

## Chapter 708 Hunters and Prey

Ilea didn't drill all the way into the taleen dungeon, instead teleporting the group inside as soon as she could see the familiar structural design within her dominion.

*Not a production facility*, she noted instantly. Ivy had grown throughout most of the room, a single green light still active. It dimmed every other second. A mead hall spread out below them, the room reaching high compared to the surrounding corridors. Black wings brought her down to the ground.

"We're not the first here," Aki remarked as he stepped down through the air like a spider crawling down a wall.

Ilea wondered if he was trying to channel the fear inducing aura on purpose. Either way each of his steps looked downright deadly.

"Looks like it," Ilea agreed, seeing the destroyed Guardians strewn about the hall. "But the gate should still be online according to the map, so let's go and see."

They made their way through the dark tunnels without another word, all of them flying or walking in the air to avoid unnecessary sounds. There was no great hall here, nor were there many houses built as of yet. What they did find were foundations. Stone carved out and corridors leading to dead ends, cracks and crevices suggesting nearby cave systems, and finally a simple room with a teleportation gate. Mostly untouched it seemed.

"*Claw marks suggest beasts?*" Ilea said, looking at Verena.

"*Star Chasers most likely, probably a burrow nearby. They wouldn't have attacked otherwise,*" the Elder informed.

*The wolves teleporting through the night. They fought Guardians?*

She put the modified key into the control panel and selected the destinations, selecting one of the three mentioned by Iana. Izvelnaar. The location was northeast of Hallowfort. Ilea motioned to the platform and activated the gate, her space magic resistance disabled after the magic failed to grip her framework. She allowed herself a grin, quite proud of her ability to resist the ancient Taleen technology.

A moment later they appeared in a cramped dark room, dust and debris covering everything. Barely any air remained.

*No dungeon notification either*, Ilea thought, looking at the destruction left behind in this place. Her dominion reached far in every direction. She activated fabric tear and brought all three of them out into the open, the group finding themselves in what looked like a basin of sorts. The dungeon below had been trampled down into ground up stone and splintered wood. A bed of ash remained, hidden under a thick layer of sand. High reaching pillars of stone cast long shadows into the basin, their lengths curved as if fingers of a hand. It seemed the arcane storms did not reach here.

Ilea moved her wings and ascended about ten meters before she spotted a scaled form half burrowed in the sand a few hundred meters away. She could see its form rise and fall. Bits of scales jutted out from several sections of sand throughout the basin, a few long and curved horns coming out of the creature's head. It looked like a combination of snake and dragon, six long teeth jutting out of its jaws, the top and bottom split vertically to create what seemed like four sections. It had six eyes in a

circular pattern, all around its head. She could feel the magic from this distance, the very sands below them vibrant with infused power.

*“Don’t move or touch anything,”* she informed the others. *“Stay afloat.”*

She summoned her notebook and started noting down her estimates of the location. There was no reason to engage the sleeping creature, and while she thought the risk for herself minimal, she couldn’t say the same about her companions. *“Only ruins left,”* she said and stored her book. A use of fabric tear brought them back down into the cramped area, several tilted and half broken support beams had managed to keep a few small spots protected from the rampage that must’ve taken place ages past.

The being had been too far for her to identify but with the sheer display of dormant magic in the vicinity, she assumed it to be at least at the power level of an Elemental. She considered contacting it with her telepathy but decided against it, her instincts telling her that bothering the sleeping serpent wasn’t in the cards today. Plus it would really be against her principles, to wake someone for no reason. An aggressive response would be expected, a potential nice new friend brought to anger just because she woke it up.

Ilea chose the next destination and activated the gate a second time. This one brought them deep below the Naraza mountain chain, and this time into a dungeon.

***‘ding’ ‘You have entered the Izacanir dungeon’***

A smile blossomed on her face as she looked around.

The gate was located at a central point of a massive cavern, a hundred meters in each direction flattened by earth magic or other tools. Railways led into a dozen mine shafts that had been carved into the walls, supported by beams of stone or wood. *Not quite as high quality and standardized as everything else,* she noted. As she flew up and looked around, Ilea could see skeletons of various beings strewn between mine carts, covered in dust, debris, or chunks of rock. Signs of battles long past remained, earth mages fighting people with crude tools and little magic.

The light of her embers reflected in shimmering bits of metal. Some of the stones were lined with it. She landed next to a thrown over mine cart and crouched down near the spread out pile of raw materials. This load had a slightly silver sheen to it.

The others joined her when the the gate activated once more. On it appeared a single large creature made of silver steel, four arms opening up from its torso. Green eyes shined in the darkness as it took in the surroundings. Its attention settled on the small group of people floating about twenty meters away.

*“Intruders,”* it spoke in a static whisper, a purple shield flaring to life and extending outwards.

***[Pursuer Praetorian – lvl ???]***

The creature had the same level as Aki. It moved off the gate and stopped, watching them with its eerie eyes.

