

Ilea soon lost track of time. She went in and out of the mists without caring for how long she stayed, only annoyed about the breaks, and her mistakes. She pushed all of her abilities as far as they would go, fought, against the god like creature in the mists. She knew it was not her true enemy, but she didn't care. She respected whatever was the source of this creature, whatever controlled the blade wielding monster in the fabricated realm.

As if a part of the theater piece, she returned to rehearse, time and time again. She got better. Got stronger. But more so, Ilea came to respect the creature more and more. The way it moved, as if flowing water, perfect and decisive with every feint, every piercing strike, and every slash. Her magic and her tools kept her in the fight, her resilience and healing turning fatal mistakes into mere annoyances. She was legend in the Plains, known for her power, known for her magic, called upon to help against threats that few others could face. And yet she felt like a student to a being ancient and powerful.

She had come here, in the hopes of finding challenge. And challenge she had found. The Wind of Aveer, the Sanguerrihn, and now the Weeping Oracle of the Lost, within the Cursed Marshes in the west. All legends of their own, perhaps not known anymore or known only to few, perhaps not known by name but by the environment they occupy. And she was here, to fight them. To push herself, to train, and to be, in the moment, one with her magic, one with the flow of battle.

Ilea rolled to a stop in Kohr, the gate closing behind her as her wings recovered, blood pooling below as her wounds healed and her mantle reformed. She coughed up blood and pieces of flesh, taking in a deep breath of air. The first one in a long while.

Pacing side to side, she waited for her resources to recover. Nearby were bits and pieces of demon spawn, the flesh attracting more predators in the salt stone realm, but she didn't care to move her gate.

'ding' 'Ashen Limbs reaches 3rd lvl 9'

'ding' 'Ashen Limbs reaches 3rd lvl 10'

'ding' 'Bulwark of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 19'

'ding' 'Bulwark of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 20'

'ding' 'Monster Hunter reaches 3rd lvl 30'

'ding' 'Spear of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 11'

'ding' 'Spear of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 12'

'ding' 'Mist Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 7'

...

'ding' 'Mist Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 14'

'ding' 'Water Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 13'

...

'ding' 'Water Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 15'

Back in she went.

Ilea felt the attack, dodged down and away, spun around with a kick before she moved her wings. Four feints came, she ignored the first two and teleported behind the being. Embered Heart spread out, burning ashen limbs slashed into the mist before she spun, her mark applied, her knee struck the Oracle's shoulder just as a blade of mist flashed past below. Her fires spread out, reverse reconstruction eating away at the ethereal figure.

Two punches, her wings moved again, back, she stopped, and flew forward, spinning above another blade, her right arm struck by the second. Her mantle cut away, a bit of mana gone, she delivered another set of punches, her shields shattered to slow another strike. Another teleport, just outside the reach of the creature. Ilea flew aside, twirling thrice to avoid the torrents of water rising from the ground. She met the emerging creature with a smile.

Magic flared up time and time again as they danced in the mist with barely a sound, seven times they joined and disengaged. Ilea missed a feint, her chest struck, forcing her into her Shift where she recovered, the ongoing strikes fueling her mana, her regeneration heightened enough to keep her Fourth Tier active. She waited for another moment, emerging from her Shift right when she knew a strike had landed, the opening exploited for another punch. Three more as she moved around the creature, coalesced burning ash coupled with barriers slowing a strike enough for her to take it with her mantle.

Embered Heart rushed out from an ashen limb, focused into the torso of the creature. Mist was burned away, more limbs slashing down before she teleported again. Up this time, Ilea coming down with a spinning kick, blue light and near white flashes of fire flaring up within the oppressive mists. She breathed out and twitched, waiting for the next attack to come and counter, but the burning figure before her did not move.

Ilea watched, seeing the strings snap, the mist form of the Oracle joining back with the white surroundings. She felt a pulse of magic, flying in the air and ready for an attack. Ilea looked up and saw a shadow.

Dark, a torso large as a mountain, two arms, obscured within the mist but visible, palpable, as if made of magic itself. Two white eyes opened within the dark head of the being, six pupils each, black as night. Long strands of shadowy hair floated back and away.

She heard it then, a single wail, reverberating through everything within the fabricated space, the mists itself trembling with the presence of magic. Her ears withstood, her body empowered by the Fourth Tier. Ilea looked on as the shadowy giant raised its arm, and brought it down.

Mists were split, coalesced behind the massive arm of dark fog. The wail continued and Ilea teleported away, twice to make more distance. Still the arm came down, and impacted the thin surface of water with a crash. Mist and liquid rushed out on either side, Ilea sent flying from the wave of magic, shields shattered and heavy armor summoned. A shock wave not of air but mist. She came to a stop what felt like kilometers away, her armor gone again and her Fourth Tier deactivating, much of her mana gone from the ridiculous display of power.

