

*“How do you power yourself and all the machines you control?”* Ilea asked, destructive mana flowing into the Executioners as she pushed against them with her space manipulation. *“We’re getting company,”* she said to her allies.

*“A majority of keys are present. Information access granted. The power source recovered from Kohr was implemented into the design of the One without Form. Other sources have failed to provide the same stability, reach, and complexity,”* the being replied.

*“That power source is inside the sphere too?”* Ilea asked.

*“Indeed, key warden. The entire design has gone through several iterations, the final installation made with knowledge of the source. Extensions have been presented to the key wardens and Guilds, implemented upon approval. I am unstoppable, human,”* the being spoke.

*Sure. As far as I can tell, I just need another five keys. To open up the core at least. The Source would be inside too but Violence seems more interested in the machines coming our way. Can it not detect anything?* She assumed the core wasn’t easy to penetrate with any kind of sight, nor easily destroyed. With extensions added by the machine itself? *Probably easier to go for the keys either way. Though I do want to see what kind of machines those twelve Guardians are.*

*“How far did you get with the Ascended programs? Did the Taleen manage to succeed?”* she asked next. The Executioners were getting close now.

*“Request denied.”*

*Feels like I only get information on specific topics. Maybe they were excluded for the key wardens and everything not mentioned is just outright denied with the core directive excuse? I guess physical access is really the only option. Or just straight commands with all twelve keys.* The fact that the being had been unclear about that part made her more than a little unsure. But if the dwarves had any kind of idea about what they planned to make, she assumed the physical failsafe would work. *Otherwise it’s hammering the sphere with destructive healing until the enchantments give. Or getting Iana and Chris access to the thing. Maybe even the Meadow.*

Ilea teleported their group back through the corridor, dozens of Executioners digging down towards them. She stopped in the tunnel as soon as no more machines were directly above them. *“Probably better for us to fight down here. They won’t be able to use their numbers,”* she said, looking at the others.

Kyrian extended his metal. *“We do need at least some space to fight.”*

*“Give her a minute,”* Fey said.

*“The void explosion. Right,”* the metal mage answered, standing back.

Ilea smiled. She had stored the keys in her domain, the mental link immediately gone with the action. The fact that this measure had an effect suggested the machine wasn’t deceiving her in some way, the keys still having an effect even after all this time. It had to work. And now she knew the golden sphere was the center of it all. They could actually stop the machines.

White flames erupted along the dug corridor, the thing hardly large enough to fit the Executioners, their void magic now breaking through into the dark and cramped space. The light reflected off her eyes, her weight increasing as she raised her hand.

Bright flames rushed down the tunnel, shields flaring up on the way as the machines rushed towards her, Ilea's allies standing twenty meters behind her. A charged wave of space magic rushed out next, the burning machines crashing against each other as their momentum was stopped. Burning ashen spears followed, shot into the expanding tunnel, void magic taking chunks of the walls with it.

Ilea repeated the same thing, Embered Heart releasing into the convenient tunnel, the first two Executioners already reduced to their cores. She pushed them back with her space manipulation, the next charged beam of flame and heat detonating the first one, a chain reaction following with two more. *"I need more mana, hit me with your spells,"* she said to her companions. They exchanged a look before she was engulfed in flame, a powerful curse flowing through her being.

*Perfect,* she thought with a broad smirk, welcoming the first Executioner that had managed to move past, the dug underground tunnel now expanded into a cave with spherical walls. Her approach wasn't as effective anymore and she started to see more machines coming in from behind, both through the corridor and digging down into it. A wave of arcane healing washed over the machine in a wave, its piercing rapier slapped aside before she advanced, using the large form of the guardian against the enemies joining it from behind.

Ilea turned back and teleported herself and the others through the tunnel, coming out on the other side a few seconds later while avoiding the incoming machines. Praetorians, flying Destroyers, and hundreds of smaller machines were moving towards their position. *"Enjoy yourselves, and do call for me should you find yourselves overwhelmed. We'll meet again in the same hall we arrived in,"* she said, watching as Feyrair charged his heat, white flames moving around his arms as he took in the surrounding army. *"I'll take on the Executioners,"* she sent, seeing Kyrian's armor thicken, his metal flails appearing around him.

She raised her hand as six portals formed around them, a few hundred arcane arrows striking them simultaneously. None of them hit their targets. Ilea saw the exploding carnage around them through her dominion.

*"This is insane. Good luck,"* Kyrian said and vanished.

Fey just hissed, giving her a joyous look before he spread his arms, welcoming the next barrage of spells, Ilea already back in the tunnel.

