

The Shadow beings looked at each other. “He was banished,” one of them said in a deep whisper.

Why is it always a whisper, Ilea wondered.

“Truly. She is touched by the Spirits of Old,” the other one said.

[Shadow Mage – lvl 283] – [Shade]

The other one was a few levels lower but otherwise the same. Both were mostly manifestations of shadows loosely gathered up within a set of armor somehow held together by their mist like forms. Two glowering dark eyes hovered between the slits of their helmets.

“Well, if the thing is dead, I’ll be returnin to the Pit as well. Come on Brand, let’s see what useless brat has taken over our smithy,” one of the remaining dwarves said. “Thanks Lilith, and Elders. Do come round if we manage to rebuild some of our reputation. I’ll give you a five percent discount.”

“S’pose that’s a way to travel through time,” Brand said, a steel covered hand touching the damaged chin of his ancient war machine.

“Five percent for saving someone’s life,” Pierce said and laughed.

“Not like we would’ve noticed if ya hadn’t,” the first dwarf answered with a smile. “Garlan Kornwatt’s the name.”

“He’s got us there,” Ilea said with a smile.

The two shades kept their distance. Based on their movements they were likely communicating with each other.

Verena crossed her arms and summoned an armchair, a meal appearing in her hands as well before she started eating in silence.

“I don’t know how you do it,” Pierce said, looking at the Elder. “I mean I know how much annoying people you had to deal with before this ash monster took over the Hand, but how do you stay so calm? The audacity of these fucks, acting like we didn’t just save their sorry asses.”

Verena looked over, her face entirely serious. “It’s good fuel for the next fight.” She switched her attention to the two Shades still floating ahead. “Anything in particular that you’re waiting for?”

“We wish to ask the ash touched a question,” one of them said after a moment of deliberation.

“You don’t need to be that formal,” Ilea said.

“Very well. Our apologies, being of the fabric. Is it merely an assumption that you came here in search of the Soul Forge?” it asked.

Ilea raised her brows. “No. I have no clue what you’re on about. What’s the soul forge?”

They glanced at each other. “She does not know.”

“She does not.”

“Has she unleashed the Wardens?”

“It is a possibility. The location is likely.”

“A creature of the mind, to calm those that rest below.”

“It was killed.”

“The path is free, but she does not desire what lies within.”

They both looked back at her. “Being of ash. There is a legend in these lands, telling of Khan Joggoth. A ruler of dwarves, a maker, and a master of essence itself,” one of them said.

“His armies lay defeated. Forgotten and destroyed. Though few remain, the danger they pose is great. Within the Soul Forge they rest. Waiting to return, and to rule where once they were defeated,” the other one added.

“A battle was expected, once, long past,” the first one said.

“And yet it never came. Defeated they were thought, but now we know. Subdued they were instead.”

“This guy and his forge are below the shining caves?” Ilea asked.

“The findings suggest such, yes. We may guide you, on the path we once sought, and teach of what we had learned,” one said.

Ilea turned her head to look down the tunnel and towards the Shining Caves. *Something’s coming.* She stood up and summoned her armaments. The others reacted to her but didn’t seem to understand what was going on.

“*The ground is vibrating,*” Ilea informed them.

“It has begun,” one of the shades said.

“We shall retreat, to the settlement above,” the second one added.

“Find us when the battle is over. May we all survive the wrath of the Soul Wardens,” the first one said before they bowed in sync, the shade like beings floating away with their dark metal armor.

“*Soul Wardens. I think Bralin mentioned them as well. Some kind of legendary war machines,*” Ilea said when she spotted the thing in the distance. It was even larger than her armored form.

The being looked entirely made of steel, full plate not even coming close to how armored it was. No eyes showed on its helmet. It ran with practiced motion, a massive near two meter double edged sword in its right hand, the blade lightly glowing with a pale magical quality. Installed on both its arms were extensions that looked to have barrel like openings in the front. Its steps started to boom through the tunnel as it approached, its two and a half meter form nearly as broad as it was tall.

I’m heavier, Ilea thought with a slight grin, already increasing her weight as she charged heat within her. Ash spread out nearby.

The Elders made some distance, floating back with their magic at the ready.

Ilea raised her hand when the being entered her domain. Her Space Manipulation gripped its framework but she found herself unable to stop it entirely. Her hand quivered as it pushed against her, both through a form of magic and by simply stepping on the ground.

Each of its steps seemed a struggle now, but it pushed onward regardless.

Ilea could hear a few more of them coming from the caves. She watched the magic flow around its form and raised her brows. The entirety of the war machine was covered in a thin layer of soul magic, its sword glowing with energies of both the death and soul variety. She watched it raised its arm when a projectile of green energy was shot out, displaced back to the sender by her Fabric Tear.

