

Ilea and her group of explorers soon passed the mind creature's cavern without incidents. There were tracks left behind by various creatures, most notably the recent Soul Wardens coming this way. Eternal Huntress made the tracking quite simple, Ilea taking the lead as soon as she had identified the specific traces of soul magic that still marked the passing of the machines.

A crevice in the ground showed a decline leading further down, stone edges jutting out from the side, some broken off. *This is the way*, Ilea thought and jumped down, her armor taking a few more pieces of rock with it in her passing. She landed with a heavy thud, her knees fighting against her own weight as she took in the area with her sword at the ready. Nothing within her dominion seemed of interest. She teleported out for a moment and found light at the end of another decline, this one more a natural cave.

Pierce landed next. She stumbled and used her right arm to stabilize herself against the rock.

Ilea smiled and vanished back into her armor.

"At least I can see," the muffled voice of the Elder resounded. Verena still rested on her shoulder.

Bralin came down through the crevice with practiced ease. He slid more than landed, rock armor layered on top of his mostly steel suit.

"We are getting close," one of the shades said as they arrived.

Ilea went on towards the light. She stopped when the cave opened up into what seemed like a spacious area. Once again she teleported out and sat onto her armaments' shoulders. Before her spread an open area several kilometers in diameter, the ceiling distant and lined with stalactites. Dozens of small waterfalls broke out from both the walls and ceiling, the liquid luminescent, giving off blue light. The water wasn't quite enough to illuminate the entirety of the large cavern but it was enough to give an idea as to its expansive size.

Some of the waterfalls weren't broad enough to reach the ground, instead creating bright mists as the liquid dissipated during its long fall. A few basins had formed over the years with creeks flowing out and away, some slowing down before ending in smaller ponds while others had managed to bore into the stone, leaving the cave to find another place to settle.

At the center of it all stood a square slab of dark steel, one edge burrowed into the ground and one nearly reaching the high ceiling, ending in what almost looked like a roof. The light from the water created an illusion of movement on the smooth surface. Ilea wondered why the creators hadn't just put the thing on its flat side, but supposed it did look more ominous this way. *Otherwise it would've just been a cube. Now it's a geometrical marvel left behind by some ancient civilization.*

She made an effort to spot creatures in the vicinity but other than a few harmless northern animals and monsters, she didn't find anything particularly dangerous. The place felt serene. Quiet. Steam rose from some of the pools. *Not all of them*, she wondered as the others joined behind her.

"Quite a sight," Pierce mused and walked forward before she made her machine vanish. The woman appeared above one of the steaming pools and fell inside, her armor gone too as she splashed into the water.

"Very cautious," Bralin mused as he stepped next to Ilea's living armor.

Verena flew over and landed on the free shoulder. "It's surprising..." she said and tapped the metal.

"Weirdly comforting to sit on these," Ilea confirmed.

"It really is," Verena said and smiled.

"This isn't quite hot enough," Pierce said, her hair wet as she looked out from the pool. "Verena deary, I require some assistance."

*A bath would actually be nice. How long has it been since I didn't just clean myself with ash?* Ilea made her armaments disappear and joined the others. "Feel free to join in," she said to the remaining trio.

"Being in liquid is... disturbing," one of the shades said, cautiously floating closer to one of the pools. The other one looked up to the falling water. "We will have to avoid it."

"Not the most surprising thing I've seen today," Bralin said. He walked over and made his armor vanish, his clothes gone except for a pair of black shorts. His beard meshed with his chest hair, the only parts of his skin uncovered were old scars. He sighed when he lowered himself into the water.

Verena had removed her armor, still wearing her fur loincloth with flames heating up the water. She rested her head on the stone behind. Defined muscles and dozens of scars on her body.

Ilea moved her mantle to cover her sensitive bits, her Embered Heart helping with the temperature requirements. She didn't go too far. Just because she enjoyed bathing in lava didn't mean the others did as well. All were above level three hundred however, which meant at least some form of Heat resistance. It was the most commonly used magic among humans after all, and she assumed Bralin had his fair share of fire breather encounters himself.

Pierce was naked.

She glanced at the dwarf and smiled. "Hmm, you really don't like humans. I thought you just pretended."

Bralin sighed, relaxing as he opened one eye to look at her. "I'm not a fifteen year old lad, Dragonkiller. I know which battles I should fight, and which I should leave well alone."

Ilea smiled. She summoned herself a meal and looked out to the two shades. They still tried to avoid the water, close together as they remained on a dry spot between three pools. "I assume that's the soul forge?"

They both looked at her simultaneously. "Indeed. It resembles the notes of our source."

"Who's your source?" Pierce asked, cleaning herself with soap she had summoned. It gave off a faint smell of wood.

"An ancestor who has since ascended," one of them said.

"Ascended to what?" Ilea asked.

