

Ilea landed beyond the murky underground lake previously protected by the high level void creature. A smooth platform of steel touched the water, a triangular metal archway reaching up and above, nearly four meters high. It was open, the hallway beyond dark and empty.

She looked up and checked the present magic. *Why do they always built this large? They're tall, but two and a half meters are more than enough.*

There were faded runes etched within the metal, no magic remaining within.

So let's see what's lurking in this one.

Ilea flew slowly, watching the runes in case they suddenly lit back up with power. She had less than a basic understanding of enchantments, even less when it came to traps that involved them. So far her approach of surviving any fire, spikes, moving walls, and trapped monsters had worked rather well, made her stronger even, more resilient. The Architect was the first in a long while who had managed to prepare a trap capable of killing her.

I wonder how well I'd do against that blast now. Slowed down, with my higher level barrier and Fourth tier.

Nothing sprung as she flew through the corridor, finding a thick steel wall at the end of it. Ilea once more could not spot any enchantments and decided to teleport through, into the open space she could see about five meters beyond.

What she found was a dark hall, extensive both in width and height. Metal beams reached across from one end to the other, large contraptions made of various bits of now rusted metals, broken glass, and dead runes littered the grounds, some reaching far up towards the ceiling, connected with extensive tubes and walkways to the walls or other machines. Everything lay dead, half overgrown with moss, water dripping from a dozen points in the ceiling. Puddles had formed, one large enough to be a pond.

Ilea could hear and see a few dozen creatures skittering to get away. Insects and monsters that liked the dark. Four legged beings with glowing blue eyes and three tails, rushing to get away from the powerful intruder. Her.

She failed to identify the creatures, but her perception of magic and her experience was enough to know that they were no match for her. Not in any capacity. But then most weren't. Not anymore.

Well, I sure as hell won't search through this entire half flooded thing in the hopes of finding anything useful, she thought, flying through the facility with her eyes open. Anything obvious she could report, but the rest she would leave to Aki. What she wanted to do was spring traps, and attract the attention of Ascended or other creatures that remained.

At least the facility isn't untouched. And these creatures here either came to be within it, or they found a way inside that didn't lead past that flesh ball.

Few of the doorways remained intact, others leading down into flooded stairwells. No creature chose to face her as she flew past, inspecting what she could. The runes she didn't know. The purpose once inherit to the decrepit machines was lost to her. Was it just a testing facility? Was it one of the places required for the Extraction? Or something else entirely?

Could be an oversized soft ice maker for all that I know. The implication of such a consideration in regards to the Knights of Marahn was rather dark. Funny too, but dark as well. *They probably just died to a distraction, for the actual plan of the Ascended.*

And now we search and fight because of something seen by divination magic of all things.

“Maybe Ker Velor just wants his soft ice back,” she murmured, stopping before a massive steel doorway that lay partially open. A cool wind flowed into the hall from beyond. Ilea felt her hairs stand up slightly. Not because of her instincts, she found, but something near as familiar.

Lightning.

She moved through the opening and flew through another hallway, this one barely remaining with stone and steel alike breaking in through walls and ceiling. Cracks led out and away, far too small for Ilea to move through. The water would’ve reached her knees if she had been walking.

Ilea squinted her eyes when her dominion picked something up. Lightning, moving through the water before it dissipated. For just a moment. Again, a few seconds later.

She couldn’t determine the source, but she knew it was coming from ahead. *Not arcane lightning either,* she thought, having considered the northern landscape.

Ilea teleported past a set of boulders blocking the way, coming out on the other side. Another expansive hall spread out, this one not as littered with machines. Instead there was more vegetation. Trees lush with blue and pink leaves, roots breaking through the stone and steel on the ground, chunks of rock having fallen from the ceiling, now laying broken within or on top of the ancient metal. Light shone in from a few large cracks in the ceiling. The air was fresh compared to the putrid smell of the caverns before.

The dull sound of thunder rolled through the halls, the stone and metal shaking ever so slightly.

Ilea felt it better now. The magic all present. As if the air itself was infused with lightning. She didn’t much care for the facility around her, most of it surely lost to time and nature. What she wanted to see was the source of this lightning. It felt familiar.

A single broken steel doorway led out of the hall, light coming in from beyond. Ilea flew closer and landed. Whatever hallway or room had been beyond the door was long gone. Instead she found ripped steel and a drop of over ten meters, down into a valley.

Mountains rose on each side, snow covered at their peaks. Ilea saw a broken steel dome sat at the center of the valley, several hundred meters away. The runes she saw through the broken side reminded her of the dome she had seen in the Descent. Where the mana had been collected.

So this place was a part of the mesh, that or this piece was brought here somehow.

