

Ilea considered charging her wings but without teleportation she would hit more than a few trees on the way her locator indicated. She hissed in response, a greeting instead of hostilities but it was entirely too late.

The elf jumped off from the tree, landing on another before he jumped off again, the misty trail of his blades visible as he twirled and attacked.

Two golden shields flared to life where she saw his magical weapons, the blades stopped immediately as she rushed him. She ignored the somewhat surprised look on his face as her fist came at him. She struck a wall of ice that appeared from thin air, Archon Strike rushing into the material enhanced by the fires of creation. She pushed through the shattering ice, burning ashen limbs lashing out towards him. Three were cut but a few struck his ice armor, setting bits and pieces aflame and biting into the material.

“I’m not here to fight,” she said with a hiss and used a charged blast of her space manipulation, blowing him away. She turned back and looked at the locator as the elf struck one of the nearby trees, spinning before he struck another, finally coming to a stop on a third one with a heavy impact. *So I guess space manipulation still works at least.* She flew off towards the location, glancing back to see more beings breaking out of their ice. *And so much for stealth. Well... they’re elves, might just fight each other instead.*

Several impacts followed a few seconds later. She glanced back to see several spells exploding in the distance. *Wonderful.* Ilea just barely dodged a thin arrow coming for her neck, the projectile fast enough to require her precognition. She didn’t look back, instead flying between the large pillar like trees of ice to avoid more shots coming her way. *Expected at least a few to come for me.*

Ilea saw a flash to her right, finding two black eyes staring back at her. They belonged to an elf with flowing black hair, his body covered in smooth armor made entirely of bone, or a material that looked as such. In his right hand he held a smooth white bow, the string glowing with a strange silvery light. He looked at her with a wide grin on his face, flying with his blueish wisp like wings, keeping up with her in his effortless style of flying.

[Ice Mage – lvl 658]

She hissed her greeting, knowing he had just fired at her.

His grin became wider before he hissed back. A greeting too, though there was a strange edge to it.

Ilea watched him fly ahead, the effortless grace with which he flew through the air something akin to a butterfly, though he outpaced her by a large margin. She didn’t even know if her charged wings could beat him. Her golden shields flared up when he spun and shot a set of ten thin arrows at her, the movements of his hands and arms nearly too fast for her to see. Two of her shields shattered, though she managed to block the arrows at the very least. Another set of ten came before she could resummon her defenses.

This time she veered to the right, avoiding most of them before the last shield took the few that got through. One of the arrows did pierce and struck her armor, exploding in a strange blast of ice, partially getting past her mantle. *Intrusion*, she realized, ignoring the blast as she kept going in the direction her locator had indicated.

“Impressive, human,” the being spoke in a smooth tone, though his accent seemed a little strange as well. “Long has it been... since I have hunted one of yours, so worth-”

Ilea decided to interrupt his speech with a beam of Embered Heart.

Several ice barriers formed as he slipped away, the defenses shattered and one of the trees blasted through.

“And so... temperamental,” he mused, spinning back out from another set of trees. The elf licked his lips, bowing lightly as he annoyingly kept up with her. “Ilynvares. Whom do I have the honor of hunting?”

Ilea sighed, still flying in the same direction.

“By the way. It is not a wise choice to go that way,” he said. “Death awaits you there.”

“Why?” Ilea asked. “I assumed you wanted to kill me too.”

“Oh I do,” he said and hissed, firing another set of arrows at her, the Azarinth Star taking the entire volley. “But in battle. And I promise to eat you afterwards. All of you.”

Oh boy. “You’ve been down here for a long while,” she said. “You could use a refresher on how to talk to women.”

The elf looked confused. “I do not understand, human. How does gender play into this conversation?” More arrows, this time not aimed at her but in the general area. They exploded in blasts of ice, temporarily freezing her wings, some of her mantle lightly damaged.

She twirled shortly, slamming into one of the trees and digging in with her limbs. Now she saw the group of elves following them, a set of five, spaced out and sometimes attacking each other. Mist, ice, arcane, crystal, and something she couldn’t see. Each wore a different set of armor, though the colors were somewhat fitting for the ice and snow, various whites and hues of blue. Bits of metal, bone, fabric, and even leaves adorned their attire, the magical power apparent in the flowing elements around them. Ilea caught glimpses of more moving figures to the side as well as farther back.

Her ashen wings were back and she continued on her way.

“Indeed. You should not dally, though most are not quite as quick as you are,” Ilynvares said. He dodged to the side when a set of burning spears rushed his way.

