

Ilea thought about the question for a long moment. She looked at the yellow reptile eyes and found that she was not afraid. *“I have heard about you. I’m close to reaching the four mark range. I thought it would count for something, to have met, and perhaps fought, a being such as yourself.”*

The dragon snorted, another wave of hot air and debris. *“I perceive much from you, Ilea. I do hope you did not expect for this journey to end in a glorious battle.”*

She raised her brows. *“I had hoped to meet a dragon. And that I have. If you have no interest in battle, then that is how it is. But I won’t lie, it would be disappointing. Not even a bout?”*

His jaws moved into a slight smile. *“You are looking for an opponent of overwhelming power. I remember that feeling. That wish.”* He looked past her for a moment, eyes slightly unfocused. The dragon breathed, then looked back at her.

“But I am not that foe. You are many thousand years too late. I tire of battle, of strife. I do hope that meeting me will result in what you wish for,” the dragon spoke.

Ilea sat down on the ground and hugged her knees in a casual manner. Her wings dissolved. *“If you’re tired of fighting, what do you want to do then?”*

The large eyes regarded her. *“Friend of the Fae. I understand now why. My purpose is here, Ilea. You are in my domain, and many still remain. Living in the shade of my wings. In the mountains, in the stone below, in the shadows that my eyes do not reach. I am a part of these lands, a part of their balance. And so I shall remain.”*

A guardian? No. Just a presence. She smiled. *Like the wind, or the sand I stand on. He’s so old, he’s part of everything.* She found the thought intriguing, grasping at something she didn’t quite understand. Perhaps one day. The Oracles in the Marshes had lost themselves, the Daughters of Sephilon were mindless monsters, the Wind of Aveer sought a befitting end, to satisfy its wish, and Garonoth, Garonoth had found something else.

Ilea still couldn’t resist.

“You can breathe fire, can you not?”

Garonoth regarded her for a long while.

“My wrath is not meant to entertain, nor is it meant to test. Only destruction is what it may bring,” the being spoke.

Ilea thought that was it, but the dragon still watched her.

“You have come here, to face one of my kind in battle.”

She wasn’t sure if that was a question. She still answered. A slight nod.

“Spread your wings, daughter of ash, child of humanity, and show me your might.”

Ilea didn’t speak. *There might be a chance, if I can impress him.*

Her mantle moved to cover her face, her wings spreading outwards, flapping once to push her off the ground. She watched the attentive yellow eyes and activated her Fourth Tier Reconstruction.

She felt the arcane energies flow through her, blue runes glowing atop her defenses. Her Meditation followed as white flame burst to life atop her ash. She spread her arms and unlocked her harmony, looking up where she willed a swirl of ash into existence, its size growing outwards, a moving sphere that soon reached the size of the very dragon before her.

She locked eyes with the ancient being and activated her Primordial Shift. She could see the fabric now, the wisps moving in serenity around the dragon. And she felt calm. Her life and mana burned away, fueling the fires of creation as her small domain grew. Once more, she moved her wings, pushing herself upwards through the fabric and towards the falling ash. Her hand reached out, igniting a part of her creation. And then she pushed, the fires flaring up as they spread. Mere seconds until her eyes looked upon a white sun.

Ilea spread out her arms and turned her attention to the fabric itself. A bed of space, she formed as she gripped not only her fires, but the very space wherein her ash resided. For five long seconds, she kept the sun where it was, and then she deactivated all of her spells, landing on the sand covered stone as the sphere broke and descended, a raging inferno that crashed down around her. She looked up and locked eyes with the dragon, until all of her ash had descended, a bed of gray and black now covering a large section of the crater, wisps of white flame flickering as they clung to existence, fading out with no more fuel keeping them alive.

Ilea breathed in, feeling her overcharged regeneration and her ambient absorption of the high surrounding density. Her health recovered in instants with her third tier.

“You are more prepared than those who have come before you,” the dragon spoke into her mind. “I see in you, a fire, that reminds me of my early days. Your ash tells of death escaped, time and time again. And yet your flame does not burn with wrath and rage alone.