[Soul Warden – lvl 608]

She let go of her manipulation, unable to do more than slow it down. Burning ash flowed out and into the tunnel, filling its entirety with white flames. She heard a strange whistling sound.

Interesting.

The being had raised its right arm, a shield of death and soul magic flickering within the flames. Its magic was continuously damaged but more fuel came from within the war machine. Most of its form was covered now by the fires of creation and still it pushed on.

Ilea watched as it pushed through the flames, its sword coming at her in a slashing strike from above. She didn't try to dodge the fast strike, unable to match the speed of the Soul Warden.

The blade cut deep, biting into living steel with the help of magic.

Not just that, Ilea thought, having watched the blade bite into her armored neck. It was stopped but had managed a comparable depth to the claws of the Devourers. Perhaps even more. Ash limbs flowed out of her back, Embered Heart releasing in a chaotic beam from point blank range and into the Soul Warden's head.

The tunnel lit up with magic, the near white flames brushing away what had remained of its shield and shimmering magic layers. The steel below was burned through. A deep indentation of glowing steel revealed itself where the beam had hit the being, heated metal dripping down its chest. The beam hadn't penetrated through the war machine, nor was any of the tunnel damaged beyond what the fires of creation had already done.

Two more of the beings now entered her domain.

Ilea gripped the framework of the war machine's blade with her right arm, pulling it out of her healing steel neck as she activated her healing to check its anatomy. Quite obviously there was none. Only steel. Steel and magic. Neither could she discern a core or enchantments similar to how the Taleen Guardians operated. Its insides weren't hollow and the soul magic she had felt still remained, though subdued and pushed back by the white flames spreading over its massive form.

It's regenerating too, she noted, spreading more of her flame to prevent that. Her space manipulation became less effective when the blade came out of her steel form, the being pushing back with its massive metal arm.

"My spells don't seem to do anything," Pierce said from the side, her lightning flashing out into the flame lit tunnel, crashing against the running war machines with magic shields extended.

"Go help the survivors escape to the Pit. I'll join you there once I'm done. Collapse the tunnel after yourselves," Ilea said with her telepathy, feeling more tremors coming her way from below.

The Elders didn't hesitate and vanished.

"Good luck," Verena sent right when a fiery explosion made the tunnel vibrate. Several tons of stone came crashing down behind the warring titans.

Ilea had reached her highest weight, another beam digging into steel. She could feel the grip on its sword slacken. She moved her hand and ripped it away with her manipulation, the burning steel

clattering to the ground. Two deep glowing pits now showed on the being but it remained functional. Ilea pushed it back with her arms, watching it fall with a heavy impact. A bed of burning ash spread over it, quenching every bit of magic that dared come to the surface.

Her hand extended, a beam of bright energy flashing out into the tunnel, entirely disintegrating the shield of the first Warden. A burning dent showed on its shoulder as it marched on without respite.

The second one sent a few death magic projectiles her way. All of them vanished and reappeared in bright explosions against its back, the energy biting deep into its metal, the death magic spells almost acting like an acid. Large parts of steel were eaten through but the machine kept on moving, ever forward and towards the enemy titan.

Ilea felt the cut in her neck didn't repair itself quite as quickly as she had expected. *Same death magic*, she saw, the remaining energies fighting back against her healing and the armament's ability to self repair. She displaced the massive double edged greatsword into her hand and pushed her mana into it. Enchantments lit up along the weapon as its edges hummed with arcane energy, the entirety of the blade bursting out in white fire.

She laughed within her heavy armor, a ding resounding in her mind when whatever force had animated the steel being died out below her bed of burning ash.

'ding' 'You have defeated [Soul Warden – lvl 608]'

Tough fuckers.

"It's just bad luck that you happened upon something worse," she said and pushed the large steel body aside with a swipe of her arm.

Verena heard dulled impacts from behind the collapsed walls. She sent a few more explosive spheres against the ceiling as they teleported back towards the tombs.

"Didn't she talk about dwarves unleashing ancient evils?" Pierce asked with a giggle.

She did, Verena thought, the two of them reaching the armored shades and a few of the survivors. "We have to pick up the pace. The Soul Wardens are coming."

"Soul Wardens? Next you tell me there's a dragon nest below these caves," one of the dwarves said and laughed.

The others seemed serious instead. "Where to?" one asked.

"Through the tomb, we'll have to dig or teleport through a section of collapsed tunnel but it will lead us out," Verena said.

"Ah, they were right then," the dwarf said, looking at a group of survivors already heading in the right direction. Some were still looking at what was left of the undead, a few inspecting the temple.

Pierce clapped her hands together, a thunderous sound spreading through the large cave. "Gather up people!" she shouted. "Monsters on the mooooove."

Verena gave her a nod and led the group upward as quickly as they could manage.

"Soul Wardens... so the curse of Khan Joggoth existed after all," a dwarf said.