Ashen limbs spread out, heavy steps resounding as she ran, heat gathered in her core. Her wings pushed her forward, only just managing to accelerate her a little. *The Primordial Arbiter is here, motherfuckers.*

Ilea impacted the first Executioner, its blade melted away under a cone of heat. Its shield cracked, charged punches stripping away the steel, every machine in the way covered in white flame. She closed her hand when the core became visible, its shield cracking under the charged space magic before the void expanded, leaving eight more enemies without shields, and Ilea with reduced layers of her mantle. *Hmm, yes. Mana.*

She didn't stop, moving forward into the burning tunnel, entirely lost in the fight. Two minutes passed, eighteen Executioners destroyed and her enhanced precognition activating once, one of them nearly blowing up her brain. She had her mantle broken through several times but no attack destroyed more than a mere third of her body. The void cannons were effective, especially without

her defenses up. But all it meant to her was more mana, energy she could put into her expensive charged spells. So far it seemed the One without Form didn't understand her absorption. A purely physical approach would've likely pushed her back already.

*Friend?*

The Fae's voice sounded slightly concerned.

Ilea vanished, teleporting through the tunnel and towards the mark. She found the creature two seconds later inside of a Taleen home, surrounded by Centurions striking against an invisible shield of space magic. Burning ashen limbs cut through them in the blink of an eye, chunks of metal flung aside as she teleported the creature onto her shoulder, healing arcane mana flowing into it.

*Appreciate*, it said and hugged her armored cheek.

*"Sure, little one,"* Ilea sent and patted its head, bringing it to another hiding spot before she left again. Her weight lessened as her wings moved her up. It looked like entire sections of the city were on the move now, streams of machines following a bright spot of fast moving white fire, beams cutting through dozens of beings as the elf flew through the tight city streets. In another section Ilea could see a maelstrom of guardians going in and out of a large magical circle, a cylinder of bright green light emanating from the curse mage's creation. Metal was flung aside as Kyrian moved his flails through the air, each weapon the weight and size of a small car. An appropriate blender for the job at hand.

Both of her allies had to avoid the continuous barrage of arcane arrows, many of them manifesting only just before they struck them. Ilea formed two ashen copies, commanding them to help in case any of them were in serious danger. She saw the first Executioners come out of the building their group had used to dig down initially. Ignoring them, her charged wings brought her to the high cavern walls around the city. Her burning form impacted a Hunter Praetorian with a crash, her spells preventing her from being dazed from the impact, her shock absorption protecting her organs. The enemy shield was broken through instead, the steel form inside crumpled against her resilient and armored body. The following explosion fueled her with more magic.

Ilea saw a large portion of the Hunters aiming at her but she didn't stop, the arrows starting to impact her in explosions of blue light when the next enemy fell, bits and pieces of steel falling down towards the distant ground, the arcane sphere emanating from its destroyed core failing to catch her flying form. She moved through the retreating masses, far too fast for them to flee. Teleporting along the wall, she set machines on fire, her beams cutting through their shields and armor with ease, her strikes shattering their defenses as her mantle continuously regenerated.

She had to stop when the Executioners reached her once again, teleporting past them as they attempted to surround her flying form. She had no trouble facing them inside of a tunnel but with enough open space, their coordination became deadly. She teleported a few times, landing on one of the destroyers with high velocity, her horned skull cutting through the metal carapace before she broke out on the other side. Her eyes narrowed on the massive golden sphere, the One without Form.

A platform surrounded its entire circumference. Distant Taleen machines stood on top of it in regular intervals. Twelve in total. They remained motionless as she approached, some armed with weapons, others without.

Ilea closed the distance with another set of teleports, watching as their eyes came to life, varying colors of light turning her way. *I'm in range*, she thought with a grin. Her precognition made her

twirl in the air, a beam of light flashing past, shot out by one of the large Guardians. Precise arcane spells followed, purple energy flying past as she dodged with her wings and precognition. She opened her eyes wide when a near four meter radius spell shot out from one of the machines, reaching her near instantly. She would've failed to avoid it without her precognition, her leg struck by the burning hot energy, several layers of her ash gone in an instant.

Some of them had started climbing through the air, moving faster than the mass of Executioners behind her.

One of them wielded four blades surrounded by magic, another held a war hammer, two more with their hands only, one four armed, the other with just two. She could see the light of the continued ranged attacks reflect off their armor, bronze, obsidian, and steel. Some of the ranged machines had spread out too, walking or floating through the air. Each with a distinct set of magic.

Ilea watched as a golden Guardian spread its eight arms, bright yellow eyes looking her way as hundreds of golden blades formed in the air around it. They shot out a moment later, moving in individual arcs towards their target. She turned her head to see lightning surge around another machine, the being armored with a thick set of protections, the blue lightning reflecting off its copper form. A wave of sound moved past, her entire body vibrating as she reoriented herself. She was struck by a set of powerful spells a split second later, slowed to a stop and pushed back, layer upon layer of her mantle ripped away.

