

Ilea landed in the sand, her wings disintegrating as her mantel retreated to reveal her face. A warm breeze moved over the group, hair flowing in the wind. "Quite the sight," she mused, spreading her arms with a smile.

Waves flowed onto the sand. Behind them spread the desert, hundreds of kilometers of dunes and rocky mountains. Ahead expanded the ocean, as far as the eye could see, calm and endless.

Kyrian stepped next to her, his helmet on. He didn't say a word as he took in a deep breath.

"I don't like it," Feyrair said.

"I don't like to be in it," Ilea said. "Looking at it from here is nice."

He shook his head, eyes scanning the horizon. "Monsters lurking in the depths."

"Trust me, I know," Ilea mused. "*Do you like it? The ocean?*"

Dangerous

"*Even for the Fae?*" she asked.

Maybe

"*Maybe? What's that supposed to mean, Mr. All knowing creature?*" she sent back. They hadn't encountered much on the way here, the Elemental being the main interesting creature. Surviving in the desert wasn't easy, even for magical creatures it seemed. Granted the mana density wasn't anything to write home about. Higher than in the Plains but not quite like in the North.

The Fae did a twirl in response.

What happens if two unstoppable forces meet? The world's end? Ilea mused. All all out battle between the Meadow and a few Daughters would've leveled more than just a city. *Probably not an entire continent though. Not even the Fae.* She wasn't entirely sure. *With rituals and enough preparation?*

"We spent hours without fighting anything," Feyrair complained. "Do you really wish to go into the waters? In that case I would very much like to return."

"I'm not going in there without a good reason. Better than leveling my skills. We could go to Iz," she said with a shrug.

"And fight the masses of machines? Neither me nor Kyrian are ready to face them," the elf said.

"That would be good training. And I'm around, just call me if needed. You should at least be able to get away from an Executioner if they get too close," she said.

The elf considered for a few seconds before he hissed. "What happened to me? Perhaps age has dulled my claws. I will join you, and reach the next evolution. It is time."

"As will I," Kyrian said.

"Really? You know you don't have to," Ilea said. "Wouldn't want to see either of you die."

The elf hissed again.

“Ilea, I can’t let you be the only three mark human when the tournament comes around. And if I can do it, any Sentinel can,” Kyrian said, his armor adjusting to a more aerodynamic design. “We’ll go for the lower level machines, and get you out if you get overwhelmed.”

“Even Isalthar couldn’t handle the sheer mass of that army,” Feyrair said.

“Yeah, but he was protecting us. And I didn’t say anything about beating them. Thinning them out maybe, or just... training a little,” she said with a smirk. *I faced a godsdamned Elemental just a few hours ago. I think I can handle a few Executioners.*

“To think you’re more risk taking than the Val Akuun,” the elf said and hissed.

Ilea puffed. “You’re kidding me right? The guy had hundreds or even thousands of years and all he managed was what? Level seven hundred? I’ll be there in another decade at most.”

“More likely you’ll be dead,” Fey retorted.

“That’s the trick, dragonling. You stay alive to avoid getting killed,” she explained, tapping her temple.

He didn’t reply but the Fae giggled into her mind.

“So how do we get there? Taleen dungeon somewhere here?” Kyrian asked.

Ilea checked the map and the key device, the closest one somewhere northwest of their location.

“Not this far south. I guess they didn’t much care about sand.” She activated her third tier transfer, bringing them to her home.

She teleported out immediately, avoiding any further structural damage due to her high density. *Don’t you dare little one,* she thought, glancing at the Fae.

The creature looked away.

They made their way to one of the closest Taleen facilities. The search for a working gate turned out to be a success, a few dozen Guardians and a single Centurion enough to clear out what felt like an outpost.

“Fey you already saw what’s down there. Kyrian, expect an absolute clusterfuck of machines. Violence, you stay at a distance and hide until we leave again. I should be able to protect you during my teleportation spell with a few gates. Or I’ll just get us far enough away first. They’re quick, but nowhere near close to me,” she explained, selecting the central destination below Karth. There were dozens of gates. She picked one at random.

“We go in and start a fight immediately?” Kyrian asked.

“No. I want to talk to the One without Form first. See what I can learn now that I have all these keys,” Ilea said. *Might even be able to figure out where the Source is.*

“Reasonable. Let us find a defensible hiding spot upon arrival,” the elf said, an excited grin on his face.

“Itching for a fight?” Kyrian asked, looking at the Cerithil Hunter.

The elf hissed. “I will be the first to have visited Iz not once but twice. The heart of my enemy.”

“Don’t get too overexcited. We won’t be able to fight through what is down there,” Ilea said and activated the gate. “But we will try.”

The fabric shifted, the four companions moved to the selected gate on the other side, appearing in a dimly lit hall that didn’t look any different from all the other Taleen dungeons Ilea had visited.

