

## Chapter 860 Pulse

Ilea followed the winding tunnels, finding more and more that connected with each other to create a cavern system right below the city. She couldn't tell if it was natural or not, but if it had been, she assumed the Druned would've known about it.

*Or they just didn't call it the depths of Paarah. Maybe I asked the wrong question.*

She didn't mind either way. If she didn't find anything interesting, she would try one or two more spots that Aki had found and then call it quits. Listening to suggestions from cursed crowns was interesting but not something she expected to lead to much.

Deeper and deeper she went, crawling through tight spaces, occasionally using her ash to break sections of stone, only teleporting when it saved her more than a few seconds. After about twenty minutes and hundreds of meters down into the stone, Ilea came out into a large open cavern, different in that she saw a simple wooden suspension bridge connecting two sides of a deep fissure.

Mushrooms provided dim blue illumination, far more than enough for her to see clearly. *So there were people down here, of some kind at least.* On the other side of the gulf, she could see the entrance to a mine shaft, wooden beams supporting the structure.

She teleported to the bridge and found the wood decaying. *Just touching that might collapse the whole thing.* Ilea didn't plan to test the connection with her considerable weight and simply flew to the other side. Glancing down into the fissure only revealed darkness. Inside of the mine shaft, she found more of the blue mushrooms growing. She realized there was barely any air inside.

*Some gasses too,* she realized as she breathed, though whatever it was failed to damage her in any way, and having no air wasn't much of a bother to her at this point. *Maybe someone hit a gas pocket or something. Let us see what is down there.*

Ilea didn't care much for keeping quiet. She walked for a few minutes until she found a deep stone shaft, remnants of a wooden lift hanging from the walls. She jumped. Ilea impacted a few seconds later with a light crouch, finding that the air was breathable once more. She saw a few critters and small clawed monsters run away deeper into the mine tunnels at her sudden and loud arrival.

Nothing challenged her as of yet, and so she went on, walking through tunnels and jumping down time and time again. Finally, she came out into a broad and open cavern, the blue mushrooms providing some illumination.

The space was vast. She could hear flowing water, saw bridges connecting various higher and lower sections of stone, cracks and fissures in the ground, tunnels leading away into other sections of the mine. More important however, was the presence of magic in the air.

A faint curse.

As if a pulse. So very faint but Ilea couldn't help but prepare for a fight. Something about the feel caught her off guard. Weak, yes, but she had never felt anything like it. Curses she knew, and not just those of Kyrian. Whatever she felt here was different, in a way she could not quite place.

It almost felt natural. As if a part of the cavern.

Summoning her hammer, she almost expected another pulse like she had felt back in the city, but nothing happened. The hammer remained in her hand, the curse magic within the artifact distinctly different.

“*You don’t have a clue either, hmm?*” she asked the thing but it remained quiet. By now she was pretty sure it had no way to talk back. Neither did she think that there was a complex intelligence within the artifact, but she could certainly control and command it in some ways, now that she was likely attuned to it, as Evan had put it.

She stored the hammer once again, and spread her wings, slowly flying into the cavern. Ilea tried to locate the source of the curse when she flew past a ledge and saw a group of four decrepit wooden houses. *Some monsters finally?*

Flying down, she watched a single humanoid creature sitting on a boulder. It was small and broad, most of its body covered in old brown rags, the face hidden. She didn’t see the person move as she approached and decided to land a reasonable distance away.

“Greetings,” she spoke out loud.

**[Cursed – lvl 29]**

*Great. At least they’re alive?*

“Can you hear me?” She took a few steps and recognize the being as a dwarf. At least they had once been a dwarf. Hunched over with bumps visible below the fabric. Ilea didn’t know if the identification meant the being was a monster called cursed, or if that was some kind of class.

“Ah...” a voice resounded. Raspy. One eye opened, blood shot and shaking ever so slightly. A male voice. “Ah you... you have come... come join the feast, th... there is room at our fire.”

“You don’t have a fire going, and you’re the only one here,” Ilea said, checking the simple wooden houses once again with her dominion. There was nobody here.

The dwarf cackled at her response, or he just cackled for no particular reason. The noise changed to coughing and retching, to the point where Ilea checked him with her healing.

What she found was strange. His health was low, wounds all over his body, with entire sections that she couldn’t gauge at all. Even when she tried to heal him, the wounds didn’t close.

