

Chapter 878 Endless Meadow

“A bout? Are you bored with managing the Accords?” Ilea sent as she stood up and cracked her neck. *“Or why bring that up now? Something new to teach me?”*

“No,” the Meadow sent back. Its voice serious. *“I am neither bored nor is this meant to teach you anything, Ilea. Your Fourth Tier spells. Your recent advancements. Your battles won against even Oracles. Since you have brought me to this realm, I have watched your progress. I had not thought it possible, but now perhaps, you may be ready.”*

Ilea raised her brows. *“Ready for what exactly?”*

“We will first see, if you are ready.”

Ilea felt the ground thrum with magic, the entire landscape shaking slightly. She spread her wings and flew up, feeling the mana now palpable around her, present in everything, the very earth and fabric gripped by the Meadow.

“You will not be facing your teacher this time, or even a friend. You will face the Endless Meadow of Erendar, of Elos, and of the Accords,” the being spoke, no trace of sarcasm or dry humor present. A challenge, from one monster to another.

Ilea looked in the direction of the being, the mark she had on it, distant and hidden below Hollowfort. Her entire form was covered in her burning mantle, her wings behind her, moving in slow and serene motions. She saw a single tree sprout a kilometer away, in the middle of the wasteland. Wood grew from the cracked ground in seconds, lush leaves of gold coming to life.

“Survive, and destroy the tree,” the Meadow spoke. *“Do you accept?”*

Ilea smiled. She didn't know what this was about, or why the Meadow wanted to have a serious bout now of all times, but of course her answer was obvious.

“How could I refuse?”

She saw ten, then thirty golden barriers come into existence around the golden leafed tree. The ground shook once more, and Ilea moved, not wasting a moment as she sped towards the barriers. She saw the environment change as magic flared up, her precognition going haywire within her mind.

The fabric itself shifted, the wisps moving strangely in the vicinity. The ground shook and the earth split as massive chunks tore out of the landscape, moving up and out, debris falling as the house sized boulders floated and thrummed with power, then hurtled towards Ilea. Shock waves extended from their sudden speed. Thousands of wooden roots grew from where the stone had been taken, runic circles as large as entire villages formed on flattening platforms of stone in mere moments, lighting up with potent magic.

Ilea felt the complex mesh of anti teleportation runes. Space manipulation followed. She felt the grip on her form. Suffocating. Overwhelming. It felt like the first few times they had sparred with each other. The first time the Meadow had shown her a fragment of its power. Her movements were slowed, her space magic inhibited. The first boulders reached her now, roots growing from below, reaching for her as more wood grew from thin air.

She wondered how the tree would do against the Oracles she had recently killed. She wondered whose magical output was more impressive.

The Meadow was a thinking creature. And the Meadow knew her every ability. It knew her every trick. It knew to focus on her brain, knew how long she could fight, knew how much mana she had, and it knew about her absorption.

Ilea watched the landscape of the North shaped into a deathtrap by the Endless Meadow, the ground, the growing wood, the floating stone, the fabric itself, all of it an extension of its will. To protect the tree it had set as her goal. Bright Barriers glowing in the light of two suns.

She took in a single breath and raised her hand towards the incoming boulder. Blue runes lit up on her mantle, her winged and ashen form covered in white flame. A wave of her own space magic rushed out, uncaring for the control the Meadow had on the fabric. It had a reason for this bout, she knew as much. And Ilea had her own. She had trained with the Meadow. Had learned from it. Now, she wanted to know how far she could push it.

Her blast of space magic slammed into the incoming boulder, an explosion of debris that dug into the ground, entire chunks deflecting off her burning mantle. Ilea pushed forward and through the dust. She fought against the space magic gripping her. Not as fast as she wanted to be, but she moved, empowered by the arcane flowing through her veins. *I won't be dodging all this. Not even with my full speed.* Her weight started to increase, her Heavy Wyrms Armor appearing below her mantle, the defense expanding slightly to adjust for the added armor. Ash formed around her, set alight in the next instant.

Ilea raised her arms when the next boulder impacted her. She felt the strain, felt how a part of her ash was stripped away by the sheer mass and speed of the projectile. She heard the loud crashes behind her and kept her eyes forward, burning the roots that tried to grapple her. All she had to do was destroy a single tree protected by some barriers. All she had to do, was survive. She tried to figure out the mesh, trusting her intuition and experience before she teleported, avoiding two more boulders in the split second they rushed by. She hadn't moved as far as she wanted, but she had moved, through the fabric, within the domain of the Endless Meadow.

Heat gathered within her as her weight continued to increase. Ash constantly formed, set alight, and floating near.

