

Interesting, that one, Ilea thought as she tried to decipher the next puzzle set around her. The walls were merely a distraction to keep her on her toes while she had to not only defend against the powerful space magic attacks aimed at her head and wings, but solve the field of magic coming from below. Anti teleportation, as usual. And yet the training had never quite been this intense. Nor this difficult.

Instead of small runed circles formed below her on a whim, the Meadow had made the entire dome into its playing field, with the tree at the center. The claustrophobic feeling that gripped her heart was nothing other than the overwhelming presence of charging space magic. All within the circle. And every time she managed to teleport, the entire thing shifted, losing just a bit of its gathered power. Without her enhanced space manipulation, she wouldn't have known what exactly was happening but it felt the same as when she tried out her charges before.

Her skull cracked under the pressure of a dozen focused strikes. All her defenses and third tier space magic resistance kept her alive, the damage healed again in moments. She didn't know what the runic circle was charging towards exactly but she knew she would lose if it activated before she reached the tree.

The Meadow remained quiet. It watched her, she knew, from all around. The knowledge alone coupled with her spatial perception nearly made her shiver. It was one thing to rationally know that the being was not only her ally, but a good friend too. It was something else entirely to believe any of those thoughts when reality itself moved in from all around, her death slowly charging up from below. The field of burning ash she had laid onto the ground didn't burn through the regenerating stone fast enough, the runes below, invisible but thrumming within the fabric.

Her skills kept her focused, the healing power in her mind and body, the experience of all her battles, skills like Veteran and the Primordial Flesh. All worked together and it still wasn't enough. Still she felt the same way as when she had first set eyes on the Sand Elemental down in the Descent. Something entirely beyond her comprehension, beyond anything a human could ever face or understand. And still she moved forward. She had faced the corrupted creature back then, and she faced this being now. She feared but her hands were steady, she was injured but her body healed, she was pushed back but resisted.

Again, she slipped, her chest crushed and her head nearly squished. A last ditch effort to push against the overwhelming fabric manipulation with her childish attempt at spatial control saved her consciousness. Her brain undamaged as stone slammed into her form. The impacts felt dulled, her resilience, armor, and earth magic resistance working in tandem with her healing. Her flesh was bruised, a few of her organs destroyed, unable to resist the powerful blows. She smirked and transferred. Another four meters closer, more than she had managed with the last one.

Her injuries healed quickly with both her third tier, the new absorption from her flames, and her regeneration alone. She met a wall of space magic in her way. Arcane power infused with the flame of creation lashed out. Burning ash spread from her body. A beam of energy slashed into the invisible force, letting her slip through the fabric with a twist of her body. The walls struck again, this time pushing her down towards the ground. Her wings were destroyed and reformed several times, her spine resisting the heavy impacts from above. A push of charged manipulation deflected a single plate and broke the series of impacts.

She got through and fought the ongoing grip the being had on her form. Each passing minute added to her defenses, Primordial Flesh, Titan Core, and Eternal Brawling working in tandem to make her more resilient. The formation clicked in her mind and she saw an opening in the torn fabric around her. Transfer activated and pushed her through. Again, the formation below lost a tiny bit of power but it was too late.

Ilea had ten meters to go to reach the tree when a strange spell activated all around her. All the stone walls stopped instantly, the air itself locked in place. Her eyes went dark as if someone had flicked off the lights. She couldn't breathe. Her dominion was the only thing that informed her that she was in fact at the same place she been before. She perceived the stone, saw the ground, the Meadow, the magical light of the barrier. The power she felt from the ground reminded her of the battle in Erendar, the warring four marks, and the Wyrms on the Krahen Isles. While the sheer might of the spell was overwhelming, the calm of it all frightened her the most. There were no explosions, there was no heat, no sudden pressure increase from the being's space magic.

It was just still.

Quiet.

As if the world had stopped.

Someone without Space Manipulation and her dominion might've thought the magic time related, or perhaps dimensional, the rules of this realm shifted to something different. None of the was the case. Ilea knew that all the spell did was amplify the control of the Meadow. Its control over the fabric and all that lay within.

She could no longer move, as the being did not permit such. Her flames were extinguished, as they were not allowed to exist. Her ash was dissolved. None of it happened instantly, her healing and resistances working against the magic but it was meaningless. She was merely a single framework inside a space of total control. She watched as the ash was willed away from her right arm, the flesh below separated as if cut perfectly by a hundred blades. No blood flowed out from the pieces that slowly floated away from her still body, her form hanging in the frozen air.

Ilea felt the pressure build now, her head about to cave in when her perception slowed. She couldn't teleport, her ability not even close to anything that could break through this field, Audur's aura a flimsy wooden box compared to this prison of perfect control. Her healing kept her alive but it remained inconsequential against the manipulation of her very form. The only thing she had left to try was break the very rules that bound her to this reality.

