

Ilea let the duo have their small reunion, instead teleporting through the ancient city until she reached the Sphere. Before addressing Aki, she reset her gate location and checked on Felicia.

“Need a lift out?” she asked, finding the woman still with Evan and Niivalyr.

Felicia gave the elf a last look and nodded. “I would appreciate it.”

“I’ll see you later,” she said, opening a gate to Riverwatch.

Felicia smiled, a hand brushing past her arm before she stepped through.

Ilea took in a deep breath before she closed the gate and opened one close to the sphere.

Spreading her wings, she addressed the new Guardian of Iz. *“The Guardians attack anyone that doesn’t have a key?”*

*“Not exactly,”* Aki sent back. *“They do not attack anyone that has the respective keys corresponding to their metal.”*

She floated about fifty meters away from the sphere. *“So why did they attack me then? Do you have some form of control?”*

*“I believe so, yes. They are quite intricate compared to even an Executioner... or perhaps more accurately, they are different. The One without Form was the lifetime achievement of the Makers. The Sphere Guardians on the other hand, were the achievement mostly of the Builders. To form and channel the spells they can wield... I’m honestly impressed, even with the perception and understanding I now have. But I don’t have to tell you, you fought them before.*

*“I cannot give them commands or control them the same way I do the other machines. But I believe there is a way for me to communicate with them, to tell them that you for example are an enemy. It has to happen continuously or they will return to make decisions on their own. If you were to attack the sphere directly, they would attack. At least those whose keys you are not carrying with you.”*

*“The keys are in my domain now. Can they track them?”* she asked.

*“I cannot, but then I’m not directly connected to the keys. I do believe they know you have them,”* Aki said.

*“Freaky. So even the space domain can’t hide them,”* she said.

*“They are two parts of the same whole. I believe even another realm would not stand between them. It is the same reason you can travel to other realms once an anchor is present,”* Aki explained.

Ilea nodded. *“How do you know about that?”*

*“I’m talking to the Meadow. Learning,”* Aki said. *“I intend to protect the Accords. From threats in this realm and beyond. Understanding the fabric is a key aspect of this goal.”*

*“So I just have to distribute the keys and then I can train with the sphere guardians whose keys I don’t have on me,”* Ilea surmised.

*“The issue is that I don’t know if they understand training,”* Aki said. *“But knowing you...”*

Ilea grinned. *“Perfect.”*

*“They will aim to destroy that which they see as a threat,”* Aki said.

She looked at the large silver machine, purple eyes looking at her. She could feel the void magic from the massive sphere guardian. *“Were the Executioners inspired by the silver guardian of the sphere?”*

*“Perhaps. Based on the limited information I have on this, I believe the choice for mass production was made due to the availability of metals and the complexity of core enchantments. The golden guardian of the sphere for example had seventeen iterations before one didn’t combust on activation,”* Aki said. *“There is a quote here from the then head of the Guild of Builders. I want swords. More swords. Flying swords. A sea of golden light. I believe she might’ve been... a little troubled.”*

*“Hey, she just liked swords. And they managed it in the end,”* Ilea said, looking at the golden machine. *“Think the Taleen could produce more four mark machines?”*

*“A lot of their knowledge was lost, no matter what Ormont claims. And even then, the problem is not necessarily the production, but powering such machines. The difference between an Executioner and a Sphere Guardian is extensive. The Source is the only reason these Guardians can be powered. They were not made with the goal of mana preservation. They were made to defend the Sphere, with as much power as could be put into them,”* Aki said.

*“They can’t roam outside of Iz?”* Ilea asked.

*“In theory, they can. But cut off from close proximity of the Source, they will deactivate quickly. And with the power they wield, a few spells would already be enough,”* Aki said.

*“So they’re like wired. Can’t unplug them,”* she said.

*“Wired... a direct connection. Perhaps, yes. The other variants may roam, though in the Plains, even Praetorians drain their resources quickly. Centurions too have to return periodically to offset the lack of ambient mana,”* Aki said. *“Before you start your unhinged resistance training, Trian and Kyrian have arrived.”*

*“Yeah, I can see their marks,”* Ilea sent and looked towards a large downright brutalist stone slab in the distance. *“New gates?”*

*“Near the settlements of the Accords, yes,”* Aki replied.

