

“I freed a city of its curse,” Ilea murmured. She checked but there had been no new titles awarded. *How long has this place been like this? With the First Warrior just waiting there.* She assumed some people must’ve come here to loot in all that time. Random adventurers, Mava, or maybe even Elves. *Wait no, it’s a dungeon. But then there were elves here, the bones were present. Them cooperating with other people, maybe there were others who split off from the Oracles and their rules.*

Ilea didn’t think it impossible, knowing that they now had a supposed former elven monarch inside of a war machine made by some ancient dwarven creator. *I guess with the continued Taleen threat, there would’ve been little change within the domains, and those willing to break out did so to join the Cerithil Hunters. But this place has to be older than all that, otherwise they would not have sat idly while the Olym Arcena came to this realm.*

None of the records she had seen of the war had mentioned Paarah. And none of the beings who had participated or been alive had referenced the city.

Just the Druned. And their challenge. She wondered if any of the Mava had made it here, to the palace. Ilea assumed they had received the same warnings. *But none have defeated the First Warrior.*

She didn’t doubt the Mava could’ve taken this city with their collective efforts. Ohn Ika alone was at a higher level than her. And she assumed there were others in a similar range. *Guess the Druned never asked. Or were never asked themselves, to reveal this secret.*

But then, they only asked me to bring back the crown.

She summoned the thing again and turned it in her hand. Wearing it genuinely sounded like a stupid idea to her. There was a slight urge of course, to test her ability to resist whatever the divine object would pull. She had faced insane mind magic before. *How bad could it be?*

Silver threads shot out from the artifact, scraping over her armor without much effect.

“*Seek... the depths... seek... the...*” the crown whispered, the voice fading as a faint glow shined in the embedded gems and waned once more. A few threads remained, moving through the air in serene patterns, occasionally attacking Ilea.

“*I got that. Anything else you can tell me?*” Ilea asked the thing but received no answer. She tried speaking out loud, with the same result.

Once more, she stored the artifact and quickly spent her stat points. All into Vitality.

Status:

Vitality: 2966
Endurance: 600
Strength: 600
Dexterity: 600
Intelligence: 2600
Wisdom: 2700

Health: 112708/112708
Stamina: 5998/6000
Mana: 102842/162000

Maybe I should stop at three thousand.

She just wasn't sure what else would be as beneficial. Her Fourth tier had changed everything. Fights that would've been long battles of attrition had turned into manageable endeavors, as long as she had her health to burn. At the same time it allowed her to trade hits with insanely powerful monsters. Without the skill, Ilea doubted she could've faced the Wind of Aveer. Granted, her risk of dying would've likely been lower if the Elemental had been entirely overwhelming. She would've simply fled, if fighting the creature had seemed impossible.

Ilea sipped from a bottle of ale. *So what to do now?*

Go find the depths, clear out more of the Golems, find more artifacts and treasure, or report to the Druned.

Wouldn't hurt to talk to them, I suppose. She raised her brows. *Right. I can ask what they want to do with the city. There's so much here. Aki could retake it, after I clear out the remaining golems.*

She jumped up and sent a message to Myr Iva.

The Mava was happy to act as a teleportation beacon, Ilea already having set one of her locations in Paarah.

She found the downright rainforest growing farther through the strange structures of the Druned, Mava occupying the now overgrown buildings throughout. Magical battles took place and food was cooked.

Ilea smiled while flying to the southernmost part of the settlement, much of it still just stone structures set into the endless sands. She didn't think too much on the stories she had heard about the Fae, but their impact was obvious right here, a massive chunk of desert changed to luscious forests, lakes, and even rivers. All of it conjured by the heart.

She landed on the same bridge she had used before, and stepped into her audience room with the Druned. At least she thought of it that way. She found them, the beings of course still playing their tower building game.

"I have returned," she spoke and received no response.

She summoned the crown and stopped the expanding threads of silver with her ashen limbs. One of them, she stopped with her hand, the thing going for her eye again. *Almost makes me think this is a Fae artifact as well.*

She found the two Druned with their heads turned her way.

“Yes, the crown. Crown of Authority, of divine quality. Taken from the destroyed head of the First Warrior of Paarah,” she sent. “I have questions though. There are a bunch of golems still around. Are they Druned as well? Should I destroy them, also-”

“Please,” one of the large stone beings sent. “Store the crown. We shall discuss.”

Ilea took in a deep breath but stored the artifact and conjured up a comfortable seat of ash. She didn't expect their discussion to be done quickly.

And she was right. The suns had moved already when more Druned joined the ones present.

“Lilith, of the eastern lands, may we see the crown, if you can restrain its magic?” one of the beings spoke, a large three headed form with eight arms.

“Sure,” she said and summoned it again. Ilea knew that the threads Silent Memory used were stronger than those of the Crown, but then she wielded the hammer and assumed she had passed whatever requirements it had for her to attune to it. The threads used by the First Warrior had been far more dangerous than those now conjured by the crown. She assumed the artifacts were affected by some of the wielder's abilities.