Ilea spread out the ash and made it follow him, his form too fast to keep up but his attacks were slowed ever so slightly under her pressure. She flew around the trees, trying to keep them between herself and the fast moving elf, sacrificing some of the distance she had to the other elves. More woke up in their wake, though few seemed particularly interested in her ashen form.

“Leave me alone. I’m not here for you. That’s my last warning,” Ilea said as she twirled to dodge the incoming projectiles.

The elf hissed in an amused manner. “But I am here for you, wanderer.”

She sent out another set of ash spears, raising her hand before she used her space magic.

His form was caught in her invisible grip, his armor splintering as one of his eyes burst in a red spray. Burning ash enveloped him right after, the elf screeching with inhuman wails.

Ilea flicked her hand, sending him into one of the trees, though she could tell her grip was waning already. *He does have some resistance.* The move bought her a little bit of time however, her wings working hard to get her through the endless forest.

She sighed when a group of four elves intercepted her from the right, though the spells they fired at her she quickly dismissed as inconsequential. The blasts of ice and water crashed against her golden shields as she sent out spears of burning ash, the explosion ripping through the armor of two elves, one use of her space magic blasting two more aside. She tried to hold back a little, as she was in fact invading their domain, and the weak spells that came for her gave some indication as to their levels. Their sneers turning into pained expressions was rather satisfying however. The last one managed to reach her, but she simply slapped away the ice spear in his arms, then she slapped his face, several bones breaking in the process. He was below three hundred. None of them followed, though the time it took to deal with them let her more dangerous pursuers get a little closer.

She moved on, dodging a few long range spells in the next few minutes but otherwise able to increase the distance between herself and the elves hunting for her. She couldn't spot any other elves hanging from the trees by now. Her movements slowed further, Ilea summoning the locator to double check the direction. She was on course, and she was getting slower.

A glance back revealed that none of the elves were following her anymore, the creatures either having given up, or perhaps deciding to fight each other instead. She deemed either option unlikely, having met plenty of elves before. She would have to worry about some of them looking for her in the Plains to get revenge or to get a proper fight in the first place. If she did manage to escape. Short range teleportation proved to be an issue, but she had no reason to believe her anchors were unreachable for her long range abilities. *But nobody else who came here had an ability like that? I doubt it.*

She assumed the stories were overblown. If she could escape Audur and the trap of the Architect, Ilea believed an elven domain wouldn't prove much of a challenge. She hoped she was right.

The air remained still, her wings occasionally cracking as they moved, bits and pieces of frozen ash falling to the ground. A trail she dissolved as she went. The soul magic pressure had built slightly, though the pure cold was more dominating. Ilea however had survived the presence of an Ice Elemental with far fewer skills and resistance levels. She generated heat within her as she advanced through the underground forest of ice, finally coming out into an open space.

She stopped in the air, looking out onto frozen plains. The ground was a vivid light blue, far more colorful than the forest had been. White cracks were visible below, some moving on for hundreds of meters until she lost sight of them. Ilea turned her head when she heard a deep cracking sound, followed by strange clucking. It sounded both kilometers away and right next to her.

Freaky. She glanced at the locator, the thing still pointing forward and onto the frozen plains. A lake perhaps, or a sea. She had a hard time gauging the dimensions, the wisps here unmoving, her eyes not seeing far enough to discern anything other than the line of frozen trees behind her.

'ding' 'You have seen the Sea of Truth – One Core skill point awarded'

Right. I feel terribly enlightened, she thought, still looking at the apparent sea with some suspicion. At least she assumed she couldn't reach the depths of this one and find another strange eldritch creature. Everything seemed frozen after all.

The ice ceiling was gone too, changing gradually to the same strange mist that covered the entire valley. It wasn't dark however, the frozen ground providing illumination in the same light blue hues. Ilea glanced back again but nobody had followed her. *The annoying one did warn me.*

But the locator pointed her forward and she was here to get the last of the Taleen keys. *More Drakes, deep within the Elven domain of ice.* She smiled to herself. The infiltration had failed, because of course it did. And yet she had pushed through, survived the elves hunting her. *Not just survived.* She had considered fighting them in a more direct manner but there were higher leveled ones around, and she didn't want to garner the attention of the local Monarch, wherever he may be.

And so she moved her wings and flew out onto the sea of truth, her spells at the ready, prepared for whatever would stand in her way. Nothing showed up however, an hour of slowed flying passing by. The trees were gone now, lost in the distance, the frozen grounds the only visible thing in all directions. Occasional sounds came from the depths. Ilea assumed they were caused by ice moving, forming, or breaking deep below.