She waited a few seconds for the duo to exit and fly towards the sphere.

*“Is it safe so close to those machines?”* Kyrian asked.

*“Yeah. They don’t attack if they or Aki don’t perceive us as a threat to the Sphere,”* she said.

*“It is good that you came. I appreciate your time,”* Aki said. *“To get to the point. There are thousands of gates in the Taleen teleportation network. Some purposefully deactivated. Out of those thousands, about half lead into either production facilities set up by the One without Form, or ruins left behind by the Taleen themselves. I am interested in both.”*

*“Some of these places have been taken by monster populations or single beings that even my Executioners cannot deal with,”* Aki said.

*“Oh fuck yeah,”* Ilea said.

*“That is the part I knew Ilea to be interested in. However it’s not all. Many of these ruins have dungeons and monster populations in their vicinity, currently left alone by the Guardians. The One without Form had no use for them and neither do I. That however is not true for the Accords. Trian. I suggest a collaboration with the Medic Sentinel Corps. I have access to hundreds of dungeons with a staggering monster variety both in magical schools and power. Optimizing the danger levels will be key, but I believe with the data and options we have available, we could significantly increase the efficiency at which the Sentinels can be trained,”* Aki explained.

“We’re doing that in the southern mountains already, but most of the dungeons are close to cleared already,” Trian said. “I’ll prepare the details and gather the Sentinels I can in the Soul Forge. You’re present in the domain of the Meadow?”

“Always,” Aki sent. *“There are considerations for resource acquisition in these dungeons. It may be a risk to use Guardians but if the Sentinels train there anyway, they could expand on that, or at least scout out potential sources of metals and other materials.”*

“We’ll discuss it,” Trian said.

“Good,” Aki sent before addressing Ilea. *“As to the two of you. If you are interested, I have made a priority list of potential destinations. Though the higher priorities might not be the most beneficial to you.”*

*“I don’t care. If I can fight something the Executioners had trouble with. Not easy to find varied and dangerous monsters anyway,”* Ilea answered.

“I’ll help, if we can clear out facilities for you or the Accords to use,” Kyrian said.

“Then I will prepare a gate for you to travel,” Aki sent, an Executioner arriving nearby. “I will lead you to the destination,” it spoke.

Ilea and Kyrian followed, soon arriving in a rather spacious hall, green light shining on from above with a few Hunter Praetorians standing guard around the central teleportation platform. The thing lit up with magical power when Ilea stepped on it. “I’ll let you know when we’re done.”

“Try not to die,” the Executioner said before leaving.

The gate activated, the fabric shifting before the two humans arrived. Ilea immediately knew they were somewhere in the north, far below the arcane storms that ravaged the landscape. A taleen facility, according to what she saw in her dominion. The flat stone floor and walls. The magical lights were present too, though destroyed beyond repair.

***‘ding’ ‘You have entered the Izvarun dungeon’***

“Feel anything?” she asked, glancing over at Kyrian.

It was pitch black. Her eyes had adjusted instantly but the hall was empty. Besides a few piles of metal. Destroyed Guardians she assumed.

“It’s strangely quiet,” he sent back.

“Think so? I mean it’s an underground ruin,” Ilea answered. Though she supposed he wasn’t wrong. Usually there were at least some insects she could hear, or in a Taleen dungeon some gears. “Let’s find out then.”

He nodded, the large form of his metal armor starting to float in perfect silence.

*That does look cool.* Ilea spread her wings with a smile on her face. *Finally a meeting I want to attend.* Her wings moved as she was lifted off the ground, the two adventurers flying past the remains of a few Guardians, craters showing in the hallway beyond. One large enough to suggest an Executioner had been destroyed. *“This is all too boring and narrow. The One without Form probably set this up.”*

*“No furniture or anything,”* Kyrian sent.

