

Ilea finally woke up, rubbing her head before she turned off the annoying alarm clock.

Her room was still a mess, dirty bowls on her desk, the monitors turned off and slightly dusty. Light pierced through the blinds, making her squint her eyes before she turned around in her bed. *Light shouldn't blind me at all*, she thought, looking at the wall. *Weird dreams. Can you imagine? Being tougher than the sun.* She smiled while rubbing her eyes.

Ilea rolled onto her back and raised her arm, the movement felt slow and clumsy. *Of course I can't summon any ash. Silly.*

Something felt wrong however. A strange feeling of unease. *I should be able to summon ash. It is part of me, part of who I am, of who I became.*

Ilea shot up from her ashen bed, breathing hard as meditation and healing flowed into her mind, instantly calming her from the horrible nightmare she had just endured.

"Fucking hell," she murmured, falling back down into the perfectly heated ash before she raised her arm, the movement lithe, fast, and powerful. Three spheres of ash formed instantly to her will. They spun and coalesced, forming a single flower, then a hammer, and finally a Taleen Guardian. Six legs and six arms.

"*Fighting demons?*" the Meadow asked.

"*How long did I sleep?*" Ilea asked. She felt refreshed, neither groggy nor tired. The strange feeling of the dream remained still, her arcane healing unable to get rid of the sensation. She knew it would fade in time.

"*Thirty eight minutes,*" the Meadow answered. "*Quite a feat.*"

"*Quite a feat my ass. I wanted to sleep like twelve hours,*" Ilea sent back, knowing that perhaps she would have to be content with lava baths and meditation, not that her mind or body needed much to stay healthy. *Guess I'm suffering from being an absolutely super evolved life form.*

"*I'm afraid you are too advanced for that. Ascended so to say,*" the Meadow sent.

"*Don't give me that stupid shit in the morning,*" Ilea said, stretching her arms. There was of course no need to stretch. "I'll hang out with Aki for a while, might distract me."

"*Give him my greetings,*" the Meadow sent.

"*You literally have Executioners here all the time,*" Ilea said.

"*Yes, but it's not the same,*" the Meadow said.

"*Sure, sure, the fabric is all encompassing, physical location is unnecessary,*" Ilea said.

"*You Do listen to me,*" the tree sent before a giggle flowed through space itself.

A gate appeared before her, Ilea stepping through into the heart of the former Taleen kingdoms. She spread her wings before landing on the golden platform going around the entirety of the Sphere. Ilea could see the entrance to the sphere behind her, trying not to think back to her experience in the corridor.

By now the keys had been distributed among the Accords and their allies. The Brass Key to Aki, Silver to Kyrian and Ravenhall, Stonehammer to Isalthar and the Hunters, Copper to Violence, Cobalt to Evan Trayne and the Foundation of Glass, Iron to the Meadow, Obsidian to Alistair and Riverwatch, Bronze to Catelyn and Hallowfort, Lead to Helwart and the Pit, and Gold to Ormont and the Taleen.

Ilea held on to the Tungsten and Titanium keys, planning to keep the former, both as a security but just as much as a memento to her travels, and the journey she had taken to get here. The Accords had decided who would receive the keys, the Titanium key not yet having found a new owner. Ilea had been registered by the Guardians of the Core as not only the holder of every key, but a ruler of the Taleen it seemed. Having them with her constantly was not a requirement, though it allowed Aki to have the machines attack her regardless of her perceived status. Something not possible if she physically had the keys on her, or stored within the necklace.

At least she could train with all of them if she stored the remaining two keys in her domain instead, the Guardians unable to recognize them in that case.

She summoned herself a cup of something akin to hot chocolate, deactivating her Heat Resistance to let the cup warm her hands at least a tiny bit. The streets near the center of Iz were occupied by machines only. A garrison of guardians in case anyone tried to attack the Sphere, though she knew it was likely one of the most protected areas in Elos.

Farther out, she could see plenty of activity. Many dwarves from Io were interested in traveling the world now that they had the option, often choosing to move to Iz first due to the somewhat familiar architecture and layouts. A starting point for their new lives so to say. Ilea smiled, seeing the colorful magical lamps and quirky flying robots, the zip lines now connecting certain sections, and the forest left behind by Naradan. More would be added in time, the population mostly consisting of dwarves and Dark Ones.

Interesting to see them come here in search of a safe haven, the environment nearby even more dangerous than the surface of the North.

She sipped on her chocolate like drink. It would take decades if not centuries for Iz to be reasonably populated once more, but she was glad the presence of Aki could finally provide the sense of security some of the Taleen had perhaps hoped for with the creation of the One without Form.