Primordial Shift activated. Ilea grinned when her head didn't burst. She could still not breathe as the very air was locked in place. Nor could she move, every piece of reality around her a solid wall. But she found the Meadow's control slip past her writhing form, as if she had escaped the fabric itself. And perhaps that was exactly what she did. Ilea wouldn't know, both the Meadow's magic circle and her own ability far beyond what she could truly comprehend.

The instinctual reaction of a being blessed with power. Trapped by a hunter who knew every piece of their tools, every intricate interaction of their runes, every weakness of their enemy. She had become the monster, so many of which she had killed before. A monster with one last card to play, only delaying the inevitable. For when the hunter understood her spell, the fight was over.

And so they remained, locked in place. Ilea's mana and health dwindled with exponential costs but everything she absorbed kept her alive. She wouldn't last much longer, but while she couldn't

understand the intricacies of the Meadow's spell, she could downright grasp the mana used to keep it active. In the end the circle lost out, stone projectiles moving again as Ilea took a deep breath.

'ding' 'You have resisted the runic circle of absolute control – One Core skill point awarded'

Primordial Shift ended, her being returned to the fabric. She spread her wings and floated back, watching as the stone around her dissipated. *Is it out of mana?* The thought was dismissed when she saw a forest of roots grow below her.

"Well done. Truly an extraordinary skill, coupled with all your other abilities. Know that even four marks have failed to escape this runic circle," the being spoke.

"Thanks. It was quite... humbling to see. I appreciate you showing me one of your fourth tier spells," she answered, the usual sarcastic tone left out for once.

A giggle floated through the dome. *"That was no fourth tier spell, Ilea. But I suppose it could be equivalent to one."*

Her body once more healed and covered in burning ash, Ilea floated over the growing roots. *"You just made that up? So you're telling me Claire or Iana could set that spell up too?"*

"Set up, yes, perhaps. However they lack the mana to activate it, nor do they have the ability to even remotely control it. Neither do you for that matter. Not yet," the Meadow spoke. *"Do you require a break?"*

"My mana is pretty low. Let me get some of yours," she said and formed a layer of burning ash that spread down onto the wood. She grinned. *"Do You need a break?"*

"I use runes because they require less mana than fourth tier spells. At a similar power that is," the Meadow explained.

Ilea raised her brows. *"Meaning you know rune combinations more powerful than your fourth tier spells?"*

"Keep growing, and you might find out," the being said in an amused tone.

"All the incentive I need, really," Ilea said and let herself fall down into the burning roots. That way she didn't have to wait until the Meadow had filled the entire bloody dome in wood. She landed with a sphere of Embered Heart, the flames pushing away the wood for a split second before it came back.

The Meadow's approach to killing her was quite simple. Trap her with anti teleportation runes or space magic, and slowly break into her skull to disable her mind. After that it was only a matter of getting her regenerating health to zero. The attempts required continuous effort however as she wouldn't exactly sit still to let the roots crack her skull. It seemed her new evolution coupled with the enhancements were enough to at least destroy some of the created wood, albeit at a slower rate than the Meadow could form it all.

"I'm wondering. Can you kill me in an instant with one of your higher level spells?" she asked, dodging through the field of roots, a set of ten wooden arms gripping her legs before she was pulled down. Ilea increased her weight and burned away the wood close to her. She summoned her armaments and formed a mantle of burning ash around its form.

"I have thought about that myself. Before your new evolution, I was fairly certain. Now, it's difficult to say. There are many things going into health damage calculation and you're incredibly elusive."

It's fair to say that I would likely use a less impressive method to kill you, if there is no need to end the battle quickly." the being explained.

Ilea smiled. *"Hmm... to think that even the great Meadow can't instantly wipe me from existence."*

"The chance of success remains fairly high. It's merely not certain anymore," it answered.

"To think that the great Meadow can't reliably wipe me from existence. Marvelous," Ilea adjusted, speaking in the same tone.

Verena watched a little longer, Ilea now wearing her flaming armaments to counter the wood creator's magic. Beams and spheres of flame cut through everything as she was struck by spears and roots, her armor ripped apart and regenerating a hundred times over.

The pressure from before was gone. And yet the barrier remained. A reasonable choice of course as the flaming beams were often stopped by the set up perimeter.

"She mentioned you were here," Verena said as she turned around to face Lucas. "I haven't heard from you in years."

He raised his hands and smiled. "Yes. Hmm. Well, I thought... if I stay away for long enough, you'd get someone else to become an Elder."

She rubbed her temple and sighed. "I was worried."

His eyes softened a little before he looked down. "I... apologize."

Verena just shook her head. "Have you kept up your training at least?"

Lucas didn't reply.