Ilea wondered why Aki had put this place on the priority list, flying out into the next hall. Her eyes widened at the plethora of craters. It reminded her of the battlefield she left behind in the City of Glass, the void creature protecting the phylacteries easily capable of producing something like this. *Void void void. Everything is void. Did the Ascended infect this place with monsters too?* On closer inspection, she found that the spherical indents were more likely explosions from various Taleen machinery. Bits and pieces of surviving shrapnel suggested as much.

*“Ready?”* Ilea asked.

*“What do you mean, ready? There’s nothing here?”* Kyrian asked.

*“Not yet. I’ll use Monster Hunter,”* Ilea sent back.

He glanced at her with his shining green rune eyes. *“That will inform every single creature in the vicinity of a few kilometers.”* He paused and nodded slowly. *“Yeah. Let me prepare something first.”*

*“Let me know when you’re done,”* Ilea said, floating in silence as metal appeared and split into needles, an entire swarm flying out to etch runes into the hall. *What are we? Adventurers that actually prepare traps?* She rolled her eyes at the novelty, looking at her ash covered hands before she charged up Monster Hunter.

*“Done,”* he sent less than a minute later.

*“Great,”* Ilea answered and released a whistle, the sound reverberating through the hall and out into every connected hallway. She could hear it echoing for a few seconds.

Nothing responded for a while. Then, something stirred in the dark.

A being appeared in the hall, leathery wings and no eyes. Twice as large as a man. It hung from the wall, six legs touching the stone. Its head moved with fast patterns before a strange set of mouths opened.

Ilea could feel vibrations when she saw a slight wave of magic ripple through the hall.

***[Craw Listener – lvl ???]***

More of the creatures appeared in the hall, a few first, then a few dozen. All at level eight to nine hundred.

*“Greetings,”* Ilea sent to the first one, using both her telepathy and her mind magic communication to try and inform the being of their presence.

The creature didn’t respond as more Listeners appeared in perfect silence, the walls now full of the strange insect like beings.

Ilea felt the attack coming, a bright golden barrier flaring up about twenty five meters away from their position. Immediately after the defenses were struck by a hundred invisible spells. “Ready?” she asked with a smile.

The hall shook, cracks in the barrier already forming.

“Sound magic,” Kyrian murmured as several flying flails appeared around him.

“Now you can level your resistance,” Ilea said with a smile. White flame flared up around her as she cracked her neck and knuckles. “Ah, I missed this.”

“We were fighting like... two days ago,” Kyrian said. “Never mind.” He chuckled.

Silent Memory appeared in Ilea’s hand when the barrier shattered, a small golden shield on her arm before she rushed forward. “*Last warning. Run away,*” she sent to the creatures, using another wave of Monster Hunter to send the same sentiment.

She hoped they wouldn’t.

A split second later, she was struck by a set of sound magic waves, unable to teleport them away or dodge. Still she flew on, her mantle only partially defending her against the strange intrusion. Her organs shook within her body, the creature she reached unable to teleport away due to her aura. She swung her hammer, the metal impacting with a dull thud, flattening half of the monster before silver threads lashed out and shred the rest of it apart.

Ilea teleported about thirty of the beings close to her and simply held up her hammer, the threads going wild. “*Feast on their flesh,*” she sent with a grin, her mantle splattered by blood and guts as the sound waves turned the gore laden air into a whirlwind of chaos.

She flew unmoved, having faced horrors in Kohr far more terrible than these dungeon dwellers. The fires of creation would not wield to such displays of magic. A beam of heat flared up, disintegrating a few dozen of the monsters. Ilea smiled, tasting blood in her mouth as she healed her shaken innards. *Combined efforts. Impressive.* Silent Memory had finished its feast of the surrounding creatures, the threads looking for more, the gem in the hammer head glowing, almost joyous.

