

Ilea looked through the mesh of magic, trying to find rhyme and reason within the chaos. She could see bits and pieces, and then it all changed again.

“Dragons unfamiliar. Auras, enchantments, runes. Space same. Open your eyes.” the Meadow sent.

She grinned, the answer both unhelpful and calming at the same time. Either she had the tools to find the answer, or she would die. *Unacceptable*, she thought. To die to the first dragon she encountered. More annoying was that Audur wasn't even a proper one! Green healing fire that made eyes explode and skin melt just didn't fit with Ilea's idea of a dragon fight. She wanted what Pierce had advertised. *Not meant to reach this power? I will show you what I can do. You. The Ascended. The Monarchs, and everyone else who wants to be a pain in my fucking ass.*

Ilea forced herself to calm down, her entire focus back on the mesh. She sent out a few ashen copies, telling them to stalk the halls and scout out everything. She wouldn't learn anything but if it occupied Audur for a few more seconds before she decided to find and kill her, it was well worth her time.

‘ding’ ‘Sentinel Reconstruction [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 5’

‘ding’ ‘Azarinth Awakening [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 4’

‘ding’ ‘Sentinel Core [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 5’

‘ding’ ‘Arcane Circulation [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 3’

‘ding’ ‘Authority of Ash and Ember [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 3’

‘ding’ ‘Avatar of Ash [Enhanced] reaches 3rd lvl 4’

‘ding’ ‘Phaseshift reaches 3rd lvl 30’

‘ding’ ‘Bulwark of Ash reaches lvl 10’

‘ding’ ‘Bulwark of Ash reaches lvl 11’

‘ding’ ‘Deviant of Humanity reaches 3rd lvl 14’

...

‘ding’ ‘Deviant of Humanity reaches 3rd lvl 17’

‘ding’ ‘Identify reaches 2nd lvl 2’

‘ding’ ‘Meditation reaches 3rd lvl 15’

‘ding’ ‘Monstrous reaches lvl 3’

‘ding’ ‘Spear of Ash reaches lvl 15’

'ding' 'Veteran reaches 3rd lvl 23'

...

'ding' 'Veteran reaches 3rd lvl 25'

'ding' 'Arcane Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 21'

'ding' 'Blast Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 6'

'ding' 'You have unlocked one third tier General skill point'

Ilea immediately invested it into wood magic resistance. She would've used her emergency point anyway, considering the circumstances. *And of course there's no resistance against healing. Even if it melts your face.*

She smirked to herself. *Ironic.*

'ding' 'Wood Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 1'

Wood Magic Resistance – 3rd lvl 1

A connection made from a mage to nature allowed for this talent to take root. Facing the force of nature you grow more accustomed to its effects, your body more resilient to the magic of the forest.

2nd stage: Magic of life and nature. It is concerning how much you have enraged the usually peaceful creatures and mages using this school. Through painfully learned understanding, your body can now absorb a fraction of the life used.

3rd stage: You are a being of death and corruption, having invoked the wrath of Audur. Wood spells and conjurations are less effective and much more costly once they come in touch with your flesh.

'ding' 'You have challenged Audur, Guardian of the West – One Core skill point awarded'

'ding' 'You have fought a Dragon – One Core skill point awarded'

'ding' 'You have survived the Cleansing Flame – One Core skill point awarded'

Maybe I should fight more dragons, Ilea mused with a wry smile, getting up when she saw a wooden bird fly down the corridor. A fully charged blast of Embered Heart burned the creation, the charred bird falling to the ground. *Can't even fully incinerate this tiny thing,* she thought, looking at the smoldering walls all around before she burned the bird away with another blast.

She could see Verena's mark move further away. *"You can send me a message. Once day, ten words."*

With everything she had seen, Audur either enjoyed a good hunt or simply didn't care about the others. *Must be boring to be the center of the fucking universe for hundreds of years. That's how self important she sounds at least,* she thought, moving through the corridors in an effort to both map out the place a little and meet back up with the others.

I wonder if we just made too much noise.

She wondered what else it could be, her eyes opening wide. *Hereven found us too. My mental resistance? A bright shield to anyone that attacks it. Fuck, I never checked if it could be detected by anyone with a smidgen of mind magic to their name.*

It was a gamble. If she disabled the resistance, she could very well be taken out instantly by Audur's mind magic, if the dragon possessed as much. On the other hand, she couldn't be located by the same means, if that was a thing at all. *Still have one more use of Eternal Sight, so I guess the risk is manageable.*

She disabled the resistance, moving on silently, her space awareness mixed with her dominion taking in every change in the auras permeating the whole area. *Leaving the range would be the easiest answer, but it's also what she would be expecting. Either that or she thinks we will go back to the gate. I doubt she would leave it here without ever destroying it for no reason.*

There was plenty she didn't know, but Ilea deemed her best course of action to be her Space Awareness. Nothing else than long range teleportation offered an easy out. Somehow she doubted even Pierce could outpace and escape a motherfucking dragon.

