

Evan didn't use the sand to carry him, nor did he use it to attack her. It felt more like he was a part of the element himself. A synergy that reminded her of creatures like the Lightning Elemental or the Fae, a part of their very self connected to the magic that they wielded.

She herself had gone through a few experiences that solidified her connection to her ash. She trusted it like she would an ally, knew that even if her mind was cut, she would be protected. A last defense, or a last attempt to strike back at her enemy. But what she saw from Evan made her feel both awe and envy. She was good enough to wield her ash like an extension of herself and it had taken her years of fighting to get that far. The man in front of her was one with his magic. There was no control, no extension, no relationship, just one being.

Her ashen limbs struck out at him as she flew, her foe spinning through the air, moving back and pushing forward within the sands, his blade finding openings through twenty four limbs of moving ash. It was true, her precognition was the only thing preventing a first strike. The damage she knew would be negligible, but it was a bout, and a question of pride. She didn't rely on her skills alone, and had spent long periods of time fighting to better understand and incorporate her magic, but her ascent to the third mark had been quick. She wasn't in denial either, of course she couldn't match the trained skill of someone with thousands of years of experience, however little he fought in that time.

The question was if another one or two hundred levels wouldn't just be able to overwhelm him anyway. She thought it a possibility, but it hardly mattered. Ilea didn't much care about what would be better, she was merely excited to see how much progress she could still make. *If I could move with my ash like he does with his sand.*

A last spin and his rapier tapped her stomach, their fight coming to a stop as they made some distance between each other. The blade of course failed to penetrate her armor.

"You're the best swordsman I've ever met," she admitted.

"Thank you. Do let me know if you find someone you deem better. I pride myself in my ability. Your limbs are interesting. Some I feel you control with a more direct will and others... seem to move on their own. You're on the right path I feel. Know that even with the manipulation skills you possess now, there is still a lot of potential. But I suppose with your fast growth you'll have new versions before that potential is fully realized," he said.

"And you think that's not the best way to approach it?" Ilea asked.

"It's merely a question of preparation. You can hone your skills for a hundred years without facing a single monster. Or you can fight monsters that could kill you for one month with the same direct results to your power. At our level... I've found personal training to be more satisfying. My place is with the Foundation. I tend to avoid extensive adventures. With each step the beings we face become more dangerous. You should know, having faced a Dragon," he said.

"Not just the Dragon. I've met a few beings that are downright ridiculous. But if you do it enough, you get really good at slipping out of their grasp," Ilea answered with a grin.

He smiled. "I suppose you have an advantage with both healing and space magic. I hope it serves you well in the future. Now... I don't suppose you mind some blood?"

“You’re good, but I’m not quite sure you understand how durable I am,” Ilea mused.

“I’m inclined to find out,” he answered.

“Here’s another small secret about me,” Ilea sent. “It’s a good way to make sure we don’t kill each other.”

“What a rare ability. You’re either the most talented mage I’ve ever met or incredibly lucky,” the man replied.

“I’ve made some really nice creatures. We fight, become friends, train together. You know how it goes. One thing leads to the next and you wield the fires of creation,” Ilea sent and burst into white flame.

“So it’s true. Well, then perhaps it’s your charisma that manages to convince these beings to share their magical secrets. I’ve heard some old legends about the white flames, but I have yet to face them. This is really... quite exciting,” Evan said.

“You sound surprised,” she said.

The man shrugged lightly, as if to apologize. “Well. Perhaps I’ve been disappointed too many times.”

“Then let’s find out where we stand,” Ilea sent and teleported right in front of him. She recognized the incoming magic but continued with her attack anyway. The man was quick to dodge but she didn’t have to hit him. A wave of burning arcane healing burst out from her fist, mixed with the burning flames of Tempered Seal. She watched bone spikes grow out of his armor, the sand below and behind him moving out, some of it hardening to pierce her armor, other parts simply moving to engulf her.

The wave hit him and his body was rocked back, vanishing into a cloud of sand as her own mantle was battered by his attacks, some of them piercing two to three layers.

“You’re quite confident, to charge into the domain of a creator,” he said.

She found his form below and within her dominion. Fabric Tear activated as she raised her arm and closed her hand around his appearing neck. “The fabric is my domain,” she answered with a smile and pushed her reverse healing into him. The flame of creation burst out and fought against the sand around her, a storm now that pushed against her wings. The man in front of her watched on, his armor too now covered in the flickering flames.

“Imposed teleportation... and the spherical perception of an Azarinth Class. Quite a terrifying combination,” he sent as his form turned to sand.

Ilea’s hand closed as her foe fused with the very sands around her. She was struck by chunks of bone, the pieces using the twirling sands to gain momentum. The spikes added to the projectiles were enough to pierce her mantle, his element just as dense as hers. She let it happen, mostly immune to the effects of heavy objects impacting her armored form. Ilea simply ripped out the pieces that pierced her body, the damage healed in mere moments.