A perfect spherical barrier appeared all around her, wooden roots growing out of thin air and instantly gripping her, trying to crush her limbs, sharp ends trying to pierce through her mantle. Her defenses from Primordial Flesh were at the highest point already, from her many battles with the creature. Ilea stopped moving entirely, and activated her second Fourth Tier spell.

Ash exploded within the barrier, filling every inch of open space between the crawling roots, and then it all exploded with the fires of creation. Her runes glowed with power as she pushed her ash more and more. She burned the roots and willed them aside, absorbing health and mana from everything the fires touched. Her own creation fought against the appearing wood, but her fires burned them away in mere moments. She willed a last push into her ash before the barrier around her splintered and exploded in shards of burning golden light.

She spread her wings, as her burning ash moved like a wild caged animal. She dropped her harmony and sped forward once again, another two sets of barriers unable to hold her. When she broke out of the last one, she saw a single massive obelisk forming above the golden leafed tree. Stone shifting and wood growing as the floating behemoth came into shape. Near three hundred

meters high, and fifty meters wide. Wood and stone fused with thousands of runes visible on the surface.

She had seen this one before.

A pulse of heavy magic rushed past and she knew that the Meadow had played its first card. She could hear the earth tremble, could hear all the floating stone around her crunching, grinding into itself as it all grew smaller, denser. The obelisk was finished, and floated just above her target.

This time, the projectiles that shot her way left a glowing trail, the very air set ablaze by their sheer velocity.

Ilea summoned golden shields and moved her ash before her. All of her defenses were punched through in an instant, the dense rock impacting her shoulder with a deafening explosion of stone and bits of Wyrms scales. Splinters were sent flying as burning ash was stripped from her form, her runes glowing bright as her mana absorbed the damage. She found another opening and teleported to avoid the next eight projectiles that would've struck her a moment later.

She formed two gates before her to move the next twelve, right back and towards the golden barrier of the tree. All she saw was the rocks veering out and away from her target before they circled back around towards her. She wanted to keep the gates up and raised her brows when her spell was disrupted, as if the fabric ripped right where she had placed her gates. Two rocks she moved with Fabric Tear, four more impacted her form, bright blue flaring up where her mana deflected the strikes.

Ilea was sent spiraling through the air, deactivating her Fourth Tier to preserve some mana. And to see how dangerous the projectiles really were. Two impacts. One slammed into her stomach, right through the Wyrms armor and her mantle, skin and muscle ground to bloody mush as organs burst from the mass and velocity. The other one embedded itself in her shoulder, ash ripped away, strips of her severed muscles glowing with heat. A few splinters had dug deep into her flesh but her arm still held. She grinned when another rock came for her head.

Primordial Shift activated, the stone slowed and deflected as if her surroundings rejected its existence. She ripped out the bits of rock still stuck in her and healed herself. *Fourth Tier it is.* She waited in her shift, both to get her spell back but just as much to see what the Meadow had worked out against her most powerful defensive spell. She waited but found that not a single spell crashed into her defenses. She felt no space magic, nor anything else.

Just waiting me out? Because it knows the cost rises exponentially?

She didn't believe it. Primordial Shift was the only spell that had confused the Meadow. Something it had not been able to fully comprehend. She did not believe the only measure it had against it, was to wait.

Ilea came out of her spell with her runes glowing once more. Her weight was still increasing with Titan Core. She could not avoid its spells with the constant space magic presence and the ludicrous speed of the stone projectiles, let alone the instant summoning of both roots and barriers. She had to face it all head on, and push through to the other side.

Her wings moved and she regained some distance, using her space magic pushes, her gates, her Fourth Tier, and Primordial shift to deflect and straight up tank all the projectiles that came her way. Her resources were depleting, now that the Meadow no longer used its roots and barriers to slow her down, but she was gaining ground nonetheless.

She could hear the impacts behind her, where the deflected and splintered projectiles of the Meadow dug into the ground, likely forced down by the creature to avoid killing any living beings outside of its domain. Ilea saw the barriers protecting the tree not too far away. A short distance, and yet it felt beyond her reach.

She stopped and summoned all her shields, even Silent Memory. Her harmony unlocked before she summoned swaths of ash before her. The first two stone projectiles still broke through, the next one was stopped with an explosion of ash. More and more she pushed, seeing through her cloud of ash that grew and grew before her. *It won't be enough.* She could already see the barriers appearing both in front of the tree and the obelisk itself.

So you're taking this seriously.

Then let me do the same.