*“Should we go and attack?”* Aki asked.

Ilea sent an ashen spear at the shield. The projectile was stopped instantly, a ripple of energy flowing over the magical surface. *“Is it just trying to prevent us from using the gate again?”*

*“I don’t think so. You already destroyed one of these,”* Verena said.

The gate activated once more, now within the dome of void magic. Four silver steel beings stepped out and away, Executioners with their eyes set on Ilea.

*“Verena, Aki, I think it’s might be best for you to take a bit of a back seat,”* Ilea said as she started charging up her heat. Another set of four Executioners appeared on the platform. *“Careful with the core explosions. Get me out if they pierce my brain,”* she sent and formed an ashen copy, infusing it with the same instructions before it rushed away, hiding in the shadows. Centurion variations, ranged Guardians, and a few Hunter Praetorians appeared on the gate next, the beings content with staring at her.

The group of machines now filled out the whole dome like protection of the central Pursuer. Its eyes flashed green, those of the surrounding machines doing the same a moment later. It moved up one of its arms, the others did the same, all in sync.

*“Boy band on the hunt,”* Ilea murmured. *No reason to do that arm thingy other than to look intimidating.* She glanced back and saw Aki and Verena had already retreated, neither of them offering any complaints. She assumed Pierce would’ve already been ripped apart by the first line of Executioners. *At least the enemy takes me seriously,* she thought and cracked her neck. Her full strength mantle formed on her body, white flame erupting a moment later as she floated up with burning wings. *“This is exactly what I need right now. Thank you,”* she sent to the Pursuer.

Its dome like shield vanished and reformed, now protecting only the central being. Everything else burst into movement. The machines spread out in a coordinated manner, circling her position with Executioners running through the air and ranged versions rushing towards the cavern walls.

*I’m afraid you missed your chance,* Ilea thought and raised her hands, all projectiles coming towards her stopping in mid air, invisible arcane arrows exploding in blue light. She twirled in the air before she sent waves of Archon Strike at the closest machines. She teleported to the cavern wall, her ashen limbs shredding through a normal ranged Guardian as if it was a wet tissue. She moved on to one of the retreating Hunters. *No clusters of machines, they’re all moving with distance between them, never in a line,* she observed and glanced at the Pursuer that presumably controlled everything.

A few strikes infused with her fires of creation broke through the Praetorian’s shield, a few more leaving its steel form dented. She turned her head to see two Executioners rushing towards her allies’ position, the core explosion next to her leaving the top layer of her mantle damaged. *Interesting approach,* she thought and teleported in front of the two running machines. Ilea tilted her head slightly as she looked at the now distant Pursuer, the machine having stepped up into the air to see the whole battlefield. Both Executioners ran past her, focused entirely on Verena and Aki.

Ilea floated forward and towards the machines spreading out. *So very well prepared,* she thought and activated fabric tear. All she could see within her dominion vanished and appeared in a tight sphere around her. It just so happened that the explosion of Embered Heart created a sphere too. And the range seemed just right. She didn’t break eye contact with the machine as her charged heat flashed out, the Centurions and Guardians burned away instantly, a few chunks of melted steel impacting the ground with heavy thuds.

Most of the Executioner shields held up but the remaining fires alone would be enough to break through in no time. She watched the machines jump and run away, regrouping as she smiled and chose her first target. *You’re not the hunter here.* She vanished. Three charged punches broke through the remaining shield of the Executioner, its form covered in white flame a split second later, its insides wrecked by flame infused destructive healing and heated cinders.

She could see other Executioners run towards her, rapier extensions at the ready. It didn't dissuade her. To kill an executioner, one had to get to the core. And so that was what she did. More punches burned away the silver metal, waves of near turquoise arcane energy washed over the machine that tried to form shields on its hands until the core was sufficiently exposed. Burning ashen limbs moved inside as Ilea charged her space manipulation. *Let's see how effective this is*, she thought, watching the shield around the core burn away.

Two Executioners had reached them, their charging forms vanishing into near invisible gates before they appeared on the other side of the cavern. Ilea raised her hand and formed a fist, watching as the core squeezed into itself, metal groaning before a void magic explosion rushed out.

A sizable sphere of the mine had vanished entirely, one mine cart halved as if cut by a high precision laser. Ilea floated in the middle of it all, the layers of her ash reforming as she turned and looked at the Pursuer.

Its eyes flashed before all the machines rushed towards it. The gate activated a moment later, taking the Pursuer and four Executioners with it.

*Oh no you don't*, Ilea thought and teleported into the midst of the remaining machines. She could feel the energy around herself, the very air vibrating with magical energy. Ilea focused on the teleportation device below, forming six gates around it, both above and in the ground.

She braced herself with walls of ash before the self destruction commenced, a series of perfectly timed magical explosions wrecking through her flying form.