Her dominion failed to perceive the man, flickers of magic showing where more spells were created.

“You’re quite durable,” he said. “I’ve fought four marks that showed more of a reaction to this level of attack.”

*“It’s hardly worth a mention. I can take quite a bit more than this,”* Ilea sent.

*“That’s good to hear,”* Evan said.

The sands around her stopped moving and instead congregated around her, finally slamming into her from all sides. The pressure built as the sand ground against her, the individual pieces hardened to a ridiculous degree. Her flames burnt away the element but there was simply too much of it there. She thought about using Embered Heart but decided against it. There was simply too much sand. *It really does get everywhere*, she thought as she healed her mantle time and time again. Bone spikes similar to a shredder’s attack soon joined the mix, massive spears and chunks impacting her with high frequency.

It wasn’t exactly the Meadow but her defenses would get overwhelmed in time. She assumed it had to do with her lack of third tier resistances against either of his elements.

*“Are you expecting me to resign?”* she asked, looking around to find him.

*“I know it’s not exciting but this method is quite efficient. Especially against regenerating monsters driven by their instincts,”* he answered.

*“That makes sense,”* she said and teleported out of the trap, appearing high above the local storm of sand and bone. *“What about space magic monsters though?”*

She didn’t receive a reply for a good thirty seconds. There wasn’t exactly a way for her to find him either. Evan was lost somewhere in the desert. Either that or he had a way to mask himself perfectly against her dominion. If she could touch him, she assumed her Eternal Mark would help but the first part proved to be quite difficult.

*“You can teleport... while being touched?”* he finally asked.

*“Well yes. Of course,”* Ilea answered. *“You did the same before, didn’t you?”*

*“No. I moved into sand. I didn’t just ignore the most reliable way to lock down a teleporting mage,”* he answered. *“How did you do it?”*

*“We’re still fighting,”* Ilea said.

*“You can’t find me. Can you?”* Evan asked. He sounded a little hopeful.

*“Sorry to disappoint,”* Ilea answered. *“Then again there is a massive desert all around. I feel like I’m at a bit of a disadvantage.”*

*“A fair assessment. It’s one of the reasons why I chose the location. And why I’ve been able to defend it against enemies objectively more powerful than myself,”* he said. *“Did I mention that I can submerge the entire foundation in the desert?”*

*“The entire mountains? That’s absurd. I doubt even a Sand Elemental could do that,”* Ilea said.

*“Elementals have raw power. They don’t have the ability to prepare and execute plans. Or such is my current theory. You have fought a Sand Elemental?”* he said.

*“A corrupted one. But fair enough. I still won’t share how I did it. Now why don’t you come out and fight me?”* Ilea asked.

*“You’re more durable than enchanted metal, you can heal both your armor and body in mere moments, and you can teleport out of even the most elaborate traps I could conjure,”* he spoke.

*“Is that really all there is to the great Founder of the Foundation of Glass?”* she asked.

The man appeared a few dozen meters away, elevated on a moving dune. *“That depends on your experience with soul magic.”*

*“I’ve dabbled,”* she sent back.

The man held out his arm where another bone rapier appeared, this one longer than the previous one, the color a little darker too, the surface not as perfectly straight. The handle looked naturally curved instead of formed to fit his hand.

Ilea squinted her eyes to see the weapon, summoning her rifle in turn before she aimed. *Plenty of heat gathered. “How about your heat resistance?”* she asked and fired at his legs.

Evan swerved to the left, the sand moving him as fast as Ilea could turn the beam, a line of glass left where the heated spell had struck. *“An impressive focus. Not quite as fast as light magic.”* He glanced at the glass in the sand. *“I should be able to survive a direct hit, if you have more like that up your sleeves.”*

*“It works so well against monsters,”* Ilea said as she stored the thing again and charged.

The man moved in tune with the sand all around, meeting her charge with his own.

Ilea noted the confidence in his attack. Her foe no longer aimed to evade her, he was ready to exchange blows. The two crashed into each other with a wave of sand and ash, limbs crashing into shields of bone, white flame expanding all around as burning ash mixed with sand. Reverse healing pushed into his form as his rapier found Ilea’s shoulder.

She kicked in tune, a wave of her spells spreading into him. A large chunk of the mana failed to penetrate his armor. The rapier cut through her mantle, several layers pierced before it was stopped. More impressive was the wave of soul magic emanating from the weapon. *Not from him,* she noted.

He removed the blade in a twirling retreat, the flame of creation clinging to the thin bone. It flickered out a moment later. *“Soul magic defenses?”* he asked with an impressed tone.

