

## Chapter 784 Conflict

Ilea recounted some of her meetings with the Cerithil Hunters, and explained their goals. “I came across one of the Keys in my travels. With various enchantments we could track the others. It took some time to collect them but in the end it worked out. To the extent where the One without Form prevented teleportation to Iz, and sent machines to attack human settlements.”

“You used our teleportation network?” one of the dwarves asked. He looked just as old as Ormont, though with a considerably more chaotic beard.

“I know some very powerful space mages,” Ilea said, patting the Fae’s head.

The dwarf glanced down at the creature, seemingly satisfied with the answer.

“Which means you changed the directives? Or turned off the Sphere?” Ormont asked.

*Quite knowledgeable.* “I tried to remove the directives, yes. But the One without Form argued that would go against the directives.”

He grinned. “Yes. Of course it would,” he shook his head lightly.

“You were right,” another gray haired dwarf said and chuckled. “After all this time.”

“You cannot seriously consider her words the truth?” another old dwarf spat, his grimace furious for a mere second before he managed to control himself. His gray beard looked smooth, longer than what everyone else wore.

“Why not? The machines are gone. You have seen them leave,” the other one said. “And you have seen the keys. You have always been stubborn, Gorn. Our thoughts no longer have to stay hidden. I shut my mouth for thousands of years, and now I can say it. You were wrong. The One without Form was a mistake. And it would have been our last one if it weren’t for these brave elves and this human!”

Several people drew their weapons, a few spells flaring up at the same time.

Ilea teleported the projectiles and weapons into a nearby wall without a comment.

“Enough!” Ormont bellowed. “Is this how we are to behave! We are the Guilds of Io, the remnants of the Taleen.” His words were harsh, each one spoken with conviction. “We have brought enough shame upon ourselves. And we have remained. We have fought, have survived, and we have waited. It is now that we shall stand together, and move forward with this change. Be it Henel, fate, or mere probability, but the One without Form is gone. The machines have retreated from our city.”

“We stand defenseless,” Joori said.

“We did not stand. We knelt,” Ormont spoke, his voice a thunder now. “Do not speak to me, boy. You were not yet born when our people ruled the mountains of these lands, when we were feared, when we-” he broke off. And looked at Ilea. His eyes were tired.

“No, go on, that was cool,” she said.

“How is it...” the chaotic beard dwarf started. “How is it you removed the Guardian? If the keys did not allow you to change the directives.”

"I opened up the sphere, and went inside," Ilea said with a smile. She could see some of the dwarves tense up, only a few of the really old ones.

"Y... you said... the assault happened... today," the dwarf said, stuttering lightly.

"Yes," Ilea said.

"But... the heat. Even our tests we... no... I need my research. A nonsense, it's all in Iz!" he stood up and sat down again.

"You went inside the Sphere using the emergency access?" another dwarf asked.

"I told you she lied," Gorn said.

"I'm happy to have a conversation. But I won't stand here while you call me a liar," Ilea said, enhancing the last word with *Monster Hunter*, the fires of creation flaring up for a few seconds as many of the dwarves sat frozen. Not the one she addressed, but she didn't mind. She could tell he knew what the flames meant. It seemed many ancient beings did.

*Violence*, the Baron said and nodded happily.

"She's standing there with a Fae in her hand. I suppose it's possible," Borin said. "I would very much like to see that however. May I ask you to repeat that while we watch from a distance?"

Ilea shook her head. "Absolutely not. My teeth melted."

Some of the people averted their eyes.

"Worse than dragonfire," she said.

A wave of murmurs went through the Guild representatives.

*Bragging*, the Baron sent.

"A little," Ilea sent back.

"So let us assume, you truly went into the sphere," Ormont spoke. He was back to being somewhat calm, taking a few steps towards her.

Joori seemed a little more mellow now. He had been frozen by her call.

"How did you replace the Guardian? As far as I understand, the One without Form is integrated into the control room," Ormont said.

"I won't tell you that," Ilea said. "Just in case you want to reverse it."

"Any controller directly inserted would work," Borin said.

"There is nothing complex enough to overtake the One without Form," another said.

A few of the dwarves glanced at each other.

"There is. There are. Plenty of prototypes existed, and more could have been made in the time between then and now," Ormont spoke. "It is truth I have not spoken since we were forced to hide in this city, but the One without Form was only one option."

"The best option we had," Borin said in a thoughtful manner. "As much as it annoys me to admit that."

Gorn grunted. A small victory for the other dwarf.

*Jesus fuck how long are these guys going to hold grudges?*

“Why was it such a rush anyway?” Ilea asked.

Ormont glanced at some of the other old dwarves. He sighed and looked at her. “There were... Monarchs. Hunting for what we had found in Kohr. A mere accident. They should have never known.”

“They wanted it?” Ilea asked. She could tell plenty of the present people didn’t know what exactly they were talking about.

“I did not know their motives, nor do I now. However... that power. I do not know what being could resist its allure,” Ormont said. “Does the sphere remain guarded?”

Ilea smiled at him. “The Sphere Guardians are still around. As am I,” she said and gave him a long look.

