

Ilea stepped back when the dagger was in, the metal of the pyramid hardly providing any resistance to the blade. There was no fancy magical pulse or anything lighting up in turn.

“*Did anything happen?*” she sent to Kyrian. She didn’t know how much time had passed in the corridor but the marks were still around. Distorted but somewhat near. At least the others were still in Iz.

No response came from the man after a few seconds had passed. Ilea wasn’t sure the message had even gotten out, the fabric itself distorted by the heat. She crouched near the dagger and watched as the thing was slowly absorbed by the enchanted pyramid. The surface was smooth a moment later. She waited another few seconds, thinking if she should leave and check outside.

Ilea didn’t want to consider the possibility of Aki being gone. *I could still get him out.* She crossed her arms in front of her when a message reached her mind.

It wasn’t Kyrian.

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Niivalyr took a step back, reinforcing the main barrier in front of him. Several of the Hunters were hurt, Neiphato healing them as well as he could. Fire still raged in the streets, mountains of dented and destroyed Taleen machines littering the surroundings. They had been separated on their retreat, the eight of them finding an old smithy with reinforcement and defensive enchantments still in place. They just had to be charged up, one in their group a somewhat experienced enchanter.

The streets were quiet for the first time in over an hour, their own breathing and hisses audible to Niivalyr.

“Did it end?” one of the Hunters asked in a whisper, a gray haired elf wielding fire magic. He used the wall to support himself, one arm raised towards the partially broken entrance.

The machines hadn’t stopped coming previously, Guardians and Centurions mostly but there were stronger ones around too. Roaming every street of Iz. Niivalyr had seen most of them following the higher leveled Hunters that had gone towards the center of the large city. Plenty had come for them however, though luckily not too many higher level ones.

He tensed up when a silver form moved past the entrance, the lithe being stepping over the dented shrapnel littering the street, not even touching the ground. It stopped moving right as it had passed, Niivalyr reinforcing the barrier as he took in a deep breath. *Executioner*, he motioned to the others. They had to work together if they planned to live through this one. *Maybe she was right*, he thought, a grin coming to his lips. *Not without a fight.*

The machine slowly stepped through the shrapnel, metal creaking under its weight. It crouched down near the entrance and looked into the building with its glowing green eyes. Its shield flared up for a moment when a blast of fire spread over its defenses. The Executioner didn't react, instead looking around the room.

Three of them hissed as everyone prepared their spells.

The Executioner's eyes glowed before a voice resounded from its form. "Cerithil Hunters. I am not your enemy. The battle, is over."

"What do you mean? Who are you?" Niivalyr asked with a hiss, his shield shimmering with bright magic.

"Your confusion is understandable, Hunter. I am the Guardian of..." the machine spoke and paused, looking up in a thoughtful manner. It refocused on them. "I am the Guardian of Iz. Protector of the Accords, and Sentinel of Akelion."

*What did she do?* Niivalyr asked himself as he kept the barrier up, more hissing resounding behind him.

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*"Your mark remains. It seems our plan has worked. No telepathy within control room. Clean up before you go,"* the message reached her mind, the voice strange. Calm. Familiar and yet, different. It could've only been one.

The only mark she felt without distortion. Aki.

"You did it..." she murmured. "Well... we did it. I walked through that horrendous fucking corridor." Ilea wondered if the One without Form was trying to trick her somehow. But in the end she could always walk back in again. Not that she wanted to. No, she did very much not want to do that. At all.

She burned up the puke and glanced at the glowing corridor behind the strange barrier.

*Fuck, do I have to get out?* She formed a gate but the spell failed to manifest. *No. I'd rather wait however many fucking years that was... wait. Even the Still Valley couldn't stop my mark teleport.* She activated her third tier blink and focused on Kyrian. She couldn't quite place him but she knew he was somewhere in Iz.

Her spell took hold, the runes glowing below her. Ilea looked at the pyramid with a slight smile. She was ripped through the fabric a moment later, feeling a strange sensation of heat before she appeared on a mountain of metal. Her wings spread as she looked at the surroundings. Hundreds of destroyed machines, collapsed houses, dozens of Hunter Praetorians, flying Taleen Destroyers, and several Executioners.

Amidst the carnage stood her friend and ally, covered in scratched up and dented metal. He was on one knee, runic eyes glowing slightly with green curse magic. He was facing one of the Executioners, or perhaps a Pursuer.

The machine stood unmoving, turning its glowing green eyes to Ilea a few seconds later. "You made it out. That is good," the machine spoke with a slightly distorted voice. It closed and opened one of its hands, looking at the flowing metal before it glanced back at them. "Now before you break out in celebration or amused commentary, we have to secure the keys and close the sphere. The emergency opening is dangerous to the integrity of the entire structure."

"And who exactly am I talking to?" Ilea asked.

"The Sentinel of Akelion," Kyrian said, his voice sounding slightly amused. And tired.

"The one," the Pursuer said. "Now please. The Cerithil Hunters are still destroying entire squadrons of Guardians. Guardians I would very much like to keep. They won't listen to me, but they might listen to you. First, the keys."