‘ding’ ‘You have entered the Iz dungeon’

Back once again, Ilea thought, feeling the instant tension. Not a place she could just rush in without reason. An enemy strong enough to overwhelm her. *Something exciting at last*. And something she knew as well, not an unreasonably strong dragon or an interdimensional tree being from Erendar. These were Taleen. An enemy she had fought since her time in Dawntree. The only difference was that this was their stronghold. Or so she assumed.

Nothing came for them immediately, the group waiting in silence as they spread out in the hall with their spells at the ready. “*I’m starting to think they can’t track us immediately*,” she sent to her companions.

“*Did the Pursuers only show up after a second jump?*” Kyrian asked.

“*I don’t think so*,” Ilea said. “*Maybe they’re giving us a false sense of security.*”

“*The gates can be deactivated. Many Hunters have been trapped like that before, me included. This one is still active*,” Feyrair said.

“*But you didn’t have modified keys. You’re talking about connections that were already established*,” Ilea answered. “*But never mind. We’ll get out with my magic anyway. Let’s find a place we can stay at.*”

She moved to the single exit, finding a broad hall on the other side, a single long stone table at the center with adjacent benches. Faded banners hung from the walls. With wings spread and all her focus on her dominion, Ilea flew out, followed by the others.

They reached the large stone gate at the end of the hall, the entrance closed and enchanted. Ilea funneled a bit of destructive mana into the magic until it deactivated. “*Two Centurions standing guard on the other side. I’ll move us up*,” she said and teleported the group onto the high ceiling of the building.

They were at an entirely different part of the vast underground city. Hundreds of buildings spread out before them, the central near golden orb visible in the distance. Hunter Praetorians hung from the cavern walls hundreds of meters away, flying machines patrolling through the entirety of the city, the ground swarming with Guardians.

“*I feel like that’s more than last time*,” Ilea sent.

“*It is*,” Feyrair said.

“*Must’ve freaked them out*,” Kyrian sent.

“*Either that or they’re just increasing production*,” Ilea answered before she teleported them into a building within her domain. The process was much easier now, her spatial awareness and quick teleports coupled with her magic perception allowing her quite a bit of control over her surroundings. Instead of moving them closer to the center, she moved them away. Until they had an undisturbed area.

"This is our safe point?" Kyrian asked. He looked around the cellar, crates, bottles, and shelves lining the walls, somewhat well preserved for their age.

"As good as any," Ilea said and formed an ashen drill, adding as much density to the creation as she could. The metal mage wouldn't win out against her. Not that he seemed to care in the slightest. *For once I'm the more competitive one,* she thought, slowly digging into the stone to make as little sound as possible.

A few minutes later, they were already quite deep, chunks and debris moved away with the help of her own domain, space magic, the Fae, and her companions.

"You talked to that thing the last time you were here?" Kyrian asked.

"Yes. It contacted me once we got close enough I think," Ilea said. *"Because I had a key on me."*

The man nodded to himself, following in silence.

Violence?

"Soon. I need to talk to someone first," Ilea said.

Friend?

"I don't think so. Tried to kill me the last time around," she answered and glanced at the small creature. *"Let me know if you see anything interesting in the area."*

Eyes

"Yes. Eyes. I guess," Ilea answered. She continued drilling into the stone, the process much smoother than last time. Fifteen minutes was all they needed to get close to the center, the descending hole now visible in her domain. They were too deep for her to see the streets above, learning from their last attempt.

"Weird. It hasn't contacted me at all," she said to the others.

Fey hissed. *"It knows you now. Why would it contact its enemy?"*

"No, no. It knew I was their enemy last time already. It contacted me because of the key," she answered.

"Do you have them with you?" Kyrian asked.

"Yeah. In my doma... ah I see. That might be the issue. Get ready to fight I guess," she said and summoned the Tungsten key.

Violence appeared next to the triangular object, floating a circle around it.

Ilea felt an attempt to establish a telepathic link a second later. She didn't respond yet, summoning the other keys in turn, all of them placed on floating ashen pedestals connected to her body. She wanted to get them back into her domain as soon as anything suspicious happened, though she had enough trust in her anti teleportation aura and space awareness to prevent anything from stealing them. Only when she had all seven keys out did she open herself to the connection.

"You return," the being said, its voice the same deep and gravelly sound. *"Key Warden, entrusted with seven of the twelve creations to lock the central sphere. Enemy of all that I am, once again bringing an Elf into the holy grounds of Iz. My Pursuers have learned much of you, human. Soon your flesh will be stripped away, until nothing but bones remain. How may I serve you?"*

I'm afraid just skinning me won't do much, she thought, not about to give the being more information. "One without Form. What can you tell me about the central sphere?"

"Key Warden. The Central sphere of Iz was built during the great war with the Ascended of Kohr. Ascended destroyed and stripped of their power, much like you will be stripped of all that you are. The efforts of all the Guilds and our most trusted allies were brought together to create a being capable of that which all Taleen failed to do. The destruction of Elven kind. And the destruction of those that would ally themselves with such arrogant creatures, born of corruption and misguided creators. You too are amongst them, and soon our machines will reach you, human. You will die here, lost and forgotten, like so many before you," the being said.