A few minutes passed as the Druned examined the artifact, none of them touching the cursed relic or getting too close to the restrained threads.

“That is indeed, the source of the curse...”

“You truly defeated the First Warrior. What wouldst thou do with the crown? We intend to bury it.”

Ilea considered. Surely there was a way to attune to this one too, to make it friendly to her. At the same time, the Druned had sent her to find this thing, and she had gotten her challenge, albeit not quite one as extensive as she had hoped for.

“You do seem in control of it. But it is best to encase such artifacts in lead and cobalt, and to bury them as deep as we can reach,” the Druned spoke.

They'd just bury the thing? Seems like kind of a waste.

Ilea gave it another thought but found one issue with keeping the divine artifact.

I really don't feel like wearing a crown.

A very valid reason, she concluded. But not one to have it buried. She was sure the Meadow and others were interested in the crown. *And maybe they can find a way to neutralize the curse too, as dangerous as it seems. But if this thing couldn't defeat me, the Meadow is an impossible foe for it.*

“I believe it is best if I show it to the Meadow,” Ilea said. *“It will be safe with the being. If there is no other way, I'll return to you to have it buried.”*

“If that is your wish. The crown has been removed. However you should be aware of the danger,” the Druned spoke.

As dangerous as my hammer.

“Would you be willing to answer some questions now that I've completed the challenge?”

“That will depend. On the questions,” the Druned replied after a few seconds pause.

Ilea saw a square box appear. Made of metal and perfectly mundane.

“Take this with you, just in case.”

“Are you sure about that? No enchantments? Won’t it just break out with the threads?” Ilea asked.

“The composition is well known amongst those who remember,” one of the beings spoke.

Ilea raised her brows. *“Remember what?”*

“That. Is a question, we will not answer. As is sworn.”

She put the crown into the box and waited for it to summon its threads. But nothing happened. *Just a crown. Sitting inside of a metal box.*

The lid is even open.

“Alright, seems to be working.” Ilea sent and watched one of the beings close the box.

“You have found and met the challenge. For that, we thank thee. You may summon us to build as you please. The curse of Paarah has been defeated.”

To build as I please? How many? For how long? Do they follow plans?

Ilea didn’t really really feel like using up their time and magic. She had gotten the challenge, and now she even kept the crown, at least for the time being. *“What about the other golems in the city?”*

“You may do with them as you please.”

“They’re Druned as well, aren’t they? You built that city. Did you join the leadership there when Paarah was founded?” Ilea asked.

“Those questions, we will not answer.”

“What about everything IN the city? The documents, homes, the magic, records, treasures?” Ilea said.

“We have all here, that we could ever ask. We do not hold claim to the city of Paarah, or what lies within. Neither knowledge, stone, nor metals,” the Druned spoke.

Ilea raised her brows. *“Really? So I can just take everything that I want? You’re saying we can take the entire city? We could connect it to the teleportation network.”*

“If you wish to bring others, or if you wish to break the seals, we ask that you rid the city of its remnants first, but after, yes, if such is your wish, and such is your ability. We hold no claim, nor do we wish to.”

“Why send me there then? Why retrieve the crown?” Ilea asked. *“It could’ve just been left there, sealed and with the First Warrior.”*

“A task unfinished, had remained unfinished. Now that the curse is removed, the task, is fulfilled.”

Cryptic as always. Guess I’ll have to find answers in the city itself, and all those books and documents.

“Anything you can tell me about the depths of Paarah?” she asked instead.

“We are not aware of such a place,” the Druned spoke.

Ilea didn't assume they were lying. They had been so upfront about not sharing certain information with her, she didn't see why they would deceive her here. *So the crown knows something they don't.*

"I don't assume you're willing to share anything about the history at all?" she tried one last time.

"We will not share such knowledge, Lilith of the east."

"Fair," Ilea sent. She wanted to learn more from the Druned, but she felt she had already said too much. *Still attentive and ready to not give me any actual information. Guess I'll find out myself.*

"Thank you. I won't bother you any longer. Might join you for more games if I find time," she sent to the golems.

"You are most welcome to join, and learn, young Lilith," the Druned sent back.

She pointed behind herself. *"I guess, I'll be off then. To rid the city of its remnants."*

None of the beings replied, the two who had played before resumed their stacking, the rest flying or walking away, some shifting back into the stone of the moderately sized tower.

Task done, I guess.

She cracked her knuckles and neck. *Now to destroy a bunch of four mark battle golems.*

Ilea didn't wait, she immediately teleported to the ancient city, now rid of its curse. *Access to all the knowledge they wrote down, all the tech that is still around, all the housing, the enchanted gadgets.*

She didn't think the Druned actually had a way to find out if she cleared out the remaining golems before taking anyone here, but Ilea didn't mind fulfilling the request. They had asked nicely, even though it made little sense to her. *Everyone will find out what happened here anyway. Ah well.*

Ilea teleported out of the empty mansion and flew towards the devastated fountain square.