“I would not wish for your long journey to end in disappointment, after all that you have shown me. I am not the foe you sought, but there is one you may find a worthy substitute. Both a favor to myself, and a wish fulfilled to you.

“The birth of Dragons is a rare thing, miracle of magic, life, and soul, just like every creature born.”

The dragon paused, eyes growing more distant yet again.

“Though rare it is, rarer still the mind instilled for greater thought. Primal rage is nestled deep within our souls. It is no surprise that some are lost to instinct, never to awaken. Mere... beasts. Monsters raging in the wild, destruction all they seek, all they know.

“I have killed a hundred dragons in my time, but there is one I cannot face. A being so powerful, I know that I cannot prevail. Chaos reigns in the east, desolate death and fire where his domain resides, and by the century, he grows stronger still. He must die, or his chaos will spread upon the world.”

“I can try,” Ilea sent. “I would love to try. If he’s really just a beast.”

“You would face a dragon, wild and bound by primal rage.”

Sounds like the best time ever. “I would.”

Garonoth scoffed. *“Very well.”* The ground trembled as he moved. His massive claws digging into sand and stone, pushing as he raised himself.

Ilea flew up to not lose her balance on the ground. She felt the wind against her mantle.

And then his wings spread out. Sand and stone was raised and crashed into the mountain sides, raising distant clouds of dust.

Ilea braced against the air and thrumming magic, watching with wide eyes as the behemoth raised off the ground, shooting up into the air with a single thrust of his wings.

She smiled, and followed.

“I will lead you to your quarry,” the dragon spoke and Ilea flew to reach his altitude.

“Mr. Garonoth, sir,” Ilea spoke. *“You don’t suppose I could, you know, sit on top of your head until we’re there? I’m terribly tired of the long flight, and I’m not fast at all!”*

The massive eyes regarded her as another push of the dragon’s wings kept him in the air, the lands below swept with arcs of air. *“A terrible liar you are, Ilea, but I know your intentions are true. For what you have shown me, you may do as you wish.”*

Oh my god. This is happening!

She didn’t say another word, lest the dragon change his mind. Ilea teleported twice to reach his head, and landed on the dark red scales. She stepped over to one of the horns only twice as large as herself and held on with a broad smile. *“Ready to go.”*

Garonoth did not speak, but flew. Higher first to where the air grew thinner still, barely there at all. Then north and eastward.

Ilea held on, soon sitting down as she enjoyed the view of the distant landscape below, the curve of the planet visible as they passed over endless mountain ranges. To the far north, she could see a cap of ice, and far to the east, she could see the endless oceans, dotted with white clouds. She braced herself when Garonoth descended once again, the atmosphere growing more dense as her wind resistance protected her against the air.

Closer to the east, she could see bright dots clinging to the landscape. The mountains moved closer until the massive dragon spread his wings, their rapid descent halting in mere moments.

Ilea hardly felt the sudden stop, but she saw the shock wave spreading out, nearby flames flaring up as they were fed by the gusts of air.

Before her, she saw a world on fire. Mountains and valleys set alight, kilometers of land covered in a bright inferno. She could feel the heat despite the distance.

“Enter, and you will be found,” Garonoth spoke.

Ilea gulped. She watched the moving flames in the distance before she flew up and away from the dragon’s head. *“I will let you know how it went.”*

He watched her, then moved his wings, ascending once more.

Ilea turned and landed, meditating for a while to recover what she had used before. Then she started flying into the burning territory. *You got what you came for,* she thought, going lower and flying into one of the valleys. The fires had not clung to forests. They were burning the very stone.

Only destruction is what it may bring.

She thought of the dragon’s words, and remembered the contrasting oasis brought to life in the southern desert.

The lands here were not as quiet as Garonoth's domain. The winds were hot and whipping at her wings. She could see movement below from time to time, small critters and larger monsters moving fast and in the shadows.

She crested a high mountain peak and looked down into a broad and burning valley. Plumes of smoke rose to obscure the suns. Far below, she saw the scorched carcass of a massive serpent creature. She flew down and checked around herself. The magic here was dense, the fires brighter and hotter than in the valleys she had crossed before. She saw the massive chunks missing from the serpent's skin and flesh, bites ripped out by a behemoth near as large as Garonoth.

