

The Key

Torchlight flickered on the crumbling walls of the chamber, revealing the faint hues of an ancient fresco. Time had faded the once-vivid colors and caused much of the surface to chip off, but the strong, carved outlines of the depiction still remained. Apollyon drew closer, her armored boots leaving deep imprints in the thick layer of dust and debris that covered the floor.

She held her torch higher, inspecting the unusual scene portrayed on the wall. Two humans, one male and one female, fleeing from a city of monolithic structures dominated the fresco, the edges painted with a complex, decorative border. The woman appeared to be cradling an orb of some sort, and chasing both were creatures of a humanoid appearance, wreathed in terrible auras. Above the pair, a falcon, or maybe an eagle, soared overhead. There was a sense of urgency and great danger to the overall piece, perhaps a scene from some ancient myth that had been long lost to history.

Apollyon spoke. "Aldous."

"Coming, my lady!"

Behind her, there was audible huffing and stumbling, along with muffled curses as some item was dropped. She turned around to look.

Her guard captain, Aldous, finally scurried up to her, arms full of aged parchments and manuscripts. In the background, more of her men pillaged the chamber of its secrets and precious treasures.

"I apologize for falling behind, Commander," he said. "The floor is perilous here; I lost my footing twice."

"Be sure to keep those scrolls intact. They may prove useful to us," was all she replied. Apollyon began to walk away, following the wall. "Continue to scour the area for anything valuable. I will investigate ahead."

She ignored his sputtering and protests that surely, they had enough for now and that returning to the surface would be the best course of action, and continued onwards, leaving him behind. This was the deepest yet Apollyon had ever been in the Shard. Previous expeditions and excavations of the fortress' underground levels had been quite fruitful, yielding historical materials and knowledge of ancient weapons and war tactics, even elements of armor that the Blackstone Legion could seek to emulate for their own use.

Each layer of the Shard revealed architectural elements of civilizations that had come before them, all stacked one on top of the other. The deeper one went, the older the structures. Finally, they had dug down deep enough to where they were today: a cavernous chamber composed of heavy slabs and great pillars of black granite and obsidian. No one could identify what era or style this room was built in. Apollyon had set her men to work anyway, stripping it of anything they could take.

Meanwhile, she explored.

The wall led her to a tall, but narrow crevice just barely wide enough for a person to slip through. Peering into it, she realized it was a hallway. The flames of her torch only lit the area a few feet beyond the entrance; the rest of the passage was pitch black. Holding her torch aloft, she angled herself sideways and edged through the gap. The bulkiness of her armor and her own natural tall height made it difficult to maneuver, but she persisted until abruptly, the hallway ended. She found herself standing in a small, square chamber, completely devoid of anything except a skeleton.

The skeleton was slumped against the far wall of the room, its limbs akimbo. Robes, torn, grimy, and yellowed with age, still hung from its brittle frame. Pulled over its skull was an odd, peaked cowl, not unlike a bird's beak. What caught Apollyon's attention however, was the skeleton's left hand. Though it lacked a finger, clutched tightly in its fist was an odd, golden orb, no larger than an apple. Dark, smooth lines were scored deeply into its surface, creating an uneven pattern.

Apollyon knelt. "What's this?" she murmured, reaching for it.

Her fingertips had barely made contact with the sphere when it suddenly came to life, a brilliant flash of golden light flaring outwards, blinding her. Reflexively, she raised an arm to shield her eyes, hissing. Her torch fell to the floor and rolled away, but its light was no longer necessary. The orb in the skeleton's hand shone like the sun, filling the entire room with its golden radiance.

Blinking away the spots in her vision furiously, Apollyon cautiously lowered her arm. Slowly, she reached for the orb again. This time, she grabbed it and wrenched it out of the skeleton's hand, shattering the fragile bones. She barely noticed, eyes glued to the gleaming globe she now held in her palm.

It whispered to her, filling her ears with promises of dominion, of control. It showed her fleeting glimpses of an army—*her* army, her Blackstone Legion, marching through the golden fields of Ashfeld, coursing through the icy tundra of Valkenheim, sweeping through the swamps of the Myre like an unstoppable tidal wave, all baying for blood. And at the head of the pack, in a blaze of fire and smoke, Apollyon herself, triumphant and glorious.

Her Age of Wolves, come to fruition.

And with this strange relic, whatever it was, she could achieve her vision.

Breathless and trembling, Apollyon stood up. Reaching for her belt, she undid the laces of the drawstring pouch at her hip. Carefully, she deposited the artifact into the bag and tied the laces shut; the orb's golden glow had died down somewhat, making it easier to conceal her discovery. Leaning down, she picked up her torch and left the chamber, squeezing back through the narrow hallway again.

On the other side, Aldous awaited her.

"The men say they've searched everything, my lady," he informed her. "Shall we attempt to access the other chambers?"

Apollyon reached up and took off her helmet. "No," she told him. "We're done for today."

Aldous stared, a little surprised. Apollyon rarely ever removed her helmet when out and about. Her mismatched eyes, one blue and one amber, bore into his. Vainly, Aldous attempted to meet her intense gaze before something within him folded. He quickly looked away. "I'll...tell the others to prepare the lift then," he said, before hurrying off.

Left alone, Apollyon watched him go. Her hand fell to her hip, where the artifact hung. She could feel a strange, humming warmth radiating through the leather of the pouch, and unable to resist, she reached in and took the orb out.

In her hand, the artifact shone brightly again, golden rays dancing on its surface and reflecting in her eyes.

This was it. This was the key.

With this, nothing was impossible.

Apollyon smiled to herself. "It's time to begin."