They glanced at each other and communicated for a few seconds. Their floating forms turned back to her and answered. "A Young Shadow Elemental. Few ever reach this state, but they are held in high regard amongst our kind."

"I can imagine," Ilea mused. "Do they still retain their ability to think and speak like you do?"

“Some do. Some do not. Choices are made upon each evolution. What is given is never unwanted,” the one on the left said.

“I’ve met a few Elementals myself, but none openly talked to me like you do,” she said. “But then I haven’t had the pleasure of meeting a Shadow Elemental yet.”

“You would be interested in meeting them?” Bralin asked.

“You wouldn’t?” Ilea asked.

He considered the question for a few seconds. “I suppose seeing them is impressive. But if you’re asking me if I want to meet a force of nature itself, then no. I’d rather stay down here and work on war machines.”

“They’re great trainers for resistances. Especially when you’re in the third tier already,” she said and ate a few more bites.

“Please. Let’s enjoy the quiet,” Verena said, her eyes closed with flames on her skin above the water.

Even Pierce obliged, the four of them soaking in the heated bath of shimmering blue water. None of the nearby creatures disturbed them. Instincts keen enough for them to know not to approach the unknown monsters. Ilea finished her meal in silence. She enjoyed the soak for another twenty minutes before she finally stood up. Her mantle spread as she teleported out. She increased the heat in her core, all the water still on her skin evaporating in seconds.

“Shall we? Before more explorers make it all the way down here,” she suggested to the others.

They all dried off and donned their armor. A mere half a minute later, war machines once more walked towards the metal cube towering over the many ponds below the Shining Caves.

*Probably still part of the shining caves,* Ilea mused. She sat on Pierce’s shoulder as she wanted to see the cube and everything around it. The limited range of her dominion wasn’t quite enough for that. At least at the current distance.

She already spotted two Tuned Soul Wardens standing next to an absolutely massive double gate set within the steel. Dark metal stairs led up to the near ten meter high entrance, the guardians unmoving and vigilant. The uninitiated may mistake them for statues. The surface of their armor was mostly smooth, decorations and visors merely cosmetic in nature.

“Those are the high level ones. Around seven hundred and fifty. They can teleport and have some kind of explosive death magic they can shoot at higher ranges from their back. Same swords sadly,” Ilea informed the others. “I can deal with them if you lot want to stand back.”

“The strongest warriors are forged in battle,” Pierce said, lightning coursing through her sword and parts of her armor.

“In that case I think I’ll get out the big guns too,” Bralin said. His solid war machine was replaced by a model near twice the size. Thin indentations lined most of the near silver surface, stone forming within before it spread to cover most of his size. A massive one bladed axe appeared in his hands. Its full form was made of the same silver steel, runes lighting up as soon as the weapon touched his armored hands. Spikes of stone formed along the large axe head, that part alone about as massive as his armored chest.

Pierce whistled, looking up at the towering figure of dark stone. Few bits of silver still showed below, runes brimming with dark red energy shimmering through the few remaining cracks.

Horns of stone adorned his head. They curved halved a meter out and then forward.

*Is that what the Trakorov Class would've made me?* Ilea wondered as she smiled towards the dwarf. His eyes were barely visible behind the thin slits of his steel and stone visors. "You three take the one on the right then," she said and jumped off the Elder's shoulder. Her armaments appeared around her, the living set powering up with her heat and mana.

She too had to look up to meet the dwarf's eyes but not by much. "*Why not use that in the city?*"

He looked her way and gripped the steel handle of his axe. "*Only in the most dire of moments. Or when nobody is watching.*"

Ilea smirked and turned back towards the Soul Forge. Where she knew it was. "*Didn't know I was nobody.*"

*"I suppose impressing a traveling goddess is also an acceptable reason to show off my most prized possession,"* he answered.

"It will get damaged," Verena said, her body bursting into flames as she flew off Pierce's shoulder.

"A battle worthy for its presence then," the booming voice of Bralin resounded through the cave, enhanced by several voice modules hidden somewhere in the stone. The ground shook lightly when he took a step, ripples moving through the nearby ponds.

"To battle then," Ilea's deep voice joined in. "May we be victorious."

Pierce raised her sword and started towards the metal cube.

Booming steps resounded through the shining caves. Animals and monsters rushed to safety as three armed and armored war machines made their way towards the downright alien object at the back and center of the cave.

The two guardians of the Soul Forge woke from their eternal slumber, mana flowing through their forms as soul and death magic hummed to life around their blades.

Ilea didn't see them yet but she could hear the familiar dull explosions of their long range artillery. One hand on her sword, she summoned a single large gate above their group, a second one aimed out and away. Heavy impacts resounded somewhere to their right a second later.

She moved into a light jog and soon saw the stairs within her dominion.

The Soul Wardens appeared closer and charged.