Ilea smiled, appearing next to the machine before she hugged it. She jumped off the metal chest and moved her wings. "You have full control? What about the One without Form? Ah and there are so many Guardians, a few thousand here or there won't matter."

"They matter to me. And... I'm not sure. I'm still figuring out how everything works but yes. The One without Form was merely... how should I explain this. It was part of the control room, part of the structure itself. Similar to the framework within this very Pursuer. I did not even have to fight it. I simply took over. But this body... if it can be called that... it is... different. Far more complex. There is... so much. So much that I can see. So much that I can use. The power I wield..." The Pursuer's eyes flickered before it shook its head, glancing at them once more.

"I'll get the keys then and close the door, before you have an existential crisis. Mr. god king Akelion," Ilea said with a grin, hitting Kyrian's shoulder. "The fucking dagger did it."

"He did," Kyrian said in a tired voice. "Took his time."

"Have some respect. You're talking to the Guardian of Iz," the Pursuer spoke, one of its eyes flickering slightly. "I could send all these machines after you."

"Big words from a baby god," Ilea spoke. "Plus, there's hardly enough here to deal with me."

The Pursuer snickered. "That is true."

"I'll show you respect when you manage to beat me in a bout," Ilea said and flew upwards.

"The Sphere Guardians will be able to provide ample opportunity for Resistance training, I'm sure. Now... the keys," Aki spoke.

"Sure, Sentinel chief," Ilea said, flying up and towards the sphere with Kyrian in tow.

"*Ally took control of the One without Form. Stand down and stop destroying Guardians. Spread the word,*" Ilea sent to every elf with a mark. Fey, Elfie, and Neiphato should've been better than her at convincing anyone. They reached the outskirts of the central area and were intercepted by a group of Hunters, Isalthar, Zori, and Fey among them. All of them looked exhausted, bloodied, their clothes and armor showing dents, scratches, holes, entire parts missing.

"You look fucked up," she said to the group. "How long was I in there?"

“You went behind the sphere guardians maybe one hour ago. What happened?” Isalthar asked. “We tried to approach but couldn’t find you.”

“Well...” Ilea started, shrugging slightly. “I went inside the sphere. Nearly died maybe a hundred times, probably more. I wanted to shut down the thing but this option seems way more beneficial.”

“What option?” Isalthar asked, glancing at the hovering Taleen, the machines no longer attacking.

“Aki... is it?” Fey asked with a grin. “The copied soul...” He grinned and started laughing.

“A friend. Who happens to be able to take over Taleen machinery,” Ilea said. “Would’ve been kind of sad to see all of this go to waste,” she added, gesturing at the army of machines. Despite the mountains of destroyed Guardians, their numbers didn’t seem any different to her.

“You are in no position to make such a decision,” Zori spoke, his voice neither cold nor kind. His silver eyes took her in before he hissed.

Ilea smiled as she looked at him. “I did it anyway.”

“Who is in control of it then? You?” another elf asked, one whose name she hadn’t learned.

“I said a friend. Not a machine. Someone I trust and someone I hold dear. And perhaps someone far closer to you than I could ever be,” Ilea said as a group of Executioners approached through the air.

The machines stopped about ten meters away. “Perhaps now we may talk, Cerithil Hunters,” Aki spoke and bowed in the air, the other machines mirroring the gesture perfectly. “I am the new Guardian of Iz. And so long as I remain, will your lands and peoples no longer be pursued by the machines of the Taleen.”

“How... why would...” one of the elves spoke.

The Executioner glanced at the tall ice mage. “That was your purpose... was it not?” the machine spoke and looked up, as if to remember. “Zevara in Cerith, veera il anur. To protect life, I choose exile.”

Isalthar floated a little closer, some of the others hissing. “An old saying. Older than I am. How is it you know of it?”

“I know of... many things now, Val Akuun. This saying... it is interesting, that the Hunters chose it. It was not meant for them,” he spoke. “Feyrair, may I ask you to stop the individual named Veratin from destroying this city and its Guardians? He is southwest of here, about four kilometers away.”

The elf glanced at Ilea, then the others. He hissed in an amused manner and flew away.

“How is this possible?” Isalthar asked.

“I have... a lot to learn. And we will have time to discuss, Val Akuun. First it is important that we gather and inform every remaining Hunter. There are many more within Taleen facilities and cities throughout the lands, some of them have been trapped... for a long time,” Aki spoke.

Isalthar glanced at Ilea and looked at her for a few seconds, some of the other elves glancing between him and the machines. Then he closed his eyes for a moment and hissed in an affirming manner.

The Executioner hissed back.

Ilea smiled and raised her brows, amused by the confusion on the faces of the Elves. "I'll join you in a minute, some cleanup left to do," she said and teleported away, not giving any of them enough time to react. They were sufficiently distracted by Aki's wonderful performance. *Close the steaming sun corridor.*

She reached the sphere a minute later, watching the large Guardians back at their posts. They stood down as she landed near the entrance. The entire platform was littered with destroyed machines. She looked up at the Silver Guardian, the thing turning its head to glance at her.

"Thanks for before," she said with a smile.