Ilea downed the drink and closed her eyes, making the cup vanish before she spread her wings. “*Let’s get started then,*” she sent and flew down into the hole below the sphere. Entire sections of wall were already missing from the numerous training bouts she’d had with the core guardians. Due to the proximity requirement and the security they provided to Aki, they had decided to simply extend the descending abyss at the center of the former capital. In a natural manner.

Ilea landed at the center of large chunks of rubble, all the Guardians with relevant magic abilities stepping through the air or flying to join her. She looked up at the beings, the various metals reflecting what little light reached down into the near hundred meter broad shaft of stone. Cracking her neck, she smiled and deactivated her mantle.

She spread her arms. The signal for them to start.

Green fire flared up near the Tungsten Guardian, the flames spreading out and rushing towards her, quickly engulfing her somewhat unprotected form as she grit her teeth. The beings were powerful enough for her to keep the resistance active. Deactivating her mantle was enough to make the training more than effective.

As soon as her fighting skills had been maxed, she had started working with the Guardians for resistances exclusively. The Copper Guardian added its lightning to the mix, soon joined by the wind blades sent by the Bronze variant. Shields flared up nearby when the Cobalt Guardian landed and started using its astral infused melee strikes to pummel her into the ground.

Ilea didn't block, the magic and impacts shredding away her skin and muscle, her bones clattering as she was punched into the ground. The stone below was pulverized with each strike, melting from the curse fires and reduced to nothing by the lightning and wind attacks.

She healed against it all, occasionally activating her mantle to make sure she didn't go too low. Primordial Shift wasn't beneficial in this case, she was trying to achieve the highest damage to her body possible. Ilea lost her eyes when the Stonehammer variant started with its light magic beams, the attacks instant and insanely powerful. By now, she understood why the Core Guardians had to remain close to the Sphere. The output from their magic was ludicrous. And so was her ability to survive it. In the most part even without her main source of defense.

'ding' 'Astral Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 15'

About time, she thought, perceiving the world through her dominion alone as her body was destroyed by the four mark defenders.

She spent about three hours with the resistance providers until she signaled them to stop. *"I'm done for now,"* she sent up to Aki as the remaining spells around her slowly dissipated, the bottom of the shaft yet again a little bit deeper. Ilea cracked her neck as soon as she had a neck again, watching the Guardians depart upwards with her fresh eyes.

It smelled of blood and burnt hair. *"Might want to send someone down here again to clean. Lest some cult uses all the blood to conduct a city wide blood ritual."*

"That's what the Stonehammer Guardian is for," Aki said as beams of light started burning away the blood that had splattered farther out.

"Right. Fair enough. Anyone free in Ravenhall?" she asked.

"Kyrian is available at the Headquarters. Trian is out near a dungeon, and Claire is negotiating with a group of architects," Aki informed her. *"Cless is running on the rooftops with her cats."*

"Thanks," she said and sent a message to Kyrian. *"Joining in?"*

"Feel free," he sent back.

Ilea waved at the Stonehammer guardian and in the vague upward direction of Aki as she activated her third tier transfer. *"Greetings from the Meadow by the way."*

"I'm greeting it back," Aki said right before she vanished.

Galgan Brefort gulped, entering their modest home in Io. The radiant golden light illuminated the kitchen, various enchantments active to heat up yesterday's stew and some water.

His mother turned at the noise of the stone door sliding open. She smiled when she looked at him. Different than she had the previous year. He even thought her wrinkles looked less prominent. "Galgan, you're just right for dinner," she said, checking the stew before she walked to their stone table. Her smile grew wider as she grabbed a small wooden box and tapped it. "Do you know what this is?"

He raised his brows, sitting down without saying a word.

"Gailroot Brood Leaves," she said in an excited voice. "Varont brought it back, from a city called Halstein!" She opened the box and showed him, as if that would explain why she was so excited.

"I... I don't know what it is, some tea?" he asked.

She frowned. "Galgan Brefort, did I not teach you about leaves? The plant only grows in sunlight. Your great grandmother always talked about it. A deep and rich flavor, as if one drank from the roots of a tree directly. Isn't this wonderful?"

He looked at her. "I'm not sure if drinking from the roots of a tree is either possible... or particularly nice, though I would try for sure."

Does one just dig down and grab the roots? Maybe some water magic is required. Or wood magic?

"You're not yourself, Galgan. What's on your mind, out with it," she said, putting the box down before she crossed her arms.

"I..." he started, chuckling a moment later. "You're far too perceptive."

Her eyes went wide before she took in a sharp breath. "You made your choice."

"That I did," he said.

Her smile wavered, a sad expression on her face for a moment before she brightened up again. "Just like that fool Harrot. Vara tells it he left the moment Lilith came flying down through our city."

He grinned. "You know I'm not the same. I thought this through. I saved up as well, and learned as much as I could."

She sighed. "I knew this day would come. Garath!"