He nodded slowly. “That is... good. I suppose.” He opened his mouth ever so slightly but closed it again.

“The Cerithil Hunters, as you called them. What claims did they bring forth? What have they mentioned of our kind?” Ormont asked.

“I don’t know. I think the purpose they shared is fulfilled now. If you’re scared if some of them will come to hunt you down... well, I can see that happening. You are in fact responsible for this whole shit. There were deaths in Riverwatch too, you know? But I’m not sure how much responsibility you really carry for that after thousands of years,” she said. *Being basically imprisoned. Shown the failure of your creation. Every. Single. Day.*

Ilea knew these had once been powerful dwarves. Tyrants maybe, benevolent rulers, creators. But whatever they once were, what she saw was a group of survivors. A group of prisoners. It was difficult for her to associate them with the actions of the One without Form.

Ormont raised his chin. “We were at war. Thousands were killed every week. Entire cities slaughtered. For nothing but bloodlust and sick joy. Uncaring killing and greed.” He paused and shook his head. “Ash now. Thousands of years past. It was our greed that led to it all. It was our failure... as makers. I have lived with that knowledge. With that shame. And yet I will not forget the dead. Should you wish to judge me, I will be found guilty. And yet still I will fight, for Io, and for our people. For them I prevailed. And I will continue to do so, until I am struck down. By you. By an elf, or by the very Guardian of Iz.”

Ilea locked eyes with him for a few seconds. Nobody else made a sound as he took in rasping breaths. “Well. Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that. You had a long time to consider the things you did. And I suppose you all have a chance now. To rebuild. How exactly that will look like... I think is mostly up to you.”

“I assume you lay claim to Iz, the Guardian, and everything we built?” Ormont asked, his breathing still somewhat heavy.

Ilea shrugged. “The Guardian lays claim to himself. The rest, I think is up for discussion.”

“Very well. And we shall discuss. I call a vote of the Guilds, to enter talks with the Meadow Accords. In an effort to create favorable terms for the security of Io and its people,” Ormont spoke.

Hands were raised before someone spoke out. “All votes in favor.”

“The motion is passed,” Ormont spoke. He tapped his head while looking at her.

“*What is it?*” she asked.

*“Lilith. Should the Cerithil Hunters claim their revenge. I merely ask of you to tell us. So that we may fight. Little of our strength remains. Their victory is certain. But I cannot bear the thought of an unhindered slaughter, after all this time. The least I wish for is to die with my hammer in hand,”* he said, raising his chin as he looked up to meet her eyes.

*“Ormont. I don’t like what you did. I don’t like what the One without Form did. But if an elf reaches this city in an effort to kill innocent people born and raised in Io, I will put them down myself,”* Ilea sent.

He looked at her for a few more seconds and nodded ever so slightly. *“I thought them foolish. To send someone like you. I was wrong.”*

*“Way to insult me,”* Ilea sent and smiled.

He looked at her and started chuckling, everyone else looking on in confusion.

“She has telepathy,” Ormont said.

*“Well that just takes the fun out of it,”* Ilea sent to everyone.

*Violence!* the Fae sent. Apparently to everyone as well.

“Right. I was promised a feast at some point,” she said.

“Of course,” Ormont said and gestured towards one of the doors. “We will feast. To celebrate this day of change. Be it for the better.”

*I do hope so, Ilea thought as she joined the dwarves. There’s a lot of conflict potential. Aki was right. Let’s hope they prioritize the safety of their people. And let’s hope Aki can protect himself against any attempts to overthrow him in the future.*

*Then again I have the keys. And they’d have to wait decades to get in even if they had them. If they can’t get someone as resilient as me to do it. Aki is the least of my concerns.*

She sighed.

“Exhausted?” Hatta asked as she joined her, the two entering a long hall illuminated with warm light. Stone chairs and a stone table stood at the center, everything prepared, a team of cooks waiting.

Ilea looked up at the lights before taking a random seat. “Yes, honestly.” She leaned back and rested her head on her fist. “What is it now?” she asked, looking at the woman.

“It... its fine,” Hatta said and sat down next to her. “I guess we should be flexible enough to have our seating order rearranged. Especially now that more guests will surely join us.” She made sure the nearby dwarves heard her.

“I took someone’s chair?” she asked.

“You really are not a diplomat,” Hatta said.

“No,” Ilea confirmed. “I can move somewhere else.”

“It’s fine. You sat down. You shall remain,” the Maker said.

“On another note, why stone? Nearly everything. In every Taleen place I came across,” Ilea said.

“It’s around. It’s durable. A little uncomfortable,” Hatta said.

“A little,” Ilea murmured, ash flowing down to create a comfortable cushion. “Why then?”

“Getting too comfortable leads to stagnation,” Hatta said. “It is the death of a civilization.”

“Should be the goal instead,” Ilea said.

“An interesting question. Subjective I suppose, to the person asking,” Hatta said. “But you did not come to that kind of power with being comfortable.”

“I’m often comfortable. I just happen to enjoy killing monsters. Incomprehensible ones that destroy your mind before you even reach them,” Ilea said.

The woman nodded. “I can imagine.”