Ilea smiled, and activated her Fourth Tier Meditation. Instantly she felt the strain on her mana lessen, could feel herself recovering resources instead of quickly losing them. Her mind calmed and she focused. She pushed her ash even more as mist like clouds were raised from the stone impacts. She was surprised she could stop them at all, but her harmony was unlocked, her ash more dense than it had ever been. Ilea pushed her fires out into the dark and moving cloud, but she could hardly cover a tenth of the extensive floating mass. She focused and raised her arms before her, shaping most of the ash into three separate lances, each near as long as the floating obelisk before her. A grinding noise resounded as she willed her element to compress.

The first of her lances shot out with a boom, a chunk of her remaining mana sacrificed to push it forward. It impacted wide barriers and stone walls, cracking all of it as the deflected ash exploded outwards, a wide mist spreading out to the right side of the defensive position. Ilea sent out the next, hearing the boom as her ash broke through the barriers protecting the obelisk, splinters of light vanishing. She sent the last, aimed at the floating structure left with no protection.

Something changed. All around. From one instant to the next.

Her flying lance stopped in mid air. It floated just before the obelisk, shaking as she willed it forward. Ilea could feel the fabric push in from all sides. She could feel the oppressive presence, and yet she pushed on. The massive lance of ash spun sideways, cutting through a large part of the obelisk before it flew aside and stopped again, hanging in the air.

Ilea grinned as she watched the obelisk crumble where her lance had bit through its center, the dense earth magic fading all around. She could no longer move. The space magic around her was far too dense. She activated Primordial Shift to get away. Four seconds of her Meditation had ticked away but she kept it up. She needed everything. Slowly, she watched as the fires of her Shift slowed and stopped moving altogether, the space magic itself that protected her was moved aside, the writhing flesh subdued with power, everything frozen before she felt something slowly grip her form.

What the fuck are you doing. You monster.

Ilea could feel herself move. She fought against the effects but her Shift was still active. Something cracked then her ears popped and she was back outside, seeing the frozen void of writhing flesh and fires hanging in the air behind her, all of it decaying in an instant now that she was no longer there.

She had no time to consider, feeling the pressure all around. Ash and fire exploded from her form as she pushed against the space magic of the Meadow with her own control on the fabric.

It felt impossible.

You have space.

I have ash.

Ilea removed the limiting doorway to her element with her Fourth Tier. No longer did she summon ash around herself, but instead she created it above the barrier. She pushed as her mana was reduced by the ongoing space magic. Her mantle by now was gone, her runes glowing bright as invisible pressure ground against her form. Her health was not reduced with her Meditation active, and all her spells were nowhere near as demanding.

She could see her floating silver hammer nearby, unable to move as she created a single lance, longer than the obelisk had been, its remnants still floating above the golden shields. She made it as dense as she could, her body shaking under the assault of the space magic and her muscles trembling from the magic she channeled into her ash. Ilea could see the air around her liquefy from the space magic pressure before with a last push, she sent the lance down.

The projectile trembled and slowed but Ilea pushed on, using the rest of her mana reserves to move it down.

Golden runes lit up all around the tree, a broad circle with intricate patterns, floating just above ground. Above it and in shimmering golden light, appeared a decorated dome thrumming with power, far brighter than the last and impossible to see through. Ilea activated her Shift again when she saw the lance slam into the golden dome, a shock wave extending outwards, her ash unable to break through.

She was out of options. Again, she could feel the Meadow's space magic invade her Shift and she waited. Ilea deactivated the spell right when she was ripped out and formed a gate to Kohr. Her spell formed and was disrupted in the same instant. She activated her third tier Transfer with her home as the destination. This spell formed but she could see the Meadow's attempts at disrupting it. Ilea finally released the heat within her, a bright sphere of burning energy spread out, her fires setting alight the very magic that was present. She spread her ash and fires more, using a wave of her own space magic to create a tiny opening. The grip on her loosened. Again, she formed a gate, this time from within her fires, and she pushed herself through, with everything she had.

Ilea rolled to the ground in Kohr and closed the gate right when she felt herself be pulled back inside. The gate snapped shut, but didn't close fully, the connection kept active by the Meadow.

Shit.

Ilea spread her ash again, this time in Kohr, to burn away her own magic. She opened new gates to forcefully close this one, but it remained open. Her fires enveloped it as a few rocks flew through the broadening opening, digging into the salt stone behind her. She sent a charged push of space magic down onto the gate, disrupting it slightly before her fires flared alight with a chunk of her health sacrificed. She burned away a third of her health until the gate closed fully, finally leaving her in Kohr.

"Motherfucker." She deactivated her Fourth Tier abilities, having used thirteen seconds of her Meditation. Not a long fight, but her mana was down to almost nothing. And she had failed. She couldn't get through that barrier, even with all of her Fourth Tier spells active.

She took in a deep breath and cracked her neck. Rolling her shoulders, she activated her mark. "*You win.*"

The answer followed a few seconds later. “*And you survive.*”