just seems to be a lot missing. I gauge that they understood more of the Ascended plans than they shared with their allies, a few sections allude to that. The Taleen had reached their power through technological advances, knowledge, education, and magical theory far beyond what others in their time worked with. The war they fought was just one part of their efforts, much of their resources spent on understanding the runes they had found, the facilities and technology they managed to uncover from their enemy.

“It became a downright obsession, one that led to a plan. What exactly that plan was is unclear as of yet. And though I remain hopeful, it seems the records have been meticulously stripped of this knowledge,” Elfie said.

Ilea sipped on her ale and looked at the ceiling, a few candles flickering nearby. “The Ascended apparently managed to take away or destroy one of Elos’ suns. Somehow. I don’t know if the rupturing lands happened before or after that.”

“Could be both,” Elfie said. “It’s frustrating that they suddenly turned to secrecy.”

“I mean they were working together with Humans and Elves, weren’t they? It’s best if not everyone knows about the plans of the higher ups. One interrogation or slip of the tongue would be enough to endanger the likely fragile alliance,” Ilea said.

Asay giggled. “Alliance. A strong word. These dwarfs distrusted outsiders and other species just as much if not more so than the Domains we hail from.”

“Then why did they all work together?” Ilea asked.

Elfie hissed. “Should the Oracles have commanded it, the males would’ve followed. Yet we would never know, unless we ask an Oracle old enough to remember.”

Feyrair hissed, as did two other Elves in the room. “Don’t suggest something like that.”

“Is talking to them that dangerous?” Ilea asked.

“What did you call it? Mommy issues?” Ben asked with a wicked smirk. “Though I admit, the idea does not appeal to me either.”

“All of this still doesn’t answer why there are no more Taleen around. If their capital was so perfectly hidden and defended, why would they leave?” Ilea asked. “And if the Domains or Ascended did come down here to kill them all, why is this city still around and why is it crawling with machines?”

“That, is precisely what we aim to answer here,” Asay said with a smirk.

“We aim to destroy the purpose that drives these machines, to find those controlling their production, seeding their intent,” Isalthar said. “And perhaps here, we may find answers that could make such aim reality.”

“Not if they were meticulous with the destruction or alteration of their records. And if we’ve learned anything about the Taleen, then that they were meticulous,” Ben said with a sigh.

“But we found out about the keys, they’re certainly important somehow. I still think it’s a good idea to whip it out and see what happens,” Ilea said.

Feyrair groaned. “Yes, please. I’m tired of reading. I want to fight. And there are thousands of Taleen all around.”

“Our time for battle will come, but I bid you, have patience,” Isalthar said, glancing at everyone in the room.

The next day Ilea and Farthorn pushed towards the center from a new direction. Below. His void magic coupled with her ash allowed for somewhat efficient digging. A few problems immediately presented themselves however.

One was the location of the center, solved with Ilea's increasing precision with her various marks. Especially the one on Elfie gave her significant guidance, the proximity to Riverwatch and the marks on Dale and Walter providing additional help. She could locate the abyss in the center of the city, of that much she was sure.

The main problem however was the architecture used by the dwarfs. Much like the modern Ravenhall, they built deep. Which in turn meant that Ilea and her Elven companion had to dig even deeper. The process was slow and boring, too much magic and vibration would likely attract the attention of an Executioner but they simply had no other way.

A direct confrontation would be catastrophic, apparently even with Isalthar's help. She had asked him to make sure. A drop from above would reveal them instantly. Not only the flying variants they had found to be called Taleen Destroyers were in the way, Hunter Praetorians swarmed the distant far reaching cavern walls. An attempt would at least lead to a lot of fireworks.

And so they dug, piece after piece, over a hundred meters below the city streets. "If we can come out in that abyss like hole, we should be able to make our way up to that sphere," Ilea said. She made the large ash drill spin again, slowly to make sure the machines above didn't notice the vibrations.

"We would likely be spotted anyway. Perhaps with my concealing spell. But it's uncertain still," Farthorn said, using his magic to remove the accumulating stone.

They continued for a few hours, Ilea humming various tunes as she enjoyed the meditative drilling work. She was woken from her trance like state by something hitting her mind. Ilea held up a hand. "Something just hit me."

"*Stop hitting me,*" she said with her limited telepathy.

"*Hit? Ah the feeble minds of the living. I merely contacted you,*" a voice said into her mind, sounding deep and gravelly.

"*Hi there. And who might I be talking to?*" Ilea said and gestured for Farthorn to wait, the elf looking at her with an apprehensive look on his face.

"*Who indeed. Perhaps the same being that has been watching your progress for the past weeks. I'm confused as to why a human would choose to work with the enemy, especially a key warden,*" the voice said with consideration. "*I'm called the One without Form. Because the makers had a very limited imagination. And I'm contacting you as is my duty.*"

Ilea smiled, crossing her arms in front of her. "*And you chose to do that now? Why not earlier? We could've resolved these issues already.*"

"*I have no obligation to talk with a limited creature of flesh. Nor do I wish to waste my time on a human so wretched, she would conspire with Elves of all things,*" the voice said, nearly vibrating in her mind.

