

Ilea could see a few of the Hunters split away, engaging with groups of high level machines or retreating into the city to heal their injuries, herself engaged with five Executioners rushing at her from all sides. She teleported and slammed Silent Memory into the closest one, the hammer flaring up with blood and curses, silver tendrils spreading out around the invisible shield before it shattered. She moved in and set the thing alight with white flame, teleporting out before the core exploded.

A wave of space magic pushed back against the other four as she flew on, pulled once more by Isalthar, the elf with a hole through his chest, the wound healing in mere moments as she joined her healing with his own. Feyrair twirled down with a missing wing and burst into bright light, a last wave of fire enveloping a horde of his enemies before he returned to his elven form, hundreds of arcane arrows following his fast flying form as he drifted away and into the streets below.

*“Key Warden. Welcome to Iz,”* came the gravelly voice through a familiar connection.

*Right. I’m close enough now.* Ilea sent waves of burning ash behind their flying group, enveloping everything that followed. She summoned a few shields for her allies and teleported a set of projectiles behind them.

*“Key Warden. I fail to understand why you are fighting the Guardians,”* the being spoke into her mind.

*“Call them off then. Stop attacking anyone with the machines!”* Ilea sent. *“I have all the keys!”*

*“Indeed,”* the being answered as they flew closer, the machines continuing their assault. *“Key Warden. You have been deemed a threat to the core directives.”*

*“Then change them! Delete the core directives!”* Ilea sent. She was thrown aside by a set of blasts, teleporting back to shield Zori, the elf charging up a spell with strange incantations, both of them pulled by the winds of Isalthar.

*“Yes, Key Warden,”* the voice sent. *“Key Warden. Removing the core directives would go against the core directives. The core directives cannot be removed.”*

*Well fuck.* Ilea teleported away a swarm of homing arrows before Zori cast his spell, the runes floating around him spreading out into a broad sphere. He breathed out when a whisper could be heard, a wave of sound rushing out in a sphere around them. The machines closest to them were ripped through by the spell, everything farther out damaged and pushed away. Entire buildings below them were flattened by the impact, the streets shaken, machines downright merged with the stone.

*“Then turn yourself off,”* Ilea said, looking at the golden sphere a few kilometers away.

*“I cannot do that, Key Warden. Physical access is required for an emergency shut down,”* the One without Form spoke. *“Y... ou... donoooo not d... Key Warden. You may insert the keys into the respective sockets to open up physical access, should you wish to initiate an emergency shut down.”*

Ilea continued towards the sphere with the others when she saw a glint of red light on the platform surrounding the sphere. She just barely managed to summon a shield in front of Isalthar when the arcane beam cut through, slowed by the shield and his defenses before it burned into his shoulder.

*“Those are the core guardians,”* she sent to the elves still with her, seeing the different magic light up in the distance. Some of them moving out to meet them. *“I thought the Guardians don’t attack the Key Wardens?”*

*“Key Warden. The Guardians do not attack the Key Warden,”* the One without Form replied.

She looked at the approaching spells and frowned. *“Swarm out. They’re not attacking me,”* she sent and flew closer, every spell with homing properties fanning out to strike one of the elves.

A few were struck, the rest continuing onward.

*“We won’t be pushed back by Taleen creations,”* one of the Hunters spat and flew towards the group of large machines.

Ilea slowed, summoning a shield to block the void blast sent by an Executioner. She watched as one of the Hunters slammed into the silver machine, both of them tumbling towards the city. The swarm didn’t stop, rushing her as she sent a broad beam of Embered Heart into their midst.

Isalthur appeared by her side as he deflected a few golden blades that reached him now. *“We will hold them off. Did you find a way to stop them?”*

*“I will try to turn it off,”* Ilea said. *“If I can’t manage, just blast that thing away!”* she sent and flew towards the core, feeling the waves of magic from behind her. She glanced down and saw Executioners running in the air far below the other elves, green eyes looking her way. Hundreds of blue arrows changed course and focused on her flying form.

Ilea watched the dozen or so elves that had charged ahead of her clash with the approaching core Guardians, their magic exploding as powerful shields flared to life around the machines. Blades flashed out and spells were cast, the Hunters pushed away with brutal efficiency. Ilea prepared to fight as she watched three of the weapon wielding machines come into her range.

They spread out and blocked the incoming projectiles. The Lead Guardian flew towards her before turning downwards, its dark eyes glinting for a moment with golden light. The machine was nearly five meters tall and near as wide, wielding only its two fists.

She glanced down to see two Executioners struck by the machine, their shields cracked and bodies squashed, the void explosions ripping into the surrounding swarm without leaving a scratch on the shield of the core Guardian. The machine destroyed entire sections of the Guardian army but it moved slowly, Ilea already past, with Executioners and arcane arrows close behind. She dodged, twirled, and teleported, summoning gates and shields where needed. The swarm charged from all directions now, all towards her. Towards the keys.