She sat down next to him and watched the burning forest, dulled maniacal laughter coming from within the barrier as several logs crashed against the stumbling armor.

"Make sure to inform the Meadow from now on. About your whereabouts," she said.

"I will," he answered after a while.

"How long until we leave?" Pierce said as she looked over.

"She said a few hours," Verena said.

"Feel like visiting Hallowfort? I don't really feel like working on my skills while that monster is training nearby. No, not you Meadow," Pierce said.

Verena looked at the woman for a few seconds before she stood up. "Sure. A bit of normalcy for once. And you come too, Lucas. When was the last time you've eaten a normal meal."

"Light and water is plenty of sustenance," he murmured, acting like an old man as usual.

And you were supposed to be the strongest, Verena thought, gently touching his shoulder. She looked towards the dome and smiled. *Maybe we should've founded a council long ago. Instead of clinging to our ways.*

“Meadow, can you get us up to the town?” Pierce asked.

“*Certainly, lightning child,*” the being replied to the three of them.

Verena felt the space magic manifest but compared to Ilea's spells, she had no chance of resisting. *I'll have to face that creature at one point or the other. Maybe now... with Lilith and the Council, I'll be able to focus a little more on myself.*

They appeared in the town made of stone, set atop the ancient statue, the Meadow somewhere below.

“This might be the safest settlement in all of Elos by now,” Pierce mused as she looked around.

“Indeed. The Endless Meadow sees all,” Lucas mused.

“You're more senile than I remember,” Verena said and walked to a nearby Dark One. “Greetings glaive master. Where may we find food and drink?”

Ilea stored her armor before it fell apart entirely, her mantle soon pierced by a dozen lances of wood. She kept her weight at the highest point, Embered heart and Archon Strike keeping the encroaching forest at bay, a little bit at least. *“Stop playing around. I want to actually test how viable this is compared to evasion.”*

The ground shook and the crystal light from above vanished a moment later.

She smirked with a sigh and let lose one last Embered Heart before magic slammed into her from all sides. Her mantle held for a while but the first injuries soon manifested. The problem just like the many times before wasn't the actual damage done by the piercing roots but the fact that they prevented her from healing her organs. She couldn't exactly reform her heart around a wooden stake. The joke wasn't lost on her either.

Compared to the last few times however, the Meadow couldn't get through her defenses as quickly. Which allowed her to use her spells more often. Destroying the elements helped but it felt like using a bucket of water to fight a forest fire. A bucket now, after her evolutions. Before that it had been a tiny water gun.

She ignored the amount of blood and fleshy bits in the meat grinder, her pain nonexistent, no blow able to faze or stun her. *“This reminds me of the vampire I killed,”* she sent as Primordial shift activated. She healed herself fully and deactivated the spell again. Compared to Phaseshift, the Meadow failed to entirely fill her unoccupied place in the fabric with wood or stone, which made the entire affair a little more interesting than an instantaneous loss.

“Maybe we should work on removing your brain permanently. You would be unstoppable,” the Meadow sent.

Gates formed around her, the nearby roots vanishing into the pyramid she had erected around herself. The Meadow countered with its own gates, sneaking roots behind the portals without much trouble.

“I don’t know if you want a zombie Ilea running free,” she mused.

“Just another dangerous monster in the wilderness,” the Meadow said.

Ilea crossed her arms before her mantle was shredded again, her skin and muscles slowly bored through by rotating spikes. A sphere of near white energy burned away a part of the wood again, her injuries healing near instantly. *“Come on, give me some credit. Ever seen a monster with regeneration this ridiculous? Arcane healing, mana intrusion, ash mantle, space magic, flame of creation?”*

“Just another very dangerous monster in the wilderness then. Or would you like a special title?” the being asked.

“Lilith is plenty I think. But I’d probably be seen as some demon or goddess. Maybe zombie me would actually go around healing things,” she said.

“It is said that Lilith appears on cloudless days, when the winds come from the east. Offerings of food will calm the being. All those brought to her with illness and injury will be healed,” the Meadow offered.

“Not bad. But if you attack her...,” she suggested.

“Her rampage usually lasts several weeks until she either kills everything in an area of fifty kilometers, or until she once more feels hungry,” it finished.

“So I’m some kind of natural catastrophe type monster you really shouldn’t mess with. Hmm, I can get behind that I suppose,” she mused with a smile. *“Could’ve even happened with some of my evolution options.”*

“You value your sanity too much for that to happen, but I’m sure there are already high level creatures that would love to have you as their instrument,” the Meadow said.

Ilea spread her arms, her entire form pierced by a thousand thin wooden spikes. *“How would I be seduced by anything lesser than the Endless Meadow?”*

The being giggled in the form of space magic. *“I suppose a good meal would do the trick.”*