Ilea heard the sound of moving wings, and she saw shadow descend upon the valley. Her head moved up where she saw the broad wings of another dragon, dark red scales covering its colossal form, and two dark yellow reptile eyes set within its horned and armored skull. Its jaws opened and she felt a sea of magic coalesce. Bright fire lit up within the creature's throat.

Ilea grinned as she looked up and spread her arms.

Time slowed as hell descended.

She unlocked her harmony, arcane power surging through her veins as she felt her muscles tense. The Fourth Tier of Meditation came to life, her eyes wide open as she watched the flames descend. Bright and all consuming. Ash came to life above her, white fire flaring up as her creation grew to welcome the fire from a dragon. For but a moment, the light was gone, her ash what felt like an impenetrable wall. And still, she felt the heat all around, the stone and debris around her glowing, the flesh of the carcass melting away.

Ilea summoned her shields when she saw the flames burn through her ash, even the fires of creation a mere nuisance to the might she felt before her. All encompassing, the fires reached the entirety of her dominion. A maelstrom of heat and destruction. Even arcane strengthened, her defenses burst as fast as they were summoned, even the gates she created were destroyed entirely, after sending through some of the fire. She activated her Shift and raised both arms, seeing the fabric tremble in the burning inferno.

She strengthened her fires of creation, and she pushed back against the fires with all the might that she could summon. Fissures formed in space itself as the ground below her creation was entirely disintegrated. Pushed back, she focused on keeping her reality from collapsing, a thousand cracks and fissures forming, her fires pushed away as her form stood enveloped by the dragon fire. When the two seconds of increased perception passed, she just barely managed to keep her Shift alive with the focus and control of her Meditation.

Three more seconds passed before the fires waned, leaving a scorched and molten crater where Ilea had stood before. The carcass was gone entirely, its very bones disintegrated. She came out of her Shift and could no longer breathe, for there was no air. Her resistances strained and her mana took a hit despite the large amounts of absorption from the near graspable mana in the vicinity.

The ground shook, debris, dust, and ash spreading out and away when the creature landed. It raised its draconic head and dug its massive talons into the ground, muscle and scales moving on its form. The creature glared at her and growled. A low sound that moved through the surroundings.

Ilea felt every cell of her being sing with fire, and she growled back, imitating the sound of a simple Drake.

***[Dragon of Calamity – lvl ????*]**

She could feel its power, her dominion bright with magic, as if the power of a Fourth Tier spell was emanating from the being with a constant flow. A flow from which she absorbed as much as she could, her health now burning away to her Fourth Tier Reconstruction. It's level, she knew, was beyond anything she had seen before. In the same realm as the Fae.

The moment passed and the dragon reached up, then brought down its talons.

Ilea teleported up and away, as far as she could before unlocking her harmony once more. Burning ash spread before her when the shock wave of the impact punched through her. Rock and debris spread out with the torrent of wind created by the mountainous form striking the earth below. Her barriers held this time, and she sent down her house sized chunks of ash, the impacts crashing into the wings and back of the dragon, ash spreading out as it turned and looked up, fire gleaming between its jaws.

Ilea teleported to avoid the torrent of fire. She flew and sent down burning ash, angling herself behind the massive wings to avoid the moving cone of fire as the dragon turned its head to follow her. She felt the heat catch up and vanished, this time appearing below the creature where her ash limbs scraped against the dark red scales, her flames the only thing that clung to its heavy armor.

She was slammed into the ground a moment later, the stone giving way as the dragon crashed its body down into the earth. Reverse Reconstruction flowed into the creature, her intrusion limited but not negated entirely. With every scraping use of Tempered Seal, its defenses would weaken. She heard the massive wings move and watched as the creature rose up and to the skies. Ilea pushed out of the pulverized ground and shot into the air, her own wings keeping up as she looked at the dragon's open maw.

She laughed and aimed her arm, flying at the emerging dragonfire as her Embered Heart flared out in chaotic energies, her flames lost in the inferno. She teleported in the last moment, appearing past the flames and atop the creature's massive skull. *Always the eyes*, she thought, realizing that a chunk of her mana was gone, the flames burning her amidst her teleport.