There was no arcane lightning in the area but as Ilea scanned the mountains above, she paused on the dark clouds moving in a serene circular pattern straight above. She wasn’t sure how high up she was by now, but if these were the same mountains she had seen upon her arrival in the area with Aki, then the arcane storms did not reach this altitude. Neither had she ever seen them move in such a pattern.

The sky lit up for a split second when a bolt of blue and purple lightning struck a mountainside to the east. The crack and impact echoed through the valley, snow rose up and splintered stone was sent rolling down the steep slope near a kilometer away.

The thunder followed.

Certainly ominous, Ilea thought and flew out into the open.

She wasn't particularly surprised when she felt the air change and the spell coming. She took in a deep breath and teleported, the very air seared where the lightning had struck. Stone cracked where she had just been, metal glowing in a bright red color. She felt lightning flow over her mantle, even at the distance she was at by now.

Something stirred in the clouds above.

Her golden shield formed as she willed it, and lightning struck down. A single strike shattered her defense, the second one burning through the walls of ash she had quickly raised, the remaining energies flowing into and through her mantle. The third strike impacted her directly. Ilea clamped down her jaws, her muscles tensing as her healing pushed against the slow moving lightning. She gasped, seeing her skin, veins, and organs burning up at the sheer raw power. Raising her arm, she redirected what she could back out and up towards the clouds. A bolt of white blue lightning spread up and out, branches forming as she released everything that remained.

Smoke rose from her arm, her muscles burnt and healing.

I suppose this is what it feels like to be struck by lightning, Ilea thought with a wide smile, her burst left eye healing once more as she watched the stirring clouds. *"Show yourself,"* she sent, a single whistle rolling through the valley alongside the roaring thunder.

Her smile grew wider when she saw something move within the dark clouds.

Two wings of lightning spread out before they were shrouded once again, a flurry of powerful winds roaring down into the valley. Ilea strained her own wings to push against the pressure, her third tier resistance the only thing that kept her from being swept away. Rocks impacted the ground and her mantle, followed by a rain of pebbles.

She caught a glimpse of two bright blue eyes as arcs of lightning surged throughout the clouds above. Rain started to fall and the winds picked up. She watched as the clouds flowed down and expanded, the sky darkening above the mountains and within the valley.

The form of a humanoid flowed within the mists, itself made of dark fog, wisps following its trail as it moved down into the vale. It reached at least five times Ilea's height, the blue eyes set within its wisp like head looking her way, the organs themselves the only well defined feature of the being.

"Nice to meet you!" Ilea sent, waving at the creature as the winds and rain moved around her, whipping at her wings and mantle. The loud noise drowning out any attempt for her to communicate with her actual voice.

***[Storm Elemental – lvl ????*]**

That's a new one. Not young either, and damn near as powerful as the Meadow. Let's see how this goes. Ilea hoped that a being of storm had no access to space magic, and thus a way to keep her here.

It watched her as the winds and rains turned into a torrent. *"I greet thee, human and Godslayer, wielder of ash."* Its voice resounded in her mind, deep and deliberate. Each word spoken with confidence. It seemed neither interested nor bored, but respectful.

Ilea bowed her head slightly. *"And I greet you, Elemental of the winds, the rains, and lightning. I have not met one of your kind before."*

“Few have. Few of us are home to these lands, young Godslayer. You are brave, to come here, and to challenge me. But I shall face thee, as I have faced others. Prepare yourself,” the being spoke as the winds picked up. It raised its arms, blue light flaring up within the roiling clouds, loud cracks resounding.

“I’m ready to fight, but do we have to? I tend to not battle those capable of speech,” Ilea spoke as ash formed around her, white flame coming to life.

“Hast thou not slain the creature of void? Hast thou not slain gods to stand here now, before me?” the Elemental asked, slight confusion apparent.

“I have, but it left me no choice, nor did the others,” Ilea spoke.

Lightning surged above as the Elemental raised its arm. *“Then neither shall I. Brace yourself, Faen healer.”*

Ilea summoned her shields when the magic above coalesced, dozens of bright zigzagging bolts of lightning slamming down into the earth within an instant. The very air cooked as her barriers were shattered, her ash punched through as the stone nearby was splintered and burnt. Lightning coursed through her, released from her arm once again as more magic formed above.

She teleported this time, healing the heavy damage done to her internals, her mantle unable to keep all the magic at bay, her barriers nothing in the face of this godlike elemental being. *“I still don’t get wh-”* She teleported again, the lightning spreading out this time, impacting the ground within the valley as the winds turned into a whirling torrent strong enough to pull her with it, small blades of air scraping past her mantle. She raised her arms when a bolt impacted her appearing golden shields, shattering the magic and slamming her downwards, her form spinning in the air before she impacted with a flying chunk of stone, the boulder exploding in a shower of bits and pieces once more picked up by the winds.