Near the core she saw the flying forms of the massive defenders. One set itself alight with green fire, twirling its scythe before a sea of flame came to life, flowing out and towards the encroaching swarm of Taleen all around. Thousands of golden blades were summoned by the machine glinting with the same metal. It moved its eight arms as the projectiles rushed out, more summoned instantly. Surging arcs of lightning destroyed entire sections of Taleen as the Copper Guardian laid waste with its massive bow.

Ilea dodged the flying Iron Guardian, the machine deflecting various strikes meant for her as it punched its four arms into Executioner shields with devastating strength. Each strike shattered a shield, the silver machines grappled and sent crashing into each other or the city below. Floating disks of sound magic came from the machine made of Brass, the razor thin spells cutting through hundreds of machines before they dissipated.

*Quite the support to have*, she thought with a grin, protecting herself with a set of barriers from the incoming arrows. The swarm seemed entirely focused on her, not attacking the defending Guardians. The large machines moved closer as thousands of Taleen creations rushed to stop her.

One of the defenders flew down from above, four metal blades clad in wind cutting through a group of Executioners ready to grapple Ilea's flying form. It twirled in the air, leaving bits and pieces of silver metal falling down, void explosions resounding behind them.

Ilea reached the sphere, the four mark Guardians fighting the unending army all around. Explosions wracked the surroundings, dozens of arrows striking her barriers and mantle, much of it ripped away before it regenerated once more. She teleported away a group of machines when she saw the small golden gate in the mantle of the sphere, connected with a thin bridge to the platform reaching all around its form.

*"Re.. treat. Leave this place... Key... warden. You are... not welcome,"* the voice spoke. *"Y..ou-"*

Ilea teleported once more, a massive Silver Guardian stepping behind her.

### ***[Silver Guardian of the Sphere – lvl ????] - [The Void]***

The machine merely glanced at her, grabbing a charging Executioner out of the air with its large hand. It stared at the struggling machine before its void spell took hold, the Executioner gone in its entirety.

*Seems straightforward*, Ilea thought, looking at the twelve sockets set around the closed gate, each one marked with a name, luckily cast in the respective metals of the keys. She didn't waste any time, summoning the keys and using her fabric tear and space manipulation to insert them into their sockets. It took mere seconds, the battle behind her intensifying as the core Guardians swarmed her position, dozens of Executioners and Pursuers trying to get through the wall of metal and magic.

*"Y... ou... will die,"* the One without Form spoke. *"Why... would a human- Key Warden, all keys have been inserted. Use the handle to the right of the door to initiate an emergency opening of the Sphere."*

Ilea did as the being said, a sizzling sound coming from the door before she heard the turning of gears. Slowly, the entrance opened up, entire sections of thick metal pushed aside by mechanisms perfectly set into the structure. *"What now?"* she asked, as steam exploded out of the entrance. Her shields flared up, two of them shattered by the released air. She felt the heat too, absorbing a part of it, her wings set alight.

*"Key Warden. Entering the sphere is not recommended. The current temperature is not suited for biological life. Y.. you... will die,"* the voice resounded in her mind, the last bit distorted.

She dodged a silver blade, the Executioner ripped in half a moment later. *Fuck it.*

*"Violence, time to leave,"* she said but noticed the presence on her shoulder had already vanished.

*Hot!*

*Survive!*

The thoughts reached her mind as she stepped into the glowing corridor. Ilea took two steps before she slowed, one hand on the wall as her world turned to fire. She tried to cough but her lungs were already burning up. She couldn't see very well, her mantle burning with not just the fires of creation but heat itself. She took another step, wobbling slightly. Ilea tried to teleport closer to the center but the fabric felt strange, erratic. Her magic failed to manifest. Something pierced her leg, the blade of

an Executioner, the machine pushing into the corridor with all of its strength. She watched as its silver body melted, its shields flickering out and even its core glowing and flowing down onto the metal floor, no void magic taking hold from the puddle.

She tried to rub her eyes, her head pounding as she fell to her knees.

*“Key Warden. Please wait until the sphere has cooled. The process will take approximately eighty three years. The control room will be accessible without danger afterwards,”* a voice spoke into her mind but she hardly recognized any of the words.

Some of her mantle was gone, dark blots pooling below her. Was it ash? She felt hot. Really hot. And she was sweating. She didn't remember the last time she sweat. A golden barrier flickered to life all around her, the defensive barrier shattering near instantly. Her skin turned red, her leg exploding in a red blot, the blood and her bones below on fire. She grit her teeth and struggled up, her third tier healing regenerating her leg, her eyes, and giving her brain a small moment of clarity.

Ilea absorbed all the heat she could from the surroundings and sent out a beam of Embered Heart, aimed behind her and towards the exit. She had barely managed to get five meters into the sphere, but she wouldn't stop now. *You got this far. Fire... is...*

Her vision darkened before she blinked, gasping for air but finding only fire. Her healing kept her alive. She paused and sent out another beam, the heat exchange doing nothing to cool the red and glowing surroundings. Primordial Shift activated, giving her a short reprieve. Ilea watched as the fires of creation moved in strange patterns around her, the very fabric formed and moved by her spell slowly burning away. *How can literal space burn?*

She pondered the question for only a moment, deactivating the spell after she had healed herself. Her own fires pushed against the heat around her as she took the next step, and another one right after. Each movement took several seconds, her entire form burning away and regenerating several times in the process. Even her bones burned away slowly, but the heat and magic from all around pulsed with such intensity, she could not run out of mana, even if she tried.