He could hear clattering noises from above, his grandfather appearing at the table, already sitting. Gray eyes took him in, the many wrinkles lost in a near white beard. "You're leaving, boy?"

Galgan nodded.

"Hah! Of course. Instantly charmed by the humans with their strange magics and promises of prosperity. WE built all this! WE made the One without Form. WE made the teleportation gates! What did they make? Some cheap copies, I say," he said and raised a finger. "Back in my day we wouldn't need the suns. We would sit in our dark caverns, building machines to fight our enemies, many they were. You would seek a battle healer like her? Worse than even the Azarinth... ash," he spat and shook his head.

Galgan just smiled. He had expected it, had hoped to get a reaction like this one. They would be fine without him, and he would return, with stories, magics, and strange foods and drink.

"I will seek whatever seems right," Galgan said.

Garath squinted his eyes at him, the old dwarf snickering a moment later. "Then go. Fall on your head, young fool."

"As long as I get back up," Galgan said. "Like you did."

"Aye. Like I did. But I didn't fall in the first place. If we fell, we died," Garath spoke, teleporting again to get himself some stew. "Gates... gates... gates. And we used to travel the old way. Caverns and tunnels."

Geia walked over to him and smiled, touching his shoulder. "Be careful out there, Galgan. Just because the Accords are allied to us doesn't mean everyone in their cities will be glad to see us there."

"I know," he smiled and fastened the straps of his pack.

"Where will you go?" Garath asked when he sat down again.

"Ravenhall," he said without hesitation.

The old man glanced at Geia before grunting.

He hugged his mother and nodded to his grandfather. "Thank you," he said and turned towards the door.

"Are you sure you don't want to stay for dinner?" Geia asked.

He didn't look back, knowing the decision would become so much harder. "No. I will eat what they serve," he said and left, the enchanted stone door closing behind him. He took in a deep breath and smiled. *Alright. Here I go.*

Up and up he went, elevators and stairs, hundreds of dwarves coming and going, people speaking in excited voices. He glanced at a group of children sitting near a strange enchanted device that produced music. A nice female voice sang of the ocean, Wyverns, and the suns above. Galgan joined an elevator with ten other dwarves, three of them armored with enchanted plate, large warhammers on their backs and knives strapped to their belts. *Like in the old stories*, he thought with a smile, looking away quickly when one of them glanced his way.

"Be careful out there, boy," the guard said, grabbing his shoulder with a strong hand as they left the elevator.

"Yes, sir," he answered, watching the group go before he rushed to the next set of stairs, this one leading to the highest floor of Io, and towards the tunnels that lead out and to the teleportation gates.

"Galgan!" a male voice echoed through the street, huffed breathing coming from the dwarf.

He turned around to see Gort. His father. His face was red, the stink of sweat obvious even before he had closed the distance.

Galgan raised his chin.

"I... Galgan. I know I... I know I have not been... what I should have. I know," he said, taking in a deep breath. "Garath once told me... that the time would come, when we return to glory. When the Taleen will break free of the prison they had made, and reclaim a place beside the gods. I never believed it. The old fool." He remained silent for a few seconds before raising his hands, in them a helmet of Taleen make. Dull green metal, shimmering with enchantments, two light brown horns

jutting out and upwards. The helmet of a warrior. “He gave this to me. On the day I turned twenty. Something to hold onto, for when the time came.” He shook his head. “I think... you should have it.”

Galgan looked at the helmet and breathed in. He held out his hands and received it.

[Legate Guardian Helmet – Rare Quality] Enchantments [Durability 5 / Hardening 3]

“I’m no warrior, father,” Galgan said.

“Not yet, son. But you will be. Wear it with pride, for I never could,” Gort said.

Galgan smiled, looking at the helmet before he turned in around. He raised it up and put it on, the guard protecting most of his face, the eye sockets large enough to let him see clearly. It smelled faintly metallic, the weight feeling right on his head. “I will. Good fortune to you.”

“Elven hells, boy, I’m your father,” Gort said and hugged him.

Galgan held his breath but hugged him back, letting go a few moments later. An awkward hug, and the first one they shared.

“Go and live your life, in freedom,” Gort spoke.

Galgan smiled and nodded, turning around before he walked to the large tunnel, dozens of dwarves coming and going, many of them equipped with armor and weapons he had never seen before, merchants transporting crates of exotic goods from all over Elos, monster parts and small animals in cages brought into Io from faraway lands.

He didn’t look back and walked towards the Silver machines that had terrified him in the past, guardians now of the Accords, and Iz. No longer the watchers of Io, and hunters of elves. He still tried not to look into their eyes, joining the line to the various gates above. He couldn’t keep the smile off his face, the weight of his new helmet almost forgotten as he watched entire groups of people vanish through the gates. *First to Iz, then to Ravenhall.*