

“Greetins!” one of the beings said as he approached.

Ilea appeared on top of her armor to have a better look. The hall was lit by various magic lighting from above, a warm light filling most of the expansive area. She doubted her not wearing the armor would really be an issue.

The warmachine was piloted by a dwarf, a steel visor open to reveal a bearded face, hardly any skin visible in the tight space of his armored suit. “Name’s Malan, Nice to meet all of you. I can show you around if you like.”

“What’s in it for you, Malan?” Pierce said, looking around before her eyes came to rest on the other two beings. “You guys here to do the same shit?”

“Why are you like this?” Ilea asked, looking at the woman. “Maybe they’re just trying to be nice,” she said, half because she generally gave people the benefit of the doubt, and half just to annoy the woman. The whole feel of this situation reminded her of taxi drivers or local sellers fucking over tourists. Because they quite obviously were tourists.

“Now I understand why everyone loves you,” Pierce answered. “I think we’ll find our own way,” she said to the dwarf before glancing to Ilea. “Except of course, the goddess does not concur.”

“A guide would be nice to be honest,” she said. “What about you two?”

One of them didn’t react, Ilea hearing muffled snoring now that she wasn’t inside her own armor anymore.

“Fuck off,” the other one said.

“Let’s go with that one,” Ilea said.

“Yes, I approve,” Pierce said.

Verena sighed and followed.

“Are you daft?” the dwarf asked, his suit showing a variety of scratches and a halfway done paint job. His machine was about as large as Ilea’s, the pieces however not quite as close to his body.

Ilea could see dozens of weak points, one part near his legs even showing his actual body. *Pathetic. I’m the far superior war machine*, she thought. “Can you show us around? We’re gullible tourists.”

[Stone Warrior – lvl 200]

“I’d rather blast myself with a heat propelled steel piercer than play guide for you lot,” he answered.

“He’s the right choice,” Pierce said. “Go on, pay him.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be the princess?” Ilea asked, sitting on her armaments again. She noticed the dwarf tense up at the mention of a princess. *Hmm, curious.*

“Yes, and I order you, with my royal power given to me through a history of violence and conquest, pay this poor dwarf,” Pierce said.

“You’re penniless... again?” Verena said, looking at the other elder.

Pierce's eyes went wide before she crossed her arms. "Outrageous! Defaming accusations, I tell you. My finances are of no concern to a lowly plebeian like yourself."

Ilea summoned a few gold pieces. "How much do you want?"

"How much do you have?" the dwarf asked.

She flicked two pieces his way. "Another two if you do a good job," she said. Ilea wondered how valuable gold even was to them, the guards outside betting several pieces on seemingly casual wagers.

"Double it, and I'm yours for the day," he said.

Ilea paid up, not even checking how much gold she had in her necklace.

"Great. That'll pay for my crippling whiskey addiction," the dwarf said as his machine came to life, the thing standing up. He stretched. More than one bone and piece of metal cracked as he did so.

"What's your name?" Ilea asked.

"Bralin," the dwarf said. "And we're not getting friendly just because you paid me. You get that right?"

"Oh no, I was hoping your services were more extensive," Pierce said and started towards the tunnel. "I assume it's this way to the Pit?"

Bralin didn't answer but followed along, his strides going quite far. "You should put that thing on, by the way. Humans aren't exactly welcome around here, nor anything else not a dwarf," he said and paused. "Even most dwarves to be honest."

"I can't speak while it's on," Ilea said.

"Really? Where the fuck did you get that thing then? I doubt you made it yourself," he said.

"Why would you doubt her engineering capabilities?" Pierce asked.

The dwarf glanced at her, the slit in his helmet showing his black eyes. "Just a guess."

"It's made to kill, not to talk," Ilea answered. "But yeah, you have something that solves that problem?"

"I do, well not me, but the people I *work* for. Somber Core smithy. They're alright, not the best, not the worst. I can make sure you don't get anything faulty, and ten percent of whatever you spend. But trust me, it's still more expensive if you go there without me," he explained.

"What's one speech item going to cost?" Ilea asked.

"Thirty silver, around that. It's not incredible but does the job. I suggest you take one that is battle approved. Wouldn't want to have it break in the middle of your massacre. I do hope you're not here for reasons of war?" he said.

"How come you think that?" Ilea asked with a perfect smile.

"You give me the shivers. These two are strong, but you... you're some kind of monster. That living armor is the best I've set my eyes on for decades, if not ever. And you treat it like some kind of tool. Most of us here would murder to get our hands on such a machine," he explained.

"We're not here to kill anybody. But a Dome *was* mentioned," Ilea said.

“Ah sure. I can show it to you, and help you sign up. So I can bet against whatever poor fool is standing across from you,” he said.

“What is it exactly?” Ilea asked.

“A dome. Well it was one at some point. Upside down... more a bowl really. Fights between war machines. Team fights, fights against monsters, tests of strength, durability, and the like, some to the death, some just until one gives up. But you won’t see any of the better machines in there, more shit like this,” he said, tapping his own helmet.