Ilea looked at her for a few seconds. “No. I don’t think you can.”

Hatta considered and smiled. “Fair. Maybe I can’t.”

The cooks got to work now that everyone was seated, distributing plates of steaming food. Ilea was surprised to find the first dish already quite varied. Various roots and vegetables mixed with mushrooms and a brown sauce that smelled both earthy and spicy.

“I don’t suppose you have a lot of meat here?” she asked.

“No,” Hatta said and smiled. “But our diet is variable enough. Is it tasty to someone that came from outside?”

Ilea grinned. “Of course it is. It’s wonderful,” she said and continued eating, asking for more a few minutes later.

The dwarves started to seem slightly intimidated when she simply did not stop. At least the cooks were considerate enough to get the empty plates out of the way.

*Not like they can’t count the plates I finished. Maybe I’ll crack their high score on my first feast.*

She drank from the large jug, downing the ale before she slammed it down. The gesture seemed to amuse some of the dwarves.

“This is hardly the best ale I’ve ever had,” she said, looking back at a group of waiting cooks. “Try this one,” she said and summoned her last barrel of Walter’s ale. It was high time for a visit anyway. “Can they join us?”

“If you wish for them to join the table. They shall,” Hatta said, raising her mug towards the cooks.

They looked around and at each other.

Some of the Guild representatives didn’t seem too happy about it, others downright snickering.

Ilea summoned ash to provide chairs for the others. “And I suppose here’s some food from my favorite cook, and a restaurant in Ravenhall. You’ll have to visit sometime.” She summoned a few dozen plates from Keyla’s creations. She could justify it as a diplomatic move. “A gift, I suppose. For the feast.”

“Is there poison in there?” one of the dwarves asked, getting a few glares from the others.

"I don't know. Probably not. I'll heal you if you start dying. Promise," Ilea said as she cracked open the barrel and started pouring mugs of ale. *Ah this youth and lack of power. Being able to get drunk off this simple brew.*

The first cook took a sip and nodded slowly. "Yes."

"Human made," Ilea said, grinning.

"I'm sure it was inspired by a dwarven creation," one of the cooks said. "Or they bought the recipe."

"Fuck off," Ilea said and laughed, refocusing on her food as the dwarves laughed and shared around the barrel and food. For a while everyone quieted down, eating what Keyla had created.

*Shutting up the entirety of the Taleen ruling class. Or what I assume to be their ruling class. "You are the ruling class of the Taleen right?"* she asked Hatta.

*"The representatives here speak for their Guilds. And the Guilds are the governing body of the Taleen, yes. There were once kings in various cities, but the Makers stood above them, even then,"* she explained.

*"Good to know things like that when you plan to negotiate with said Taleen,"* she said, glad she didn't have to stop eating. Telepathy was nice.

*"The three question marks make up for a lot of missing tact and knowledge,"* Hatta said. *"Though I find your approach refreshing."*

*"Refreshing compared to what?"* Ilea asked. *"Or did you lie about your age?"*

*"Refreshing compared to what I learned. From books, and lectures. One doesn't have to experience everything to gain some manner of understanding,"* Hatta spoke.

*"Not everything. But some things,"* Ilea said. *"Like flying."*

Hatta smiled. *"My grandfather used to say the same thing. Maybe now I'll get a chance to try it myself."* She swerved her mug around and looked at the liquid before taking a sip.

*"Was he around before?"* Ilea asked.

Hatta nodded. *"Yes. And he taught me things that could've meant death. Even now... no. With the Guardians gone, there is no danger. And still it feels... like it's there. Always watching. We tried to break out. Many did. Others accepted it. Some welcomed it. Entire generations in conflict."*

*"Sounds fucking shit,"* Ilea said, downing another mug. "Try this one," she said and handed the dwarf a mug of Walter's mead, from her second to last barrel.

Hatta drank from it and froze, wiping at her eyes.

*"You okay?"* Ilea asked.

*"This is mead... isn't it? Honey wine,"* she said. *"It's so sweet. Sweeter than it says in the books."*

*"There's a lot more things out there,"* Ilea said, realizing the noise level in the hall had picked up by quite a lot. They weren't exactly singing and shouting yet but it was getting close. "Were you allowed to fight? To train your magic?"

*"It was very limited,"* one of the warriors said. *"For exercise mostly."*

Ilea grinned. "I know the Guardian doesn't like his machines destroyed, but maybe he can sacrifice a few hundred for a good cause."

Joori growled at the suggestion but someone slapped his shoulder.

"When have you last used your sword?" someone asked.

"I didn't need it," Joori said.

"You will now," Ilea said.

"Aye. I will. To protect the people of this city," the Paladin said as he looked at her, drinking from his mug.

"If you want to use it on me, give it a shot. I survived the Sphere. I think I can take you," Ilea said with a smile.

"Your provocations don't-" Joori said when someone punched his shoulder.

"Joori!" one of the cooks shouted, others soon joining in.

"*You don't seriously think he can hurt me?*" Ilea asked, seeing the somewhat worried look on Ormont's face.

He glanced at her.

"*You have survived in Kohr. I have been there to hunt,*" she sent.