Ilea teleported. She appeared in front of a wall covered in the sound magic creatures. Waves of magic struck her, the combined effort of nearly a hundred beings. She closed her eyes, feeling herself be pushed back ever so slightly, her eyes resisting, her muscles, skin, and organs shaking. Ilea raised her arms, the golden shields she conjured shattered in moments. She glanced at the hammer and let go, a silver tread wrapped around her arm as it let itself dangle down, landing in a flurry of threads, the red gem glowing with foreboding light. Death and Curses. “*Go wild,*” she sent, feeling her Space Manipulation charged to the highest point. Ilea savored the power, her palms held out towards the incoming sound magic and the beings that cast it.

Ilea smiled as she released a wave of pure space magic, the invisible power near instantly slamming into the dark wall before her. The enemy magic stopped. A smear of dark blood and pieces of flesh remained as a shock wave of air hit the ceiling and adjacent walls. Not a single one had survived.

She turned to see the hall lit by white fire and green curses, her friend floating past as his dark metal shred and flattened the creatures. Ilea teleported and healed him, the injuries not as extensive as she had expected. “*Nice armor,*” she sent.

“*Sound is still difficult to deal with,*” he answered, waving a hand as six flails flew past, spinning and impacting the creatures, one killed with each strike.

*“You’re a terrific exterminator,”* Ilea sent as she felt the heat in her chest charged yet again. She flew around, using fabric tear to collect another large group of the monsters, her aura activating right after to prevent their use of teleportation. Arms spread wide, a sphere of heat and fire expanded from her at the center, sound magic, flesh, and bone burned away an instant later. She glanced to nearby movement and saw her hammer move along the wall, threads of silver impacting the stone before it flung itself into groups of Listeners, waves of curse and blood magic flaring out, the threads cutting through the monsters like steel through paper.

*“Is that a good idea?”* Kyrian asked, a few hundred runes activating before green light flared through the hall, a few hundred flying monsters convulsing before the curse took them. *“Letting it go off alone.”*

Ilea raised a brow under her horned mantle, the hall returning to relative darkness. *“You’re not allowed to ask that, after that spell.”*

*“Fair,”* Kyrian said and moved on to the next group. Few remained.

*“Besides. Silent Memory knows who’s in charge,”* she said and flew closer to the hammer. *“Right?”*

The thing sent out threads, striking the ground before it flung itself towards her. Thorned silver threads spread out, one moving around Ilea’s arm before it pulled itself closer, the handle landing in her hand.

*Strange.* She felt a pulse, as if the hammer asked to use its power.

She hissed, feeling the power absorbed by the hammer. It thrummed with curses. With blood. Instinctual, she felt something touch her very core. A wish. A memory of death and bloodshed. A promise of power. She could feel the change it wanted to achieve, a burst of power. A gift. Though her resistances were too high to allow for it.

*We could try,* she thought, feeling the thorns move around her arm, magic flooding her. Bone, blood manipulation, and a sinister curse. She smiled, feeling the slow changes. Ilea had felt the corruption back in the Descent, had experienced death, blood, and bone magic before. This was different. An addition more than anything, the nature of the magic similar to what she felt when using one of her own spells. It felt right. She grinned and removed her resistances. *Do your worst, hammer.*

Ilea grit her teeth, her eyes opening wide when she felt her blood boil. Wings of bone broke out of her back, her ash moving aside to allow for the changes. She could feel her body shift and break, her bones cracking, extending, claws now where her fingers used to be, long like swords. The hammer had downright merged with her arm, Ilea flying in the dark as the white flame flowed over her ashen mantle. She could see herself in her dominion, three, near four meters large now, a monster of bone and claw, silver metal shimmering between the flames and ash.

The curse shook her very form. It spoke to her, whispers. A plea. One she was willing to answer.

*“Should I run the fuck away?”* Kyrian asked.

She looked at him with a grin. *“I told you. I’m in charge,”* she sent and sped up, crashing into a group of monsters, three of them splattered below her clawed legs. Silver threads moved out as she moved herself to the left, a clawed hand catching one of the beings, their teleports useless against her inhibiting aura. Ilea grinned as she squeezed, the monster squashed like an insect within her massive clawed hand.

Bone and ashen wings moved on her back in serene patterns as she healed herself against the empowering magic from the divine artifact. She looked up and addressed both her hammer and her friend. *“Let us hunt.”*