“Ah... too late... too late for me. No no no no no no no. You. You have come to seek audience... have you not? With him... with him...”

She could tell the dwarf understood some of what was happening, but even his brain seemed to be decayed, half gone and Ilea unable to heal him. “Who are you? What’s your name?” she asked and took a few slow steps towards the dwarf. She closed the distance when he didn’t react. Carefully, she touched his arm, again without a reaction.

“Can you tell me anything about this place? About the curse?” she asked, slowly pulling away at the decayed fabric clinging to his arm. Below she knew was a section she couldn’t even feel with her healing.

“The curse... oh... the curse... find him... I... I must find him,” the dwarf said and moved slowly, his arm raising when some of the fabric fell.

Ilea stopped what she was doing, staring at the silver covering his flesh. Half his arm was eaten through.

“I must... please...” he spoke, sobbing before another fit of coughs took him.

“Talk to me,” Ilea said when she saw the bloodshot eye open and stare at her.

Silver flowed into the organ from within. “Ah... the maker...” His mouth opened, his arms reaching up.

Her precognition warned her of an attack, but the damage was irrelevant to her. Ilea only watched as silver spikes grew out from the dwarf, piercing flesh and bone, killing whatever remained of him before the silver impacted her mantle, sizzling as it flowed out to cover her form.

The fires of creation erupted on her ash, burning the metal away in mere moments. Much of it still clung to the dead dwarf, his chest cavity and skull open and split wide, dripping silver flowing out of the wounds, no longer reaching out towards her.

Ilea willed her ash and fire to cover the corpse and whatever was left of the silver, burning the remains.

*May you find rest.*

She took in a deep breath when the corpse was gone. *How long was he down here?*

*There is definitely another artifact somewhere. The source of this curse.*

She wondered what it meant. The Druned told her the curse of Paarah was gone, but this place, while deep, was reasonably close to the city. Did the crown come from down here? Did it lure another artifact or cursed being closer to the city with the strange pulses she had felt?

*One way to find out,* Ilea thought and flew up again. Nothing remained within the houses, any possible clues long decayed.

She followed the curse, going where she felt its power increase and backtracking when she felt its presence wane. The search didn't prove too difficult, leading her deeper into the system of caverns. She soon found more creatures, some twitching, some dead, all of them at least partially covered by silver.

Ilea wondered if it was the result of the curse she felt, or if there were creatures around that caused the effect. If it was the former, she assumed her resistance was far too high for the spell to endanger her in any way.

Ilea burned the corpses and checked on those still alive. A journey to the Meadow and back with a few of those still alive revealed that not even the ancient tree could help them at this point, the beings too far gone, too little of their selves remaining for a recovery. Mind and body, eaten by the silver curse.

Soon, she started feeling a slight pulse within the magic around her. Repeating. As if a metronome. Though she felt no major change in the intensity. Entering a cave littered with dead creatures, humanoid and monster alike, all covered in silver, she found herself staring at a group of four cursed beings.

An elf, a dwarf, and two four legged monsters she could not place, their legs ending in talons with heads on long necks, jaws opening to reveal sharp teeth as they turned towards her with no eyes. All of them were eaten through by the silver, most of their bodies covered. They were neither dead nor only twitching. They saw her, and moved to attack.

***[Cursed – lvl 284]***

*[Cursed – lvl 402]*

*[Cursed – lvl 183]*

*[Cursed – lvl 520]*

Her ashen limbs rushed out as they charged, only growls coming from the creatures. She cut through them as if metal blades through paper, chunks of silver and flesh splattering against the ground as white flame burned the remains. Howls resounded from deeper within, the sounds of her massacre rousing what had been still before.

Ilea didn't stop, walked with moving ashen limbs, more added as she willed two dozen spears into existence. She saw the manic eyes moving in the dark, flickering with reflections of white flame where the organs of those blessed with vision had not yet been taken by the curse. Spears rushed out and fire spread as ashen limbs cut into the approaching mass. Growls were stilled, and howls were silenced.

She watched the creatures move, mindless, charging her as if a tide of flesh and silver, stumbling, lunging, reaching nothing but the end. Ilea saw a massive thing push aside the other Cursed, a worm like creature, spikes growing out of a half silver carapace. The shredder would have perhaps been a challenge for her a few years past. She sent a single spear of burning ash, piercing through the hardened carapace and cutting through the flesh within. A second spear skewered through the worm, a ding resounding in her mind.