*“It wasn’t pleasant,”* Ilea said as she watched nine copies of him fan out from his central form. She couldn’t tell the difference between them. Even the blade seemed the same. She watched them all vanish into the sand before they reemerged. Ilea had no choice but to spread out her destructive healing, to get in at least some damage. *“I thought we wanted a direct engagement?”*

*“If you don’t want me to hide and recover every few minutes, this is what you’ll have to deal with. I have trained much against Azarinth intrusion magics but there is only so much one can do against such destructive forces,”* he admitted and circled her, blades advancing from all sides.

*Fuck. They’re all just as good as him.* Ilea spread her burning ash all around, her limbs going wild as she delivered punches in exchange for stabs. Few of the blades got deeper than two or three layers but the sand and bone projectiles wore her down as well. Every few seconds her true foe would strike after a calculated series of perfectly timed attacks, his soul rapier ripping through the weakened parts of her mantle and piercing her skin. Bone spikes shot out from the blade, cutting up her insides as soul magic ravaged her very essence.

She was glad for her fires of creation upgrade, the pain more than manageable and the damage not nearly as concerning as it would’ve been otherwise. Ilea ignored the damage to her insides for now, sending a few waves of her spells onto the Evan holding the blade. Sand and bone walls appeared in

front of him, shattering into thousands of burning pieces as they swallowed some of her spells, the man ripping out his rapier at the same time and retreating into the sandstorm swirling all around.

Ilea smiled, her mantle recovering as she felt something quite peculiar. She teleported the foreign pieces of bone out of her body and transferred away to avoid another strike from the soul magic weapon, healing herself with her third tier. *"You're using intrusion healing?"*

Evan didn't let up, the storm around her a second later. She was fully healed again regardless, her soul the only thing showing slight damage. *"You noticed?"* he asked, his copies striking dozens of times, a few destroyed or covered in burning ash, half the sand in the vicinity clad in white flames. *"It's not quite as impressive as your version. Not by far."*

*"Enough to kill most, I would imagine,"* she said, waiting for his next strike. It came, and this time she sent her waves into his defensive walls, following up with a beam of chaotic heat sent from one of her ashen limbs.

The man let go of his rapier and moved away, his left side burned away, some of the armor gone entirely. The wounds on his arm healed already, blades of bone cutting away the burning flesh. His armor reformed in turn.

Ilea looked at him as the copies made some distance. She grabbed the weapon and ripped it out of her stomach. A wave of her hand and all the splinters were out, her body healed again. He did supply a lot of mana. She was ready for a week long battle. *"What makes it so special?"* she asked, inspecting the weapon as soul magic continued to burn into her.

*"You're the special one, being able to hold it at all. And yes, my offensive healing is more than suitable to kill, but I don't have to tell you that,"* Evan said and raised his hand towards the rapier. Nothing happened.

*"Finally, you're using teleportation,"* Ilea said with a grin. She thought about destroying the weapon but killing him would likely be a much easier feat, knowing what her necklace had gone through without damage. *Magical items.* The soul damage wasn't something she intended to endure forever either, so she threw it his way instead. *"It's quite a blade. Who made it?"*

Evan caught it and paused, looking it over before he turned his attention back to her. *"I did. With the wing of a dragon, who happened to wield soul magic, or so I presume."*

*"Need me some soul gauntlets then. What's the quality on it?"* she asked.

*"Because you managed to hold it... It's Mythic,"* he said.

*"I don't know what that means,"* Ilea answered as the storm resumed. She sent waves of arcane energy into the approaching copies of sand and bone, dozens of projectiles glancing off her mantle without eliciting a reaction. Ashen limbs cut and pierced all while reverse healing burned into all of her foes.

The man struck once more, aiming for her eye this time around.

Ilea simply teleported him away, not about to waste one of her limited uses of enhanced perception.

*"Did I just discover your weakness?"* the man teased. *"The theory is that an item can reach mythical quality once its wielder has accomplished suitable feats, in regards to said item of course. I have wielded this blade for over a thousand years, have honed my skill with it."*

*I get it, you studied the blade.*

*“I suppose you could call it that,”* Ilea asked. *“What about you? Got anything against exploding head syndrome?”*

*“It simply wouldn’t happen. It would take a high level Elemental to crack my skull,”* he answered.

Ilea charged a wave of space magic and raised her hands. She watched the approaching group and clenched her fists, the bone and sand crushed and broken. One of them remained mostly uninjured, merely stumbling to one knee. *“Yeah, your bones are indeed quite dense.”*

The storm around them calmed, sand falling to the ground to join the desert. Evan’s helmet receded before he spat out a bit of blood, his eyes bloodshot for a moment before they recovered. *“As are yours. I’m out of ideas.”*