The running and flying machines had reached her, each larger than a Praetorian, heavier too by the looks of it. And yet they moved with a fluidity that only an Executioner could match. Four blades surrounded by wind magic slashed past, their arcs adjusting before she was spun aside by an expanding gust of air.

### ***[The Bronze Guardian of the Sphere – lvl ?????]***

Ilea spat blood against her mantle, dodging the continued ranged attacks as the Executioners joined the fight, working in a supportive manner to corner her against the powerful Guardians. She assumed all of them were close to level one thousand, just like the one she had managed to identify. She vanished a few times to get some distance, the swarm following instantly, only unable to keep up due to their lack of teleportation.

Lightning flashed past, a continued set of arcs striking everything in a broad area. A concentrated beam of light magic struck her chest, burning through more than a layer. Her body tensed up when a curse gripped it, more sound magic striking her at the same time as a barrage of golden blades and arcane beams. She was forced to teleport again, blood dripping down towards the distant city streets of Iz, her wounds and mantle healing as the enemy attacks continued. Gates formed around her to send the spells aside. She raised her brows, just barely dodging an invisible burst of void magic that materialized at the center of her gates. She transferred out and found the purple eyes of a large silver machine looking her way, one of its arms raised towards her as it floated near the sphere.

Three teleports brought her out, her marks leading her eyes to her allies, both of them retreating against a growing number of Taleen, Executioners in the mix now too. She was ready to dodge more spells when she realized the machines had stopped, the ones close to the sphere now returning to their previous position. *About a thousand meters, maybe a little more.* The Executioners were still out for blood, soon to reach her position. *Which means the One without Form doesn't have direct control over those four marks. That or it's prioritizing the protection of the core. Against me?*

She doubted it, flying down towards the broad curse ritual pulsing with power, several tons of shrapnel spread around or stuck inside the half destroyed stone buildings. "Time to leave," she sent

and teleported Kyrian out of his own circle, the battered mage looking around in confusion before he grabbed on to an ashen limb.

“*Get met out,*” he sent, healing magic flowing through him.

They teleported a few more times, flying in a broad arc around the central sphere until they reached the burning form of a dragon, bright claws cutting through Taleen shields. The dragonling tackled an Executioner as his breath spread out, simple guardians and Centurions melting in the flames.

“*We’re leaving,*” Ilea sent. “*Turn back.*”

“*I got this. Leave without me!*” the elf sent back. He pushed the Executioner into a portal and fell through himself, the two of them appearing far above the city.

Ilea moved herself and Kyrian to the two engaged fighters, the elf winning out as the machine’s shield shattered, his claws ripping through the thing’s right arm before he breathed more fire. She reformed the portal below the machine, stranding the elf in the air with nothing to fight.

“*What are you doing!?*” he called out.

“*Look down,*” Ilea sent, the elf following her gaze, seeing the city in motion, hundreds of arcane arrows flying their way with dozens of Executioners climbing through the air to reach them.

“*Tactical retreat. We’ll be back tomorrow,*” she sent with a broad grin.

The elf returned to his normal form before she picked him up. “*Violence, we’re leaving.*”

The Fae appeared on her shoulder when she flew past its position, giggling into her ear.

*Glorious*

*Violence!*

Ilea just smiled, teleporting her group through the streets and buildings of Iz, soon reaching a random hall. She moved them down into the extensive cellar before she activated her long range spell, six gates around them to prevent any magic from reaching them. Her mana was half drained when she saw the first machines search through the hall above. A few seconds later they were gone.

Kyrian raised his head with a sigh, Feyrair laughing as he struck the man’s back with an open palm.

Some of the still gathered council members turned to look at them, some offering greetings while others quickly returned to their planning.

Claire raised an eyebrow at Ilea but didn’t comment.

“*We’re gone again soon,*” Ilea sent to the Meadow.

“*Of course. Claire told me to give you these,*” the being replied, a stack of letters appearing in front of her.

Ilea formed a bed of ash to catch everything, looking at one to find it sealed and addressed to Alistair, another was for Nero Skorn, a third one for Alyris of Lys. “*From fighting the One without Form to delivering letters.*”

“*I was once the protector of entire peoples, Ilea. Now I help to set up tournament rosters for level fifty adventurers,*” the Meadow replied.

“*Fair enough,*” she said and stored the letters. She grabbed a glass of wine on her way to her room. “*Back to Iz tomorrow,*” she sent to her companions. “*We’ll need a bigger tunnel.*”

One thought still went through her mind. The laid out plans by the One without Form. Had they overestimated the impact the Taleen had on the Elven domains? The being itself admitted it didn't have a way to challenge the Monarchs. Maybe it had lied, but she didn't see a reason for it to do so. Ilea and the Hunters had expected there to be a major impact if the Taleen were removed from the picture, but now she wasn't quite so sure anymore.