“You didn’t make that one?” Verena asked.

He grunted. “You seem surprised. You’ve been to dwarven cities I assume. The Pit isn’t quite as beautiful or pretentious. Most of those pissers haven’t ever had their chest plates dented in by a matured elf or a wartroll.”

Really? At level two hundred? Ilea thought and checked him with Veteran. *Oh. I see.*

It turned out Bralin was closer to three twenty. Why and how he hid his actual level from her was a mystery. “How are you hiding your level?”

“Ah... you noticed. Would appreciate it if you can keep that to yourself,” Bralin said. “It’s a skill related to my heritage. Nothing I could teach I’m afraid.”

“You’re hiding your level?” Pierce asked.

“I said keep it fucking down. Or you can find another guide,” the dwarf said.

“What’s he at?” Pierce asked Ilea.

“Three twenty,” Ilea supplied.

“Damn, higher than me. You suddenly became a lot more interesting, Bralin,” Pierce said and walked a little closer to him.

“I’m not attracted to humans,” he said.

“Shame,” Pierce answered.

“Why hide it?” Ilea asked.

He glanced her way. “You’re doing it too.”

“Yeah, but three marks is a bit different than your case,” she said.

“I have my reasons,” Bralin said and left it at that. “To get back to the topic, a lot of dwarves here don’t use war machines they’ve made themselves. If someone gets squashed in the Dome, it’d just be a waste to not sell the machine. Their main business next to betting actually.”

“What are the rules against using your own body to fight after the war machine is destroyed?” Ilea asked.

“None. Most would get obliterated even more. In your case... hmm. It wouldn’t be against the rules, but rules only mean something until they don’t. If you get what I mean,” he said.

“Gotcha, I’ll stay inside,” Ilea said with a smirk.

“Smarter, definitely. For everyone. You don’t strike me like someone who’d wipe out an entire settlement for no good reason,” Bralin said.

The hallway led down into the underground for several kilometers, the occasional war machine wearing dwarf walking or flying past them.

“Is there only one way in?” Verena asked.

“From up in the stormlands? Probably. Yes. But most of us don’t go there. Not with the pit,” Bralin informed. “The Pit is both the city and well, the pit. Was a former prisoner town ages past. Only goal was digging down, for whatever metals, treasures, and monsters they could find. It’s at a respectable depth now, the lower levels too dangerous for most. Are you here because of that?”

“It does sound interesting,” Ilea said. “What kind of monsters are we looking at?”

“Hard to say. Some have died over the years digging further down, entire sections are off limits and rarely entered. I’m sure you can imagine the kind of creatures lurking down there with your experience,” he said. “You are human, aren’t you?”

“I am,” Ilea reassured him. “How’s the settlement still here? If you constantly go down.”

He glanced at her and started laughing. “Yeah... well. There have been... incidents. And there will be more. But enchantments and various defensive measures, cave in options, and well... explosions. Explosions work well pretty much every time.”

“How reassuring,” Verena said from the side.

“I’m sure you three will be more than fine,” the dwarf said with a slight chuckle.

They soon reached a massively oversized gate, made entirely of enchanted steel.

Ilea looked up to see the top about thirty meters up. “This is ridiculous.”

“It really is,” Pierce said. “Boring design too.”

“And a waste of steel,” Verena added.

“You should wear your armor now,” the dwarf said. He walked past them and literally knocked on the massive closed gate, magic surging up from where he touched it, the energy rippling through the entire length of the entrance before the heavy doors moved forward. They stopped with a few meters of space in between.

Two war machines greeted them, both wielding halberds with a near four meter reach. “Those two?” one of them asked, pointing at the humans.

“With this one,” Bralin said, nodding to the dark set of living armor.

“Go on then, gate can’t stay open,” the other said, ushering them inside.

Ilea stepped into the space and followed Bralin to the side, a large smooth platform of steel expanding into what she assumed to be the city, an enormous stairwell nearly twenty meters wide led down from the center. When she thought to be far enough away from the guards by the gate, she transferred outside and in front of her armor.

Her eyes adjusted immediately, the darkness of her armaments giving way to warm magical light coming from massive devices built into the cavern ceiling. She blinked her eyes, looking at the even surface above, everything perfectly angular and lined with metal. Before her sprawled a city of lights, buildings of various sizes and forms sitting in a bowl like bed, many of them reflecting the magical light in different colors. While the structures themselves looked different from each other, it all seemed to follow a rather brutalist style. Everything was a combination of angles and flat

surfaces. A lot of the stone buildings were simply rectangular boxes, the structures situated higher up on the surrounding slopes started to have more complex designs, some with several floors and balconies, others more pyramid like with various extensions. She even saw a few that looked like simple monoliths.

Ilea saw buildings made entirely of gold, silver, and bronze, or at least metals or alloys with a similar shine to them. There were some with a blue hue, others with a green one, some even entirely black, much like the obsidian that made up her hammer. The underground city spanned kilometers wide.