Summoning her ash, she created five ashen clones of herself and imbued them with her mana. *Go find all the golems left in the city and lure them to the fountain square.*

The command was simple, and the clones were fast. She didn't trust them to be able to defeat any of the ancient beings on their own, but luring the large stone creatures was a task she thought them more than capable of doing.

Ilea herself flew to the square, using her charged Monster Hunter as often as she could, continuing to do so while circling the chosen battlefield with an increasing distance from the center.

She didn't have to wait long for the first golems to appear. Looking down one of the larger roads, she could see one of her ash clones flying ahead of at least a dozen of the large beings. What Ilea had expected to cause at least some damage to the underground city, didn't come to pass. Instead of recklessly running after her ash, the golems instead ran after it in formation, using the street instead of the sidewalks, none of them so much as touching the houses.

Same as with that chandelier. But then there was damage in the homes too, pretty clearly from their axes. And they destroyed the square without a second thought.

She stood at the center of the wrecked and burnt stone, a few ashen spears forming around her. Most of her ash capacity was taken up by the clones and the layers of her mantle, but she still had a bit to spare. Fighting the golems with no ashen limbs wouldn't be much of a problem. She assumed that finding and gathering them all here would take up the bulk of her time.

Ilea cracked her neck and stretched. *Clearing out ancient ruins. Maybe I should open a business at this point.* She sent out her spears and charged past her flying ashen clone. *I'll take over from here.*

Time passed as the ashen clones scoured the city of Paarah, waking every golem they could find and luring them to the fountain square.

Ilea fought through it all, sometimes against ten of them, sometimes just against one. The outcome was always the same. Piles of rubble added to the square. She punched through the legs of her latest enemy and continued punching into its chest as it fell, keeping the torso in the air with the power of her punches. A ding resounded, making her stop as the remaining stone crashed onto the rubble.

That was a long stretch.

She had lost track of time for a while, lost in battle. Ilea was getting more used to the golems and the way they fought but they remained four marks with some ability to adapt and work together. Her life was not in danger but she had to focus to keep it that way, and more importantly to destroy the beings in an efficient manner.

With all the stone around, the creatures often retreated to rebuild the damage dealt to them while others tried to cover them. Not much of a problem with her teleportation but it certainly made the fights more complicated than facing a horde of bloodthirsty monsters coming to the slaughter.

Ilea couldn't see another golem coming towards the square. *Looks pretty empty now,* she thought, teleporting up and spreading her wings as she scanned the streets. Her ash clones were out there, searching through houses and alleys. She let herself fall and landed with a reverberating impact.

Once again, she checked through her messages.

'ding' 'You have defeated [Paarah Warrior – lvl 1009]

'ding' 'You have defeated [Paarah Warrior – lvl 1037]

...

'ding' 'You have defeated [Paarah Warrior – lvl 1021]

'ding' 'The Arcane Eternal has reached lvl 816 – Five stat points awarded'

...

'ding' 'The Arcane Eternal has reached lvl 821 – Five stat points awarded'

'ding' 'The Ashen Titan has reached lvl 811 – Five stat points awarded'

...

'ding' 'The Ashen Titan has reached lvl 815 – Five stat points awarded'

'ding' 'The Primordial Arbiter has reached lvl 810 – One stat point awarded – One Core skill point awarded'

...

'ding' 'The Primordial Arbiter has reached lvl 814 – One stat point awarded'

As expected, the golems still provided a good way for her to level. Of course compared to the first ones she had destroyed, she soon needed twice as many for a single level up. By now she assumed she was already at ten times that.

Sucks that I've got all my class skills leveled up already. This would've been a great way to level them.

'ding' 'Ashen Limbs reaches 3rd lvl 7'

'ding' 'Bulwark of Ash reaches 3rd lvl 14'

'ding' 'Monster Hunter reaches 3rd lvl 29'

'ding' 'Blast Resistance reaches 3rd lvl 26'

Ilea got her Vitality to three thousand, and put the remaining twenty six points into Intelligence.

Summoning another drink, Ilea sat down on her ashen chair and relaxed. There had been waiting periods between the battles but usually nothing too long.

When she was done with the drink, she continued with a meal, and finished that too.

Already done?

She spread her wings and flew up again. *How long should I wait? If I start exploring, the golems are going to leave the square again. Hmm.*

"Can you send me a message in two hours?" she sent to the Meadow.

"The great Endless Meadow of the Accords, relegated to a mere herald of time," the tree sent back.

Herald of time sounds way cooler than what I actually need it to do. Just an alarm clock. A phone with a timer or a clock would actually be pretty helpful sometimes. I just go with my intuition.

Granted, Ilea wasn't bad at telling times, having worked in a fast food place. Though she didn't know how much her enhanced perception and skills like meditation changed things.

Which was really her plan here.

She sat down on the ground and started meditating. Either approaching golems would wake her, or the Meadow would.

Until the city was cleared.