Another wail resounded as the creature turned and floated closer, its other arm already coming down.

Ilea looked up. This time she waited, and teleported through the massive limb, coming out atop where she was sent tumbling through the mists from the wave below. Her organs wracked and healing, she turned towards the eyes she saw within the mist, and charged.

Ilea impacted the dark mist, her magic flaring up, her fires spreading, just as her own mantle was eaten through by the dense manifestation of mist. Burning ashen spears rushed out and struck the closest eye and its six pupils, each as large as Ilea herself. She healed and pushed out of the fog, wisps lashing out to catch and damage her, white fires spreading out in turn.

Another wail resounded, close enough to send Ilea flying, the mist heavy and laden with magic, the very fabric trembling with power. She came to a tumbling stop where she saw the creature raise one of its hands to its injured eye, the other striking down onto the ground. Another wail, this one more a scream, angry, pained.

“Are you alive? Are you still there?” Ilea sent as she closed the distance once again, seeing her fires remaining in the dark fog that formed the being, spreading as she sacrificed her health to empower them. Her response was another strike, faster now, unfocused. More spears rushed out, Ilea now keeping at a distance, sending out more and more of her burning ash to strike the massive form, its attacks devastating but not fast and focused enough to take her down.

She aimed with her wyrm cannon and fired, a beam of white energy and fire searing into one of the massive eyes. She watched as the creature raised its arms, the mist all around coalescing into thin lances, rushing her way a split second later.

Ilea activated her Shift, seeing her defenses fade against the unending assault. Her Fourth Tier activated when she came out, facing the storm, the mist no longer inhibiting her visibility. She saw the dark fog like creature in the distance, burning with her spreading fires, one eye glowing with a searing scar. A moment in time as she floated in the lack of air with her ashen wings, staring at the manifestation of magic, tens of thousands of glittering spears of hardened mist hovering in the endless space of white.

And then the storm commenced.

Ilea flew, teleported, summoned her shields, her gates, all to avoid the unavoidable. Each spear that struck her pierced her mantle as if it was wet paper, flared up against her arcane magic, as if she was a beast to be hunted. And still she smiled. Still, she spread her flames, sent out her ash, her Embered Heart. She had faced the overwhelming might of gods. This was just another one.

Again she fled, into her Shift, knowing that her fires kept on burning, knowing that her wounds healed, that she would regenerate what was lost. Knowing that she would not be killed. Not by this creature made of mist, a mere monster left behind in a magical pocket realm unknown to this world.

Ilea came out again, her Fourth Tier brimming with power still, her fires spreading, still. She summoned a single spear of ash, using her third tier to form it. The projectile was near five times her size and flared up with fire. She aimed and sent it out with her manipulation and a charged push of her Space magic to help. Again she teleported to avoid the storm of lances, again her ash was struck, again her arcane spell flared up with every strike. And yet she saw the spear of ash shatter against the left eye of the Oracle, burning ash spreading wide and far, spreading through and into the dark fog as she willed it.

She healed and healed, defended as she could, and spread her fires. Once again she aimed her rifle, another searing line of white flame on the burning form of the fog like creature. She heard the wail now, as her fires continued to spread, inch by inch taking over the entire height and width of her enemy. No longer did it sound like anger, like loss. It sounded like a breath, released at the end of a long journey, at the peak of a mountain. It sounded like relief.

Ilea no longer had to defend against any spears. She flew in the air, hundred of meters above the thin layer of water, watching as the dark mist was taken by her flames. Soon, the only sounds remaining in the thin fabric of this space were the flickering of flames, and the beating heart of a single human.

Ilea could not breathe, for there was no air. Her wings were silent. She heard the noises resound within her mind, but kept her eyes on the burning remains of the Oracle, her fires already spreading down onto the water. The lances had spread out again, into pockets of mist. She waited and saw a single crack in the endless white, beyond was visible a dark and gnarled tree, bereft of all its moisture. Another crack. Dust showed beyond, the cracks expanding into webs as the wisps of the fabricated space trembled, the source of the spell gone with the death of the Oracle.

Webs rushed out and the space splintered, a mosaic of the Cursed Marshes visible before a crash resounded, a wave of magic rushing out as the space collapsed.

Ilea moved her wings, flying now where she had been pulled into the white eyes of the Oracle. Her mantle was whole, her body uninjured. Now she breathed. She smelled the earth. The moisture. The warmth of the swamp as water flowed into the dust crater left where the creature had been. She landed before her wings dissolved, closed her eyes and shuddered, feeling goosebumps all over her.

The mists were dissolving, quickly.