“Fitting name,” Pierce mused, even her voice not quite as mocking as it usually was.

“Right,” Ilea said with a smile, looking at the hundreds of meters wide circular abyss at the center of it all, metal extensions, railings, and war machines visible both near the top and on the side of the descending cliffs.

“Welcome to the Pit,” Bralin said, not sounding nearly as bored as he had back at the entrance.

“Please tell me you don’t have a gold house,” Pierce said, frowning at some of the closer structures made of shiny metals.

The dwarf chuckled. “No. I prefer something a little less pronounced. And a bit more sturdy.”

“Are those cannons?” Ilea asked, looking at the dozens of large tube like extensions mounted to the side of the round pit, the ends looking a little like barrels and aimed down into the hole.

“Good eyes,” the dwarf remarked. “Yes. There are a few things where everyone agrees to chip in, with metals, time, and most importantly knowledge. We’ve sent four marks back into the depths, not just scared but crippled and dying.”

Ilea whistled. “How much for one of those things to shoot me?”

Pierce grinned. “You’re mad. I want to see it.”

“That’s not a request I’ve heard before,” Bralin said. “Let’s get you that speech module first. I assume it’s clear who the influential people are based on the state of the housing. There isn’t a single ruler or government present in the Pit, various groups and mostly high level individuals have a say in whatever comes up. General rules include no stealing, no destruction of property, and most importantly, no match fixing.”

“What about killing? Basic rights? Healers? Work?” Ilea asked.

“You’re free to kill anyone you like. But make sure you’re prepared to deal with whoever will come for vengeance. There are few healers here, but there is a lot of work. And a lot to learn. But you’ll have to make your own way in the Pit,” Bralin answered. “The champion of the Dome generally has the most influence, but that’s not always been the case. The current one is Helwart Maulstroem. Not quite as dim as the last one we had.”

“What happened to the last one?” Verena asked.

“Crowned himself king. Killed and thrown into the pit. That was a glorious night,” he mused. “Two whole districts were leveled,” he added with a bellowing laugh. “Ah but it’s better when the fighting doesn’t get too extensive. My forge was destroyed entirely.”

“You have a forge? But are employed by a smithy?” Ilea asked, seeing a few war machines taking flight in the distance, one with fire coming out of its boots. The thing flew before taking a sharp turn and hitting a building, sparks visible even at this distance.

“Yeah, most of us have our own forges, or shared ones. A lot goes into making a working war machine, the tools and materials are neither cheap nor always easy to get. I can only manage general repairs in my home. Saves me plenty of silver,” Bralin explained and made for the stairwell.

Ilea followed, surprised her massive form had enough space on the broad steps, the Elders next to her like children.

“A lot of the war machines date back to the prison background. Older designs were simply made to carry more ore, and to let dwarves efficiently scale the pit. The tools and weapons help with digging too,” he explained.

“I’ve seen war machines in other dwarven cities too,” Verena said.

“Of course. It’s unclear when it all started but I’m sure more than one of us rock brains had the idea to make a powered suit out of metals. I’m more surprised other species don’t do it as often. But much of what I’ve seen outside of the Pit is made to look intimidating, entirely focused on strength, or defense. Ceremonial nearly. If the royal guard of Parior participated in the Dome, I’d bet my gold on one of our semi decent fighters,” he said.

“Lots of confidence,” Ilea mused. *Royal guard of Kroll wasn’t particularly impressive though. So I guess I could say the same about the Shadow’s Hand.*

“Well... either one of you could likely kill the entire kingsguard of any human nation. Last I’ve heard, they’re not particularly impressive,” he said.

“They’re really not,” Pierce confirmed.

Verena shrugged. “No wonder when most of them have been sitting around a throne room for decades.”

Ilea followed in silence, taking in the various buildings, pubs, restaurants, shops, and smithies. Smithies were really the dominating structure, or perhaps everything else simply had a smithy attached to it as well. Most of the people were dwarves but there were occasional lizardpeople, humans, and dark ones. Few were wearing a heavy suit of armor but there were enough to make their prevalence clear. She got plenty of looks and comments from the folks passing by, mostly impressed or envious. Some few were accusatory or belittling, suggesting whoever was piloting the armor wasn’t worth the materials and work.

She had a hard time disagreeing with the latter ones, Goliath being an insanely good maker and herself having spent very little time actually using the armaments. Ilea wasn’t a war machine pilot who worked her way up from simple designs she had made herself like Terok, to arrive at the powerful tool she had around her now. *I just have better connections*, she thought with a grin.

“Here we are,” Bralin said after a fifteen minute walk, leading the three of them into a silver monolith nearly forty meters in height and half as wide. “Let me get you what you need,” he said, stepping past crates and piles of scrap metal, his massive form not touching a single thing as he passed.

“You do look rather clumsy in that thing, now that we’ve seen the people here,” Pierce admitted.

I won't disappoint you, Goliath. Don't worry, I have the power of overwhelming recovery, fire beams, and ash on my side.