She flew close to the right eye, twice as large as she herself. A charged punch slammed into the organ, converted into pure physical strength. She could see the wave of force travel over the protective membrane, punching again before the dragon closed its eye.

She felt the attack coming and activated her Shift once more, seeing the dragon twirl around itself, a violent motion that ripped entire chunks out of the nearby mountainsides, coupled with its breath leaving trails of fire clinging to the stone as her shaped reality withstood the chaos.

She exited when the dragon turned its head and closed its jaws around her.

Ilea flew forward, avoiding the crushing teeth, an avalanche of bone as the fire and light vanished in an instant, replaced by scorching heat and the smell of brimstone. Not a cavern, but the inside of its mouth. Her harmony unlocked and once more her ash and fires exploded outwards. Jagged chaotic blades and spears she formed and dragged around in a storm of motion, bracing when the dragon moved its head. She tried to fly but crashed against the inside of the teeth, her eyes widening when her precognition kicked in, the cavern lighting up with fire coming from deeper down.

A teleport brought her out, flying up and past its head as if she passed a mountain peak, all the while her white flame spread, every passing second dozens of scraping strikes sending destructive mana into the being. She started alternating between using her Meditation and her health to keep up her Reconstruction.

She teleported up when the dragon started using its fire on the white flames clinging to its form, burning away her magic. Her harmony unlocked while the creature was busy, she formed a massive spear of ash above, and focused on two specific points in space. Her Meditation activated, guiding her as she aimed. Her gates appeared and she sent the massive lance down into the first, the spear appearing through the other gate. Right in front of the creature's head and slamming straight into its eye, a loud impact, ash and hot air exploding outwards.

The dragon roared in turn as it shook its head, talons moving up to grab the remainder of the spear and break it.

She saw blood in her dominion and froze, her smile growing even wider.

I made a dragon bleed.

Her focus didn't waver for more than a split second, her next spear already forming. This time she aimed at one of the large wings, finding one of the thinner areas. Still, everything was covered in scales, the lance impacting the dragon where it scraped its armor and broke in two.

Ilea rushed down, teleporting close to the roaring form, where she gripped the two eye lids and pulled with every bit of strength she had. Her ash helped, all limbs pulling. Still her fires spread as she tried to open up the eye, gritting her teeth when she saw a single massive claw reach up to scrape her away, like a fly that had dared to land on someone's skin. She timed it and teleported, but found the dragon covering its eye by now.

Teleporting past another burst of fire, she flew towards its back, twirling in the burning air as she sent out fire and intrusion spells, more and more of her mana getting past the scales. Embered Heart rushed out and left a searing line of near white flame across the dragon's back, the creature roaring as it turned around itself, its massive form making it impossible to reach Ilea's speed.

She reached the tail and flew under, trying to find orifices unprotected by the near indestructible scales. She found no obvious genitalia but saw the hint of an anus. She was both annoyed and grateful at the same time to find that it was protected just as well as everything else. The creature's eyes remained its weakest spot, and the inside of its mouth, at least when it didn't breathe out fire.

Again, she changed into her Shift, just when she felt the dragon was about to twirl with another violent motion. Its tail cut into the mountain side, leaving a deep furrow as whirlwinds were created from the massive moving wings. And again, she came out unscathed, tremors running through the earth and mountains when the dragon crashed against the rock, trying to scrape away the Fires of Creation.

Ilea reached its head and teleported to the injured eye as another roar resounded. A barrage of intrusion spells and ash ripped into the heavy eye lid before she cut through the thick skin and once more drew blood. She didn't stop and held on even when another talon crashed into her, her runes lighting up as white flame and sparks of arcane energy flared up from the impact, but she was too small for the dragon to simply scrape her off.

Density over size, motherfucker.