Ilea breathed. Once, then twice. She opened her eyes with a smile, and cracked her neck, Wisp Ravens cawing in the distance, the howls of a thousand Dread Beasts resounding. She saw the first of them rush towards the crater, stumbling into the dust before they saw her form.

Ilea welcomed them, her ashen limbs rushing out, tearing flesh and bone, piercing skulls as bodies were whipped around and thrown into the coming tide of beasts and monsters. She had slain the Oracle, these creatures were no danger to her. She sat down on a chair made of ash and summoned both a bottle filled with ale, and a hammer made of silver. "*Enjoy the rest,*" she sent and relaxed, ash coalescing into copies made from her, each more than enough to face the frenzied beasts.

She did not miss the ebbing pulse of magic, focused fury, and blood, aimed her way and rising with each creature brought to rest.

Silver threads and beings made of ash fought against the monsters, many of them battling each other, tearing flesh with teeth and claws. Ilea drank from her ale and watched as her hammer tore through the blood magic elven beasts, a few of them resisting for longer, others fighting back against her ash, torn down by their brethren in the all out chaos. Few remained after the first few minutes, only those lucky, and those of higher levels.

The dust was covered now in limbs and flesh, the murky water running thick and red.

One of the Dread Beasts deflected several threads of silver, cutting through the reawakened puppets of Silent Memory with single strikes of his claws, trails of blood following each strike as his magic surged time and time again. He was beset by other Dread Beasts nearby, and soon by Ilea's ashen copies. Battered down and healed, time and time again, he was finally brought to the ground by an ashen copy, resisting his blood magic, it punched down again and again, until nothing but pulp remained of his head and brain.

Few of the others resisted as long, though one of Ilea's copies was destroyed by the many beasts, quiet returning as Ilea finished her bottle.

The remaining copies joined her side, Silent Memory falling to the ground in front of her, the red gem glowing.

A last pulse reached her before the magic subsided. By now she had a good idea in which direction she had to go, to find out where the phenomenon had come from. But first, Ilea wanted to check her rewards.

‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Weeping Oracle of the Lost – lvl 2510]

‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Dread Beast – lvl 620]

...

‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Dread Beast – lvl 321]

‘ding’ ‘The Arcane Eternal has reached lvl 822 – Five stat points awarded’

...

‘ding’ ‘The Arcane Eternal has reached lvl 841 – Five stat points awarded’

‘ding’ ‘The Ashen Titan has reached lvl 816 – Five stat points awarded’

...

‘ding’ ‘The Ashen Titan has reached lvl 835 – Five stat points awarded’

‘ding’ ‘The Primordial Arbiter has reached lvl 815 – One stat point awarded’

...

‘ding’ ‘The Primordial Arbiter has reached lvl 834 – One stat point awarded’

‘ding’ ‘Bulwark of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 21’

‘ding’ ‘Spear of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 13’

‘ding’ ‘Mist Magic Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 15’

Ilea sat there for a long moment just looking at the numbers. She had known about the range of the Oracle’s level from Veteran, had felt its magic, but she had been so absorbed in the fight, she kind of forget what it meant. *I just killed something at the level of the Meadow.*

She huffed, then smiled. *Well, it wasn’t intelligent really, so not sure if that counts.*

Though she couldn’t deny it any longer. Perhaps the Wind of Aveer had been ancient, ready to die, perhaps the creatures she had killed in the seas of Kohr had been outliers, not as powerful as others in the same range. But now she had felled an Oracle.

These were no longer creatures entirely out of her realm.

She had joined them.

Twenty levels for one creature.

After having felled entire hordes of monsters, she knew what it meant, knew how powerful she had become.

And still, they would just be some of many. Some of the creatures she would face. Perhaps one day, she would be the one to die. *But not today.*

She smiled, looking at her new total of Core skill points. Enough, finally, to advance one of her General skills into the Fourth Tier. Enough to unlock her second spell of that level.

She decided to wait with her stat points until she found out what her spell would do.

I could go back to the Meadow and relax for a while, maybe or maybe not gloat a tiny little bit. But then there was this pulse. Might as well keep the flow going for a while, and see what else is lurking in this swamp.

She first checked the few remaining messages.

‘ding’ ‘You have defeated the Weeping Oracle of the Lost – One Core skill point awarded’

‘ding’ ‘You have rid the Cursed Marshes of the Endless Mists – One Core skill point awarded’

‘ding’ ‘You have faced an Oracle in battle, and have prevailed – One Core skill point awarded’

In addition, Ilea found she had unlocked a new title.

- Val Akuun [You have killed a Mother of Elves, an ancient piece of their kind. Elven males are weakened by your presence, to their very core confused by your existence]

Now if that isn't interesting. If I ever need to intimidate a Monarch, I suppose this is it.