Half an hour later she finally saw something else. Kilometers ahead she spotted strange floating bits of what she assumed was ice. Hundreds of shards perfectly frozen in the air, some larger than entire houses, others thin and long. The blue light from below reflected off the magical phenomenon in strange and mesmerizing patterns, light flickering as she approached.

The locator pointed to the center of it all.

Ilea could now feel the already freezing air getting colder with each passing meter. When she was just a few thousand meters away, she could barely move her wings. A hundred meters later, she had to land, the limbs constantly freezing over, bits and pieces breaking off as she tried to move them. Her core was now generating heat constantly, fighting off the cold around her. Looking down at her hands, she could see layers of ice forming on her ash, breaking away, then reforming. She left behind a trail of water, more added with every step she took on the freezing sea.

She was glad her eyes still worked. Cracks resounded as she walked, bits and pieces of frozen ash falling to the ground and reforming on her body, the fires of creation now added to fight off the magical climate.

Freezing temperatures no longer affect your body, my ass. Ilea squinted her eyes, feeling the oppressing magic flow through everything in the vicinity. She was getting closer to the source, whatever it was. A wave of ice magic came through, freezing half her form and pushing her back a few meters. She tried to use fabric tear, the space magic barely getting out of her before it froze. Instead she broke out with her fires and strength, some of her fingers and her entire right arm snapping off as she did so. She didn't feel any of it, the missing bits already reforming.

She looked at the healing arm, the process downright crawling compared to her usual speeds. She pushed with the third tier, the magic still not quite as quick as usual but it did the trick, her arm back when she saw another wave of magic through her dominion. Her second tier golden barrier formed around her, walls of burning ash right behind.

The wave came and went, the golden magic not shattering but frozen instead, the cold seeping through and moving through her ash. Her mantle was mostly unaffected this time. She deactivated the barrier, half of it still floating in the air, shimmering with a strange blue and golden hue.

Freaky.

Ilea walked onward, using the same combination of defensive skills to endure the invisible waves of magic. Her precognition and dominion allowed her to react in time. As she was struck by more of

the ice magic, she felt her defense strengthen. At the same time she was sure the attacks were becoming more powerful, though the frequency of the waves remained the same.

Ilea soon passed some of the first shards, hundreds of them hanging in the air without movement. When she passed a large piece of ice, she saw what she knew to be the source of the ice magic waves.

A humanoid figure hanging in the air, its form blurred and unfocused. Two arms were raised to the side, the legs hanging without motion. Two bright dots were set within its head, though Ilea couldn't discern if they were blue, white, black, or any other color. Each was like an abyss, taking her in with infinite depth. Something akin to hair flowed from the being's head, and yet it was perfectly still.

Ilea kept her eyes on the being, healing her brain as blood froze near her nose. She wanted to retch at the sight of the being but felt calm at the same time. What she felt wasn't primal terror at the sight of an ancient predator, but a pure and utter lack of comprehension. The only experience she could compare it to was the act of trying to comprehend powerful magical runes. She was looking at a magical phenomenon, one that overwhelmed every bit of her perception and ability to think.

She couldn't move her jaw very well, and so went with telepathy instead.

"Greetings," she sent, another wave flowing over her barriers and ash. She wasn't sure what to expect. The locator had pointed at this being, which meant the key was in its possession or somewhere behind.

"Words. A language... ancient, changed and adapted. Once spoken by few, now... by many. It is... human... that thou art. Thou hast come here... seeking, what." the being answered, its voice a whisper, barely audible even within Ilea's mind.

"A Taleen artifact, that I believe you have," Ilea sent.

The being was in front of her now. It hadn't used space magic to achieve the feat. Ilea had no idea how it had happened, she only felt a powerful magical source within her dominion.

[Oracle – lvl ?????]

She tried to breathe in but couldn't. Ilea knew now that the being had a lower level than the Meadow. Her instincts however told her to run, the feeling more visceral than anything else she had experienced in a while. And at the same time she felt safe, as if embraced by someone who loved her.

"Guardian of Cerith. Friend... of the Fae. Azarinth Healer. Key Warden, and... traveler of realms. Thou hast come... far... in thine journey, Wanderer," the being whispered. "Gifts exchanged. Show us. The fires... of creation." The being moved its arm, the limb dark and light at the same time.

Ilea could focus on it but failed all the same. She could see something flicker, the triangular shape of the Taleen Key visible for a mere moment. It was held out towards her, offered.