"*And yet you're talking to me,*" Ilea said and laughed.

"*Of course. I must communicate with the key wardens when they reach my authority. What may I do for you, esteemed ally?*" the One without Form asked.

"*Alright... ally?*" Ilea asked.

*“You hold the Tungsten key, entrusted to you for its protection. An ally to our cause. I’ll have you ripped apart, your blood and innards smeared onto the ancient streets you have desecrated.*

*Traitor,”* it said, the voice vibrating more during the second part, the words distorted and warped. *Ah I see,* Ilea thought and glanced at Farthorn, twirling her index finger next to her temple. *“This thing is nuts.”*

She turned her attention back to the thing still connected with her mind. *“What can I do as a Key warden?”*

*“You will have a say in decisions made by the Guilds,”* the being said in a perfectly even tone. *“You will be found and destroyed, including the vermin you have brought into this sacred city.”*

*“Yes, yes. I got that. Can you tell me what you are? Where you are?”* Ilea asked instead.

*“The information I can share with you is limited, key warden. Due to your status as ally. You need not know who or what I am, for death is already descending,”* it said.

*“Praetorians have gathered above,”* Farthorn said. *“They’re cutting into stone to reach us.”* He sounded calm, waiting for Ilea to make a decision.

*“Can I change my status?”* she asked.

*“Three keys must be entrusted to you, only then can one without ancestry be considered a true key warden. I suggest you contact the guilds, should you desire more information,”* the being said.

*“I see. Can you tell me where the other keys are? Or where the Guilds are?”* she said.

*“No. The locations of the keys are not known to me, as is protocol. Your attempts are meaningless, human. You will perish. This day, or in a thousand years. My purpose will remain. The enemy will be eradicated. And you will die with them,”* the being said when the first silver blade entered the tunnel.

*“Time to fuck off,”* Ilea said and displaced the two of them away.

Farthorn turned and made the ceiling collapse as they ran away. *“What happened?”*

*“Talked to the One without Form. Apparently we entered what it called its authority,”* she said, the two teleporting through their tunnel before they exited out into the city, finding their hiding place and appearing within.

*“We might be in trouble,”* Ilea said.

Isalthar looked up from the book he was reading and cocked his head a little to the side.

*“Dug closer to the center. Was contacted via telepathy by the One without Form. Or at least it called itself that. I think it was a little confused because I’m obviously its enemy but I also held a key,”* she said.

*“Have you learned anything?”* Asay asked.

Ilea smiled. *“Well yes and no. Apparently I need three keys to be considered an actual key warden. Until then, the information I get is limited. It did seem quite upset with me working with Elves, something about blood and death.”*

*“Enemies,”* Seithir said.

*“They’re coming,”* Asay said. *“Should we relocate?”*

“Many,” Seithir said.

Farthorn’s eyes glowed a deep purple for a moment before he hissed. “That is an understatement. Seems like hiding might no longer be an option.”

“The carpenter’s study. Everyone but Ilea and Feyrair, retreat there while we hold them off,” Isalthar said.

The Elves hissed and vanished, Elfie touching Ilea’s shoulder briefly before he joined the others without complaint.

*Must hurt their pride quite a bit, to be sent off like that,* Ilea thought. Though she did agree with the decision. While powerful, with the numbers here in Iz, even their group here would be overwhelmed. Escaping would be easier for Isalthar and Feyrair than for Neiphato or Ben.

“Do you trust in your ability to get us out?” Isalthar asked, turning to look at her.

“Of course. The spell does need a little over two minutes to activate. Think you can protect me for that long?” she asked.

Isalthar smiled lightly. “With everybody else there, yes. I will tell you when you two should go and start the spell. Ready?”

“Whenever you are,” Ilea said, white flame flaring up on her body.

Feyrair smirked and hissed, his own fire flaring up. “It’s been a while since I last fought by your side.”

“A necessity. Not a joyous occasion,” Isalthar said as the air around him stilled to an unnatural degree. “Do not take unnecessary risks.”

He vanished a moment later, Ilea glancing at Feyrair before she followed.

When she appeared once more, Ilea thought the city itself had started moving. Thousands of machines were rushing towards their position, moving in tandem as if a single mind guided them in their wave like advance. She wondered if that was exactly what was happening, or if she simply hadn’t truly seen an army of Taleen on the march before.

The ground didn’t vibrate, nor was the sound they produced particularly loud. A silent tide of death, coming towards them with a singular intent.

She looked over to Feyrair, seeing Isalthar advance a little. Their spells were ready, powerful magic coupled with near endless resources and regeneration. And yet she felt small.

A single high level enemy was one thing, graspable no matter how much they could manipulate the elements around them or how strong their weapons hit. This however was different.

“Like an ant hill down here,” she murmured, looking at the sea of green lights rapidly moving towards them.