Ilea met them, Pierce close by with Bralin following behind. Her blade lit up with the flame of creation. She formed two gates to send the death magic projectiles back. Her aura already engulfed the beings, their teleportation subdued as long as they stayed in range. Her blade met that of her adversary, flames already spreading onto its form. Neither of them relented.

Two impacts pushed her back. Acid like death magic ate away at her shoulder as she pushed the being back with her space manipulation. A mist of burning ash engulfed its form. Limbs extended from her back, a charge of heat slamming into the machine's left arm, the cannon on it burned away. She failed to deflect a blow, a deep slash leaving a furrow of molten steel on her chest. Ilea formed another gate in front of her, unable to bring her sword back in time.

The machine attacked through the lightly shimmering space and hit its own back.

She slashed at it when the gates came down, her heavy blows expertly deflected by the enemy machine. A step back brought her out of range, a hand held up to slow the being down. It was only a matter of time until it would succumb to her fires. Another beam burned into its sword arm, slowly working through the thick layered and magically infused metal. The thing could fly, which meant the only reasonable thing was going for its weapons.

Pierce had already taken a few hits. Her fancy armor showed five deep cuts already, one as deep as her body. Her left arm hung on by a sizzling thread.

Explosions of fire flashed over the tuned Warden, Verena circling it and charging in with her flaming axes whenever an opening presented itself.

Bralin charged from the side, his axe blocked as his blow pushed the Warden back nearly ten meters. He managed to block the first of the Soul Warden's retaliating strikes, the next three cleaving out chunks of stone, one cutting into silver.

Ilea kept her flames going. She smiled and activated Primordial Shift. Her own armaments seemed to split and fracture within her perception. Her sword vanished into her domain, both hands slowly raised towards the creature. With her already increased weight and the armaments around her, Ilea didn't even attempt to move her body. The flames lit up within her dominion, bright white light all around the enemy.

She formed a sphere of burning light between her hands and sent it into the struggling mound of steel. Its blade hit her armor but was blocked by something not quite flesh, not quite ethereal. The sphere exploded. A wave of flame engulfed the thing, its hands pushed back as its sword was flung aside, half melted. It still stood, steel dripping to the burnt stone ground as its life was slowly eaten away. She aimed her right palm at the melting remains and released Embered Heart infused with the Fires of Creation.

The beam formed within the fluctuating space, her own armaments slightly melting from the heat alone. White light took over her perception as the energy flashed forward and vanished. The Warden's torso had vanished, what remained of its legs no longer infused by soul and death. A ding resounded in her mind as she looked at the cone of destruction she had left behind.

Primordial Shift ended, the space around her returning to normal as she summoned her blade. It lit up with fire. *That's one down*, she thought with a grin and turned to the others.

Pierce had returned to her normal form, dark metal covering her body in a lithe design. She circled the Warden with Verena, their magic slowly wearing down its incredible defenses.

The machine's main focus was on Bralin. Each of its strikes ripped out chunks of stone but it never quite managed to hit each spot twice in quick succession.

The dwarf took each slow step with deliberate care. He reformed the damaged parts of his enchanted armor and stayed defensive. For ten slashes of the Warden he attacked once, only using openings he considered safe. His axe managed to dig into the machine's steel, but more so just pushed it away with its massive weight. The cuts were too shallow to disable its arms or legs. At least the Elders had managed to wear away its cannon.

Ilea shifted her attention to her armaments, feeling it demand more mana. She allowed it, her movements slowing down as she watched the changes. A few seconds passed, dozens of magical

explosions hitting the remaining Warden. Burning axes cut into the back of its legs with increasing frequency, neither Elder stopping their assault.

A slit opened up in front of her. Ilea smiled, her eyes not as useless as they had been but a moment earlier. Now she could see the fight, not just perceive it in her sphere. She touched the part with her mana and it closed again. *Neat.* She opened it again and inspected the change that happened on her left arm. It seemed to have formed a chamber and a barrel of sorts. She didn't understand the purpose until she filled it with burning ash. Aiming her arm towards a nearby pool, she pushed it through the thin opening. A stream of flame came out, coating the water in white flame. *Not that I really need it, but I suppose I don't have to focus as much like this.*

She assumed it was more about aesthetics anyway. Her new flamethrower add on was certainly welcome. The cuts in her armaments finally closed entirely. She saw a last change in her legs. *I wonder. Ash is the only thing that can reach that part.*

Two limbs moved through her back and into the tubes leading to her heels. Tempered Seal hit the reinforced steel, heat packets forming until she released them a few seconds later. The stored energy escaped the only way it could, down and out of the steel feet. The resulting explosions propelled her upward, if only by the width of a hand. *Gotta charge those more,* she thought and rolled her massive shoulders. The weight and size remained. Everything else felt a little more comfortable in small ways and definitely more receptive.