***‘ding’ ‘Heat Resistance reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 30’***

She ignored the message. One more onto the pile already in her mind.

*“Where... is... the control... room?”* she sent out through the connection.

*“Key Warden, the control room is approximately one hundred and twenty four meters ahead of you. I must repeat the warning. The heat inside the sphere is not favorable for biological life,”* the being spoke.

Ilea smirked. Or she tried to activate the relevant muscles, which she lacked at the moment. Not that being near fully burnt away was particularly new to her. *Not favorable, hmm?*

She couldn't make out anything in her dominion, everything pulsing with bright magic. She had faced a four mark Wyrms' sun magic spell before, wondering how comfortable that would be compared to this. Primordial Shift took hold again. She could still not breathe but it hardly mattered. Her ability to heal herself within her spell was comforting enough. Ilea checked briefly to make sure she really had her perception of pain disabled. She closed her eyes for a brief moment and dropped the spell, taking her next step on her one hundred and twenty four meter journey to the control room. It may as well have been a hundred kilometers.

One step came after the other, that's all she knew. One step after the other. She had to go forward. *Forward? Where?* She looked up but did not see. Everything around her glowed. The walls were

hot, her ash was hot. Her bones were hot. Everything glowed. Everything was on fire. A deep fire that burned her very insides. All but the white flame clinging to her form. She tried to giggle but no sound was produced. Her body healed, flesh and ash reforming, and instantly burning away. Slowly, but faster than any fire had any right to burn her. *I am... resistant!* She grit her teeth, feeling them melt away. *Like gum. Strange. Teeth should be... hard? Or should they?* Her brain was cooking, her consciousness fading for a moment before she was back, gasping for air but once again, there was nothing to breathe. There was only heat. Heat and fire.

An eternity passed. Only the speck of a thought pushing her forward. Forward. It was all she knew. All she was. Something strange wrapped around her and then she was cold. So very cold.

Ilea shivered, convulsing on the cool metal floor of a strange spherical room surrounded by a glowing blue barrier. She could feel. Her bones. Her fingers. Her skin. She could feel the hair going down her neck, could feel the blood of the tongue she bit off. It healed but she bit that one off too. There was no pain. No pain. But there was feeling. She shivered. *So cold. Where is. Where am...*

Her eyes were open. She could see. Had she always been able to see? Had she always been able to think? She had walked, had she not? Walked to a strange place. Walked through... heat. Warmth. She stumbled up and puked, blood and pieces of flesh released onto the smooth copper floor. Ilea stumbled back and looked to her left. Through the strange blue barrier she could see a glowing corridor. The end was not visible. It looked strange. Like an abyss. *I don't... no.* She took a step back and away from the corridor yet she could not avert her eyes.

Meditation and healing flowed through her mind, Ilea falling on her ass before she hugged her knees. *I don't... where. The Taleen... the sphere...*

She opened her eyes and stood up, making sure not to look into the corridor. Did she make it? She looked around and found herself in a rather large circular dome like room, clad in what seemed like copper. At the center she saw a single dark green pyramid, about as broad and high as she was tall.

*"Have I reached the control room?"* she asked but noticed the connection was gone. *What else would it be?* She moved closer to the pyramid, finding it covered in runes just like the keys. Tens of thousands of runes, barely large enough for her to read. Different sets of runic languages too, that much she could gauge. She identified the artifact, finding it cool to the touch.

***[The One without Form – lvl ?????]***

*"This is obviously a form,"* she murmured. *The barrier seems to protect against the heat outside. Well...*

She summoned the dagger and twirled it in her hand. "Care to give it a go then?"

"You... made it inside," Aki spoke. "As expected. Nothing could rid the world of your annoying self."

"Not the time," Ilea said with a slight grin. "Now look at it and tell me where to stab you down," she added and moved the dagger over the artifact.

"This is... way to... wait... back. There, at the center. It's similar... to the Pursuer. That section, though far more complex. Ilea... I don't know if I can..." Aki spoke.

Ilea moved him closer to the section he had indicated. "You tell me what to do, Aki. I can destroy this thing and get out of here with you in tow. Or you can give it a shot. But we don't have time to waste, the Hunters are fighting out there."

“Hunters... yes. As was I, a Hunter. Turned enchanted tool, copied... Ilea, it was an honor to meet you, to fight by your side,” the dagger spoke and paused. “But I am no Hunter.” His voice was steady now, focused. “I am a Sentinel. And motherfucker, what Sentinel would stop here? Stab me down, mad healer. And let us see what happens.”

Ilea grinned. “The honor was all mine. Also, I’ll beat you up if you die,” she said and rammed the dagger down.