Ilea felt the mana density increase again, her wings stopping her as she twirled and flew into a nearby room. She activated Phaseshift and let herself sink into a stone bed, her body floating down before it was pushed up again slightly when she reached the ground. *Good, didn't float through.*

She could see her mana tick down, the cost increasing with each passing second. Ilea could feel the mana increase yet again, several times over now, Audur slowly prowling past the large corridor where she had been in just a moment earlier.

She watched the dragon sniff the air, her sharp claws not leaving a single scratch on the stone floor as she moved.

Audur's head poked into the room, her shoulders too large for more than that to enter. She growled lightly as her golden eyes scanned the room. Two seconds passed, Ilea holding her breath despite her phased state.

There it is!

'ding' 'Space Awareness reaches 3rd lvl 29'

The pattern had repeated. She was sure of it. Her perception turned to unintelligible mush again, Ilea back to deciphering the new set of combinations. She tried to burn the imagine into her mind. Its repeated appearance meant the Dragon wasn't a master of space magic like the Meadow, unable to create an infinite set of puzzles but using a set few on repeat, likely an automated process by the spell connected to its aura.

The dragon glanced around one more time, checking the adjacent room before it left, rushing out of her dominon's range in mere moments.

Ilea disabled her spell, her body pushed out of the solid matter before her wings caught her in the air. She checked the hallway and found no trace of the dragon, the mana density returned to merely heavy. *Even when she was close... nowhere near what the Meadow produces. And yet the source... is so much brighter. Is she trying not to kill the creatures that live here?*

She could see the many beings move around, insects mostly within the dark and damp corridors of the Taleen facility. Her wings moved quickly, her eyes on the mark in the distance. *They went quite far. Good.*

It took her the better part of a minute to reach Verena through the many corridors, broken walls, and down several floors.

Both Pierce and Hereven were present, the former badly injured.

“Don’t heal me,” Pierce immediately said.

Ilea noted that the woman didn’t have any visible wounds, but she was in a rather rough state.

“*You survived! But... your mind? What happened?!*” the demon spoke.

“I disabled my mental resistance in an effort to hide my presence. She went the other way but she’s quick and I don’t know how long she’ll keep this up,” Ilea said.

“*Until she has finished her hunt,*” Hereven said.

“We should move, towards the open space at the center. I’ll be able to avoid her spells easier, and maybe get us out,” Ilea said.

“I can sense the vibrations if she’s coming towards us,” Pierce said. “She’s fucking silent for her size.” Her voice shook slightly, the woman gulping as she checked the surrounding corridors. “She’s coming back.”

“Stay calm,” Ilea said and healed her mind, feeling that Pierce’s presence within her dominion was barely visible, magically that was. “Focus on the vibrations. Tell Hereven where she is, and you relay the information to us. Or can she spot telepathy?”

“*I do not believe her capabilities to be quite as masterful. It was good for you to disable your resistance. I believe she lacks the ability to find you through its presence, but we should not underestimate Audur,*” the Mind Weaver informed, the group now on the move again, Verena leading the flying companions.

“*Teleportation still not working,*” she informed the others through Hereven.

“*Fire subdued. Nearly unusable, fire woman,*” Hereven sent. “*Dragon coming, three hundred meters back. Hide. Lightning woman.*”

Everyone spread out, spells extinguishing. Pierce molded with a dark set of stones, her armor flowing out. Hereven chose a dark corner and pulled Verena with it, a simple visual illusion shrouding them in shadow. Ilea sank into a piece of furniture in a separate room. She absorbed mana from the vicinity, meditating to keep her regeneration high.

Three seconds later, Audur prowled past, sniffing the air a few times.

Ilea watched her glance at the room Pierce hid in, her eyes glowing with power as she growled lightly and moved on.

She stepped into the next room over, ignoring the corner in which Hereven and Verena hid, both floating and holding their breaths.

This time she moved a clawed arm, cutting through the stone wall preventing her entry as if using a sharpened dagger on a piece of paper. She moved in and sniffed the air once more, her claws

moving past the various pieces of stone furniture before they came to rest on top of a large slab of stone, Ilea hiding within.

She was phased within the storage unit, compartments within the slab destroyed and empty. And still it seemed the dragon was set on her location.

Ilea didn't have time to contemplate, watching the patterns come and go as the creature's aura shifted time and time again. Her claws scraped against the top of the slab before she pressed down slowly, cutting into the stone.

She could see the magic in the dragon's claws and knew they wouldn't just pass without a trace. *Come on. You trained with a fucking sentient tree. Focus.*

The patterns moved, Ilea waiting with closed eyes and approaching claws before she smirked, opening them again as the claws cut through stone. Ilea however had appeared one floor above, having used one familiar set of patterns to slip through with Displacement.

She could see the dragon's slightly confused look, the beast growling to itself as it moved on, entirely ignoring Pierce and the others, or having failed to detect them.

Ilea now had the issue of a floor between her and the others. *"I'm above. Continue towards the center. I move here."*

"You teleported. You fucking escaped from a dragon! Lightning woman," the Mind Weaver relayed.