Ilea kept her focus, healing the damage as she released the remnants of lightning, teleporting to avoid the continuous impacts all around. She saw the being follow her with its eyes, still floating at the center of the vale. *“Why do we have to fight?”* she asked, teleporting once again.

“Thou considers the morals and history of thine civilization, thine upbringing. Do not disrespect me with those foolish assumptions. Godslayer, thou hast come in search of challenge. And I have waited here, hoping for the same. Now let us fight, until nothing remains, but the now. As we have done since time immemorial,” the being spoke and the skies trembled.

Ilea’s eyes opened wide when she watched the clouds light up in bright blue, condensed energies beyond most she had ever seen nor felt.

The Elemental lowered its mist like arms and closed its eyes, and the world turned white.

Ilea’s perception slowed, the Primordial Shift activating at the same time as her Fourth tier came to life, barriers shattered by the maelstrom of flowing lightning that burned away everything in its path. Her fires flickered as her ash above was stripped away, her runes shimmering in bright blue light as her mana stood against the might of the Storm Elemental. It burned away despite her third tier resistance against lightning, her sentinel core, and her healing.

But then the spell waned, before she considered summoning a gate. Her Fourth tier left her body, the damage done by it healed as her mana regenerated further. The mountains had changed, a circular shape burned into everything but the Ascended mana collector at the center of the vale. Stone had vanished, the ground level lowered by several meters. Everything glowed with residual

heat, flames flickering to life as the overwhelming spell faded. Sparks of lightning ebbed through the ground and air.

The Elemental hovered where it had been before, its eyes opening once more before its chest moved as if it took in a deep breath.

Ilea used every second to gain back mana, back to half but she knew her Fourth tier was essential in surviving that spell. She thought it a fourth tier ability, but there was no notification in her mind. Either she wouldn't receive any core points anymore for surviving fourth tier abilities, or this was really just a normal spell.

She grinned at that, and understood the words shared by the Elemental. *"I apologize,"* she said as her ash burned bright with fire, the heat within her reaching the limits of what she could contain. Her wings pushed against the winds that once more started to pick up, rain sizzling against burning stone. *"I have come in search of challenge. And now, I will meet yours."*

The Elemental did not reply with words, but with magic.

A wave of air as if a wall rushed towards her, stone shattering as the pressure moved past.

Ilea aimed for a nearby mountain side, now more a glowing cliff side, and teleported right before the air reached her, past the wall where she summoned her cannon and aimed. Lightning surged above when the mountain shook from the impact of the torrent. A beam of white fire and heat rushed out and struck a wall of wind, the fires spreading as the very air was set alight with the Flame of Creation.

Ilea saw the two blue eyes glimpse at her and where she had seen no emotion, now she thought that she saw joy. Golden barriers appeared when a set of lightning bolts flashed down towards her, black wings of ash pushing her through the cascade of magical bombardment and the pressure of the air, every shred of precognition and perception working in tandem to avoid the fast moving blasts. A set of three closed in and forced her to use a teleport, Ilea absorbing much of the surrounding mana. The very air was thick with it.

She flew towards the elemental, some of her fires still clinging to a reforming wall of air. Her fist rushed out, Archon Strike releasing in a wave of arcane power, the turquoise wave of fiery energies struck another wall as Reconstruction connected to the being, destructive healing pulsing into its form with every passing moment. Lightning came down upon her, forcing her back and away, but she kept the connection up, forming ash and adding what remained of the burning grounds to her arsenal.

"You bring honor to your kind, human," the Elemental spoke into her mind.

Ilea smiled. The praise was unexpected, but she thought it genuine. *"You're not so bad yourself, Elemental."*

Its eyes pulsed slightly. *"May I ask your name, before we bring this battle to conclusion?"*

"Ilea Spears, and what is yours?"

"I recognize you, Godslayer Ilea Spears as my opponent, and I shall meet you, on this burning field of battle as the Wind of Aever, that which rests atop the northern peaks," the Elemental spoke, and the mountains trembled.

Ilea felt her instincts push her to flee, felt every hair on her body stand up as a flood of magic emanated from the being, her fires instantly pushed aside. She had questioned why the Elemental

knew of the void creature and yet left it alone. Now she knew. There was no challenge in those caverns for this being now declaring her its enemy.

The Wind of Aveer understood. There were moral considerations and consequences to her continued growth in power. There were reasons why she had come here, explanations she would provide to those who did not understand.

An ancient Elemental, seeking battle, just like her. She was young still, and hopelessly outmatched against the magic that she felt. But Ilea wasn't born an Elemental. She was not made an Ascended, nor was she elevated into the divine.

She was human, and she had fought and survived. Against wolves, Drakes, Guardians, and Wyverns. All of it to stand here, in this moment. To face the might of this Storm Elemental.

And to feel alive.

Ilea smiled as magic burned within her. She heard the skies crackle with the weight of magic.

And then she moved.