It gave her a slight nod and looked back out onto the burning city.

*God you're cool. Wish I was that cool.* She looked out towards the buildings, seeing large Destroyers spraying mists of water onto the fires, swarms of Guardians stabilizing buildings, others cleaning up the debris.

She turned towards the entrance and watched the glowing corridor. *Here you go*, she thought and turned the handle with her space manipulation, if only to stay as far away as possible. Instantly the gears started turning, remains of several Executioners spilling out as the sections closed one after the other. The final chunk of metal shut with a satisfying clunk and the turning of gears.

"*Well done. Now my rule is complete. I'm joking. Just to make sure,*" Aki spoke through the mental connection from the Sphere.

"*You're not entirely wrong there, Sentinel of Akelion,*" she mused, removing the keys before she stored them all in her domain.

"*So, you changed the core directives?*" she asked.

"*No. They do not exist anymore. I'm not a simple creation like the previous Guardian of Iz. I am closer to a true mind,*" Aki sent.

"*Closer? So you're not a true mind?*" she asked.

"*I have yet to determine that,*" he answered.

"*Fair. So with the keys someone can still give you commands?*" she asked.

"*No. The keys were tuned for the One without Form. They remain the only feasible way to open the sphere, and the Guardians around you are connected directly to them,*" Aki explained.

"*So you lied about the resistance training? Or can you control them?*" Ilea asked.

"*I cannot. Not beyond defensive measures aimed at anyone not recognized as a Key Warden. However you as the Key Warden... you have a little more freedom. And after a set of enchantments and ceremonies that I have yet to fully figure out, you should be able to give more complex commands to them yourself. Nothing that would betray their core purpose, but enough to suit what I believe you're looking for.*

"*For now the keys do not matter. I have plenty of information on the battle that just transpired and other than yourself, none of the present elves or humans will be able to traverse into the control room without thoroughly dying.*"

"*You're saying I'm the toughest one here?*" Ilea asked.

*“The most resilient. Perhaps more so than even the Guardians of the Sphere. Toughest however... who knows,”* Aki sent.

She smiled and tapped the metal sphere with her fist. *“I’m glad you’re still around old friend, after that stunt.”*

*“I’m glad you made it too. I believe even the One without Form did not consider the possibility of your survival. A tremendous feat,”* Aki spoke.

*Violence!*

Ilea twitched at the sudden shout into her mind, grabbing for the invisible cunt. “You fuck,” she murmured, teleporting the creature out of its space hideout before she squeezed it slightly.

*“Welcome back to Iz, Baron.”* Aki sent, presumably to both of them.

The Fae waved towards the sphere, trying to squash one of Ilea’s eyes at the same time.

*“So what’s the plan now?”* Ilea asked.

*“The Hunters remain... agitated. For good reason. I have yet to earn their trust. I suggest you join them,”* Aki spoke.

*“Sure. I can hang out around here for a while,”* Ilea sent as she started to fly back towards the group of Elves. *“You don’t want to hide anymore?”* she asked the Fae.

*Violence*

*Over*

The Fae sent as if that explained anything.

Several more hisses resounded when she arrived with the Fae in tow.

“Did the Taleen capture a Fae?” Zori asked as he glanced over, most of his attention remaining with the Executioners and Isalthar.

“No. Violence has been around for a while,” Ilea said, putting the being onto her shoulder where it plopped down and held on to her ash.

“The main Guild hall seems like an appropriate place, to discuss further,” Aki spoke through one of the Executioners. “It was once... the main seat of the Taleen. And it would bring me... quite a bit of joy, to welcome the Cerithil Hunters into its halls. A few of my machines are already hunting, to prepare a feast.”

“That’s what I need right now,” Ilea said.

A few of the elves hissed, in agreement of course.

Ilea looked over the capital as they slowly flew towards one of the largest buildings near the center. Entire sections of the town had been destroyed in the battle but with the overall size, the damage wasn’t too extensive. Though it wasn’t easy to tell, thousands of machines still moving through the streets.

One of the Executioners glanced back at the group. “The elf by the name of Naradan has agreed to cease hostilities, yet will remain in his newly grown forest,” Aki said as they flew.

*“Ilea, there are a few things we’ll have to discuss. Preferably with the Accords. Things have come... to light,” Aki said.*

*“Sure. I can get them whenever. Where do you see yourself anyway?” she asked.*

*“What do you mean exactly?” Aki asked.*

*“I mean you’re in control of the Taleen now, aren’t you? Are you a faction of your own?” she asked.*

*“A faction of my own. I suppose that wouldn’t be too strange, would it? With all of these machines,” Aki spoke and paused. “But I have told you before, Ilea. I am a Sentinel, and I have been appointed to be the Guardian of the Medic Sentinel Corps. I intend to fulfill that role. Perhaps even more.”*

*“More?” Ilea asked with a smile.*

*“I’m still thinking on the name. Guardian of the Accords perhaps?” Aki suggested.*

*“How about Guardian of Cerith?” Ilea said with a grin.*

*Aki remained silent for a while. “A little excessive perhaps, but I do like the sound of it.”*