She cut into the eye, the roar nearly deafening as she ripped and tore with all her many limbs, her fire, heat, and ash. Covered in burning dragon blood and eye fluids, she dug deeper, not leaving everything to her intrusive magic, but intruding on her own. She felt the heat build as everything around her cooked, her runes glowing bright as she both absorbed and lost immense amounts of mana. Not for a split second did she stop her assault, now at the back of the eye where the flesh was

thicker and more resilient. But still, she cut through, and unlocked her harmony, dense ash appearing in the hollow socket of the dragon's eye before she bore into the skull.

Time slowed again when she felt a wave of heat and switched into her Shift, the connection to her ash gone, but her fires flaring up with renewed vigor. She had around forty seconds of her Meditation left, and knew that this was her one chance. Any of her Fourth Tiers gone, and she would be unable to get past the near invulnerable defense.

The heat wave increased and tore at her Shift, space itself aflame as wisps vanished and her sight waned. Still her fires burned, deeper into the creature and returning both health and mana, keeping her alive and fighting. Back out, she resumed, burning and stripping away pieces of flesh and blood. With every passing moment, she dug deeper, and quickly reached the monster's brain inside its skull. She burned and cut it all apart, her blue runes glowing bright against the heat, soon forcing her to use her Shift, recovering some mana as her fires continued burning all and everything away.

She came out to find most of the brain gone, reduced to pulsing flesh and ripped chunks of meat. A moment later she felt an impact, her limbs stabilizing her against the inside of the skull, her dominion glowing bright with magic, but she knew the dragon had crashed into the ground.

But it's not dead. She kept burning away everything that she saw. *Its heart.*

She knew there wasn't enough time to get there through the inside, not with what remained of her Meditation and thus her Reconstruction. And she didn't know how fast the dragon would recover. Teleporting past the empty socket of its eye and out, she spread her wings and flew up and above, finding that the gargantuan monster had landed on its side, against the mountain. *Getting through its back is going to be impossible. Fuck.*

Why didn't you land the other way around.

She felt a possibility and focused with her Fourth Tier Meditation. Ilea activated her Shift, close enough to the dragon to use her space manipulation. She grit her teeth and grabbed on to the immense framework of the dragon. Her mana drained faster than she could recover as she pulled with shaking hands, a smile blooming on her face when she saw the limp dragon rise. Rise above the stone and debris, wings scraping past the mountainside and rocky grounds as Ilea willed it up. She pushed her right hand forward, sweating as she felt her mana and her meditation tick away.

But the body of the dragon turned, around itself until its back was towards the ground.

Ilea breathed out and let go of her space magic and her Shift in turn, sound coming back to her as the dragon fell and impacted the ground, a shock wave reverberating out and through the burning valley, dust raised as Ilea moved her wings to keep afloat.

She focused on the creature's chest, one arm raised above as her mana fueled the largest lance of ash that she had ever willed into creation. Every last fiber of her form, ever Fourth Tier spell beside her Shift, and every ounce of mana that she both recovered and absorbed, all fed into the floating weapon of ash. She didn't stop until its length had reached the colossal size of the dragon itself.

And then, she aimed.

Perfect Synergy. She had four seconds left, and just about eighteen thousand mana. All of her will, she put into the velocity with which the weapon would descend. And then she pushed.

And she kept pushing.

She heard the thunderous sound of a colossal object cutting through the air. A mountainous creation, she herself controlled. A moment later, the lance came down and cut into the dragon scales. An explosion of debris, the earth itself shaking, sound reverberating through the flattened valley. Her spear cut through, digging deep into the creature's chest, and deeper still, she pushed, past flesh and bone. Two seconds remained when she turned off her Meditation.

Ilea's spells waned as she watched the lifeless dragon skewered to the glowing and half molten mountain side.

She waited for a long moment until a sound reverberated through her mind.

'ding' 'You have killed [Dragon of Calamity – lvl 3105]'

More sounds followed as she kept her eyes on the colossal thing, almost expecting it to twitch and move again.

But it remained, the lance embedded deep within its chest, a dark pillar reaching up towards the skies, making Ilea wonder what had possibly summoned such a weapon, what had possibly fought and killed this scaled titan of a dragon.

She breathed in as air once more flowed down into the valley.

One Four Mark creature had started this fight.

And one Four Mark creature still remained.