"Of course. None of these legends are made up. Just buried under metric tons of stone and metal," Garlan said. "Ah if we could get our hands on their machines."

"Magic, not machines," one of the shades informed.

"Bound they lay, hidden in the depths of the Soul Forge."

"Unleashed by burning ash," the second one finished.

"Disappointing then. He was feared for a reason. My great great great great grandfather used to tell stories about the terror of the Soul Wardens. He did like to exaggerate but I'm glad that ash monster of a healer is dealing with them now," Garlan said.

"More ways exist," the first shade said.

"Out from the depths. Be prepared," the second one added.

Some of the dwarves groaned, others gripped their weapons. "Centuries trapped and right back into battle," one said with a tired voice.

"YES," another added with enthusiasm, gripping the first dwarf's shoulder as he walked past.

"Can everyone teleport through?" Verena asked as she pointed at the cave in where their group had entered the tomb.

"No," a few of them said but it turned out not to be an issue.

Earth magic and heavy tools got rid of the natural barrier in less than a minute as heavy impacts made the tunnel shake, chunks of stone pulverized with support beams added to the structure.

Verena almost felt bad for collapsing everything again when they had gone through.

"We should've joined Lilith in her battle," one of the Dark Ones said.

"You heard her whistle. You saw her, didn't you. That thing wasn't human, or dwarven, or like anything I've seen before," one of the dwarves said.

Another laughed. "Aye. She's there not because she wants to protect us, but because she wants to fight them."

"Why did you come to the Shining Caves in the first place?" one of them asked, looking at Verena.

"To kill time," she answered truthfully. Ilea already had her evolution after all. There was little reason to keep on pushing down into the depths. *And now we have another thing to deal with.*

She knew that Pierce would simply leave the dwarves to their plight. Perhaps the cannons and preparations up in the Pit would be enough to fight whatever ancient war machines they had unleashed, but she knew Ilea wouldn't let it be. Their actions had unleashed these beings and their actions would end them.

They came out into the near endless pit through the crevice in the wall. Already dulled sounds of battle resounded from deep below. A few war machines were flying upwards, two with trails of

smoke and missing limbs. “Soul Wardens comin up, better get goin!” one of them shouted and laughed as he passed.

Verena watched as the dark ones and war machines Ilea had rescued rushed past, many taking flight while others simply gripped onto the stone wall of the pit before climbing upward with surprising speed.

“What will you do?” Pierce asked as she stepped next to the woman.

Verena looked down into the depths. “Still some of them fighting.”

The lightning mage laughed. “Great. Good luck. I’ll go warn Bralin and his dwarven lot. See you on the fields of battle,” she said and saluted her way with a smile on her face. Pierce jumped out and flashed away, a streak of lightning that rushed up and past the slow moving war machines.

Verena sighed and focused, flames heating up on her skin as she cracked her neck. She activated her auras and jumped down, the sounds of battle like music in her ears.

Ilea swung her massive sword to the side, white flames splattering onto the destroyed wall of the tunnel. Five half molten Soul Wardens lay behind her, no more of them coming. Her own armaments had taken quite a few hits, due to her interest in their magic and mostly a wish to have a few flaming sword fights. With a warhammer skill and no related abilities or training when it comes to the blade.

I did not study the blade, truly, a failed being.

She waited for a little while to see if more soul machines were coming, using the time to fully regenerate her armor. *Probably better if I regroup with the others, in case they went into the pit instead. I hope none make it to the plains. Ah well. I did unleash the mess by killing the unreasonable mind creature.*

She turned around and looked at the caved in stone. Ilea stored her armaments and teleported through, quickly flying through the caverns, the tomb, and out to the crevice they had come from.

There were traces of the Elders still here. Verena’s mark suggested she was up near the settlement. Her dominion picked up several floating war machines coming from below, more already flying up towards the Pit. A grin spread on her face when she heard a booming sound, a flash of light slightly illuminating even the deep part of the pit she was currently at.

Hmm, can’t use my armaments while flying through here, she thought as she ascended, casually dodging the swords and projectiles of the nearby Soul Wardens. She had to teleport when one of them appeared next to her.

[Tuned Soul Warden – lvl ???] - [Soulforged]

The war machine looked mostly the same, its back adorned with a set of four canon like extensions aiming upward. The same soul magic flowed through it, likely what made it move in the first place.

So there are more dangerous ones.

She sent beams of heat at the creatures and covered all of them in white flame as she passed, quickly rising up through the circular pit dug out by the dwarves. *Let's hope they haven't breached the city proper. Or this will get messy.*

Ashen wings moved her onward when she saw the first chunk of smoldering half molten war machine fall down towards the approaching enemies. More impacts resounded now, the booming sounds of magic cannons filling her ears as her fires burned brighter.