Ilea landed a moment later, her wings gone as she wiped blood from her nose and mouth. Her mantle reformed, the slight damage to her innards healing in mere moments. Her wings spread again, tail moving behind her. She raised her hand and slowed the falling chunk of stone, bringing it to a gentle stop at the bottom of the spherical imprints left behind by the core explosions. The gate remained within, undamaged.

*Question is if it still works, or if they disconnected it*, she thought and landed on the piece. *"Let's check the last location before this thing stops working,"* she sent to her allies.

Both joined her in a few seconds.

*"So that's what would happen in a bout between us,"* Aki said.

Ilea put in the key and selected the last of the three destinations. The gate sprung to life and made them vanish. *Too confident? Or do they want to know where we're going?*

*"Don't be ridiculous Aki, you're not comparable to one of those shit machines,"* Ilea replied, looking around in the small hall they had arrived in.

***'ding' 'You have entered the Izcural dungeon'***

*Should be the right one*, Ilea thought and had a look with her dominion. She raised her brows and stomped down onto the gate, the attack enhanced with a physical set of spells. A series of cracks spread out in a web, the device powering down instantly.

"I thought you wanted more," Verena said.

Ilea looked over. "I'm happy for more, but not in this place," she said. "Kill all the remaining Guardians before they can destroy anything," she added and vanished, teleporting through the facility and taking out the low level machines left behind. The spear of the Centurion scraped

against her mantle before a charged Archon Strike exploded inside of it, the machine destroyed before its core could detonate.

*Should be the last one*, she thought, watching Verena finish off a set of Guardians.

Ilea appeared in the largest room, next to Aki. She glanced at him before she followed his gaze at all the devices. “Want me to collect everything? Iana can look through it with you.”

He looked down at her for a moment before he nodded without a word.

She opened one of the books but everything was written in the Taleen script. Instead she stored it inside of her domain. The present machines didn’t look exactly like those found in the Soul Forge but some inspiration was obvious even to her. The whole facility wasn’t particularly large, suggesting that it wasn’t exactly the main endeavor of the Taleen. Some of the diagrams showed machine like bodies with detailed core descriptions and runes. Humanoid in nature.

*Did they succeed?* Ilea wondered, looking at Aki. *Why a dagger of all things? And why was he made to be influenced by his wielder?*

She stored everything, including the machines, near entirely emptying the place out. “*She’ll figure things out, I’m sure,*” Ilea said, touching his back.

“*I’m merely... curious,*” Aki said.

“*Of course. Understandable that you’d want to know about your origins. It doesn’t change who you are now, but maybe you can get some more perspective,*” Ilea said.

“*Thousands of years have passed in that dungeon... where you found me. My memories of that time are limited, the dagger unable to hold all the information I received,*” Aki said.

“*Are the machines helping with that?*” Ilea asked.

“*Yes. The capacity not just to store information but to think is exponentially better with this Pursuer body,*” he replied. “*And yet I fail to... process everything... that I...*”

Ilea looked at him. “*It’s alright.*”

“*I fear what you might think of me, once my origins are... revealed,*” the dagger said.

She remained quiet for a few seconds before she talked. “*You’re surprisingly stupid for all that supposed processing power. One of my best friends is a tree. Even if you’re some kind of complex enchantment, you’re Aki, a friend I found deep below Dawntree.*”

“*I am aware of that, rationally. You have said as much before. And yet I can’t help but... feel...*” he said and paused.

Ilea flew up and bonked his metal head. “*Being scared is okay. But we’ll be there for you. Iana, Chris, me, the Meadow, Trian, and your Sentinels. I guess it doesn’t make sense to tell a supposed artificial intelligence not to overthink something but well... try.*”

Aki’s eyes glowed a little brighter before he slumped down just a little.

“*Helps to take things one step at a time. Anything in life really, especially when it feels overwhelming. For now let’s just focus on getting this stuff back to the Meadow’s domain. Once that’s done you figure out the next step,*” she said.

*“I understand. A simple mind like your own has to section challenges into pieces to be able to process them,”* he said.

“That’s my murder machine,” Ilea said and punched his side with a converted physical Archon Strike. She smiled as Aki was sent flying through the room, crashing against the stone wall with a heavy impact. The wall lost.

“I thought you didn’t want things destroyed,” Verena said as she joined them. “Cleared out now, didn’t find any hidden stashes, enchantments, or hidden rooms either.”

“Same for me,” Ilea said. “Teleport needs a few hours to charge up but maybe we can dig out of this place.”

“Where are we exactly?” Verena asked.

“Somewhere between Stormbreach and Salia. Deeeep underground,” she answered.

“Gate near Ravenhall seems like the fastest option then,” the Elder said.

“Yep,” Ilea said and formed an ashen drill, looking up at the ceiling. “This will take some time.”

Aki walked over, his arms reforming into cannons, void magic glowing within. “I’ll help.”