"We haven't escaped. Fire woman," came the reminder. *"My shroud should hide us. It's simple in nature. Simple enough to fool her enhanced perception. I believe she looks for complex spells, though I do not know how she spotted Lilith."*

"Not lightning anymore, Dragonkiller. Yes. I will remember the name. Though perhaps you could stop hiding and show the power of your name," the demon said, its voice starting to sound a little anxious.

"Wood in the way here," Ilea said, coming up on a wall of roots glowing with magic.

"Do not touch it!" Hereven informed. *"Our way is blocked too. She will know we are here if we try to move through."*

Ilea sat down and started meditating. *"Stay where you are. Don't move."*

A few seconds passed, Ilea watching the aura move and turn, the magic weaving through the fabric of space and everything within. She breathed out slowly, shivering slightly as she started to unravel a little more, understanding growing of what this foe had conjured up. It was a stroke of luck that Audur was not in fact a master space mage, and still, Ilea considered the possibility of a deliberate way of escape. *It would be too convoluted. Or she will come and crush us at the last moment when we think ourselves safe. No. Don't overthink it. It's the only way.*

'ding' 'Space Awareness reaches 3rd lvl 30'

Displacement activated, the group appearing beyond the wooden barriers. Ilea saw a flash of magic flare up within the wood right as they passed, her spell activating again to bring the group further away. A roar resounded from deep within the Taleen facility right as they appeared within the open caverns.

'ding' 'You have heard Audur's roar – You resist its effects'

Ilea allowed herself a grin, forming an ashen copy as she dropped her own mantle and wings entirely, her Titan Core disabled and heat generation ceased. She sent the copy to the gate room and displaced the group down to where the Dragon's lair was supposed to be located.

They fell, Verena following suit as her fire ceased, nearly all magic gone from the group a moment later.

Ilea grabbed on to the falling demon, its body locked in the roar induced paralysis. She used her spell a few more times, bringing the group into a crevice near the bottom of the caverns, mists covering a set of light blue lakes. Statues and monuments were present on islands of stone, creatures of the same material working on various new creations.

"Let's hope she takes the bait," Ilea sent and activated her third tier Transfer. She wondered for a moment if she should attach one of the Druned as well, very much interested in learning about them. *They want to be here,* she reminded herself, remembering what the demon had said. The runes continued to form when they heard a heavy impact far above.

Two seconds later, her ash had vanished. Another roar resounded, this time from farther away.

Ilea sighed, knowing that the plan had worked out. She smiled when the spell took hold, the fabric of space shifting before the group appeared near the Valley of Carnage.

"Come to the Taleen gate on Krahen. Now. Emergency," she sent to Feyrair and Neiphato.

The two weren't far off, the flying dragon form of Feyrair already visible as Ilea charged her wings and grabbed the others. "A short detour. Just in case she can locate us through my spell. Two allies will join us shortly. Don't attack anything."

Do not underestimate dragons, she told herself. *Especially not when they have anti teleportation auras.*

The group shot off towards the dungeon, Ilea getting the key ready when the two Elves appeared nearby.

"What... who?! Another dragon?!" Pierce exclaimed.

Feyrair hissed as he returned to his Elven form.

Neiphato bowed respectfully to the two women and the demon. The latter remained paralyzed still, all moving into the dungeon.

"No time to explain. Get on the platform," Ilea said and put in the key, selecting a random destination somewhere in the north, far east of Audur's domain. She activated the gate and removed the Krahen Isles from her available Transfer destinations.

The gate came to life and moved the entire group into a dimly lit Taleen dungeon.

Hereven stumbled forward, falling to its knees as it made a few gurgling sounds. *"I'M FREEEEEEEEEEEE!!!"*

Verena and Pierce raised their hands to their ears, Neiphato hissing at the sudden sound.

"Quiet, demon," Feyrair said as he looked at the group. "Are we safe now? I was in the process of hunting a four mark," he explained and spread his arms in an annoyed shrug.

Ilea summoned a meal and sat down in her ashen chair a few meters away from the gate. "We were fleeing a Dragon. You tell me if we're safe."

The dragonling hissed, glancing at the group before he turned to the gate. “We should destroy this.”

“She’s too large to use that t-” Ilea said with a stuffed face when the gate came to life once more. “You’ve got to be shitting me,” she said and stored her food. “Run away, all of you. I’ll hold her back.”

She displaced the whole group as far away as she could, blinking her eyes when she looked at the being standing on the platform.

[Pursuer Praetorian – lvl ???]

The Praetorian variant was smaller than an Executioner, its silver carapace shimmering in the dull light. “Intruder detected,” the creature said in a distorted mechanical voice, its eyes glowing a bright green as it aimed two cannon like extensions at Ilea.

“Oh thank the fucking gods,” Ilea sighed, her body blasted away by a steel projectile the size of her head. She twirled in the air and landed on her feet, her Wyrms armor appearing around her as her mantle spread to cover the large form. Heat gathered within her as her weight increased. “Welcome to...,” she said and checked.

‘ding’ ‘You have entered the Izlental dungeon’

“Izlental,” she finished and ran at the machine.