"What can you tell me about yourself?" Ilea said, this time entirely ignoring the threats. She knew what was coming.

"I am said being. The One without Form. A name perhaps indicative of the intellect of my creators. Twelve keys were made to lock the sphere," it spoke.

"What happens if I get all twelve?" Ilea asked. "Are you in the sphere?"

"Correct, all twelve keys are required to open the central sphere. I am obligated to remind any key wardens of the danger of such an action. Opening the sphere is an emergency measure and not the indented way to control the One without Form. Human, you will fail in your endeavors. The Elves have poisoned your mind," it said.

"There's another way to control you?" Ilea asked.

"Yes. As a key warden you are eligible to issue commands and should a majority of the key wardens accept said command, it will be accepted. Commands conflicting with any core directives will require a one hundred percent majority," the being spoke.

"Can you recall the machines coming to kill us then? And just let us talk?" Ilea said. "I'm a key warden and hold the majority of the keys."

"Request declined. You are a filthy traitor," the being replied.

"Why?" Ilea asked.

"The request requires a one hundred percent majority, key warden. It goes against one of the core directives," it replied.

"What are the core directives?" Ilea asked.

"You do not possess the required authority to learn of that information, key warden. The dead should not think to learn secrets beyond their standing," it said.

"I command you to tell me a joke then," Ilea said.

"Request denied," the being said.

She raised a brow. "How so? I doubt that goes against a core directive."

"Key warden, your request goes against a key directive," it spoke.

"Can you elaborate?" Ilea asked. She was getting a bit tired of the being.

“Certainly, key warden. Your request would require important resources to be allocated to a low priority task. Like telling you a joke, you underdeveloped flesh brain.” It spoke with an even tone at the start, the insult sounding quite a bit different.

More personality in that part for sure, Ilea thought. “What if I have all twelve keys? Can I reallocate resources?”

“Of course not. Have you not understood, human? Your efforts are meaningless. You will die here. Yes, all twelve keys will grant authority over even the core directives,” it explained.

That doesn't help. Maybe it found a way around it. A joke definitely can't be requiring considerable resources, and yet here we are. I'm starting to think the dwarves fucked up when they made this thing.

“Where are the Taleen?” she asked.

“Request denied,” the being spoke.

Now that's interesting. “Did you kill them?”

“Request denied.”

“You're being an unhelpful fucking artificial intelligence. Is that even what you are?” she asked.

“I apologize for my shortcomings, key warden. You wouldn't understand a fraction of my being,” it replied.

Arrogant A.I... sure. Easier things to deal with I suppose. Guess we're not getting around collecting all twelve keys.

“How can you detect us in the teleportation network?” she asked.

“Request denied.”

“How do you intend to win against the Elves?” she said instead.

“Core facilities have developed into dungeons as described in the Third Mana Theory by Nelron Kheer Mauer. Cerithil Hunters are an enemy manageable by the current density of Guardians. Testing and development is in progress while Elven younglings are lured into battle and killed before they become a threat or join the Hunters. Once sufficient quality is reached, direct attempts at the Domains can commence. The main targets will be their Oracles, the creators of their young. The probability of success is significantly higher than a direct confrontation with the male Elven population. Monarchs are to be avoided. Potential natural enemies are to be found and manipulated into confrontations, though it seems likely that the destruction of all Oracles will lead to an eventual destruction of Elven kind,” the being explained.

“That doesn't sound very efficient. How long do you plan to do this?” Ilea asked.

“Key warden, my calculations are based on available data. You're just a single human. Barely old enough to walk. Time is irrelevant. Elven kind will be eradicated. And you along with them,” the One without Form said.

“How is the central sphere secured? How do I use the keys?” she said.

“Twelve Guardians, one for each key. Approaching the sphere will be seen as a hostile action. Only if all keys are within a one kilometer radius will the Guardians stand down. Non key wardens will be considered hostiles either way. Please take that into consideration, key warden. Should the key

wardens wish to initiate a physical interaction with the central sphere, they will be required to insert the keys into the respective mechanisms on the main platform. I may provide specific further instructions should it be required,” the being spoke.

“Those twelve guardians... what’s their level?” Ilea asked.

“Request denied,” it said.

“Of course. What about their orders? Could you override them standing down in case a core directive is in danger or something?” she asked.

“Negative, key warden. The Guardians are linked directly with the keys. It is an intended security measure to allow for an emergency opening of the central core, should any technical issues be detected,” the being explained. *“You will never reach me, nor any of your filthy companions. Leave this place, human. Your actions are irrelevant.”*

“I’m not so sure about that, machine. Sure I can’t convince you to tell a joke?” she said, seeing the first Executioners reaching her dominion.

“Request denied,” the One without Form sent once again.