None of the creatures reached her level, most not even close. They all died the same. In the end, Ilea charged herself, her ash cutting through the cursed too slow to reach her on their own. *Not quite enough to be a challenge*, Ilea thought as silver and blood splattered onto the hard stone grounds, all of it set alight with flame, no remnant of the curse remaining.

Ilea still felt the magical pulse when silence returned to the cavern. *Drums in the deep*, she thought with a smile and kept on walking. She felt the curse closer now, and still she couldn't quite tell what was wrong with it. It felt like a whisper, both present in her mind, and fleeting all the same.

She burned more of the dead covered in silver, killed more of those that charged her, turned into mere monsters by the curse. Not one was a threat, not one was a challenge. Ilea killed two cursed beings, both once elves, their flesh and bones cut through as silver exploded outwards, cast into the flame consuming their remains. When all was gone, Ilea stopped fueling the fires, and saw light shine into the cave. The same dim blue she had gotten used to back in Paarah. Faint and distant.

Walking through the last stretch of the underground tunnel, Ilea burned the dead creatures taken by the curse. Dozens of them lying on the ground, arms outstretched towards the light, as if they died trying to reach for it. Finally, she came out into an expansive open cavern. Several waterfalls broke in from far above, rivers flowing down into the abyss with the sound of rushing waters. A cliff side spread before her, few of the cursed reaching this far. Two blue lanterns stood, marking the beginning of a two hundred meter long suspension bridge made entirely of silver.

The pulse remained constant. Repeating every few seconds. The curse growing in power as Ilea neared the source.

At the other end of the bridge, she could see a structure built against the rocky side of the stone cavern, hanging above the abyss with silver lined dark stone. Three massive moving water wheels were built onto the structure, catching just a few of the falling rivers. Blue and fiery light came from dozens of glass windows that lined the twelve floors she could see. Windows set into dark metals

and thick stone alike. A fortress in the deep, reaching several hundred meters in every direction, magic palpable even at this distance. Magic and heat.

*Suppose that's the place, Ilea thought. At least the crown didn't just send me down here to kill a bunch of cursed creatures.*

She spread her wings and followed the bridge towards the other side. Ilea couldn't see the ground below, unsure how far the waters fell before they hit the ground and continued digging deeper. Landing on the stone ledge jutting out of the fortress, Ilea looked at the large gate of black metal decorated with silver runes. Enchantments shined within her dominion, some preventing her from seeing through the gates. Reinforcement had been set into the stone, the bridge, the windows, all of it strengthened to a degree she hadn't even seen within the walls of Ravenhall.

Beyond the enchantments however, she could feel the cursed pulse, stronger once again.

She took in a deep breath and walked to the heavy double doors. She didn't plan to teleport inside, keeping her eyes out for any enchantments against space magic. She found a few, though none were even close to what she had faced when training with the Meadow. *If even Audur couldn't keep me there, whatever this place is, won't either.*

Ilea set her hand against the right side door and pushed. No enchantments or defensive magic lit up, no traps activated, nor was the gate locked at all. It opened in a smooth motion, with barely a sound.

Beyond, Ilea found a lavish entrance hall, dark marble, lined with silver, chandelier and candle imitations flickering with blue light. Her dominion reached into the hall but not beyond, two winding stairwells leading down onto a lower floor, another set of doors at the center of the opposite wall. Ilea grabbed one of the candle holders with her space manipulation and ripped it away from the wall, wedging it below the heavy gate as metal bent and the door was locked in place.

Still, she felt the pulse. Coming from ahead. She spread her wings and flew down, the curse growing ever stronger, now accompanied by waves of heat and the dull sound of metal hitting steel.

Ilea took in a deep breath and sent a wave of space magic into the less decorated metal double doors.

Expanding heat hit her in an instant, much of it absorbed into her core. She could feel the curse now, whispering words she could not grasp, perceived with senses that she did not have. Metal hitting steel reverberated from within.

She grinned, and walked inside.

A massive dome like hall, steel all of it, lit with fire. A forge, larger than she had ever seen, heat, beyond most that she had felt. Bits of blackened monster pieces hung down from silver chains. Wings, skulls, arms, and legs.

No tools lined the walls, no weapons, no creations, just a single anvil made of a black metal reflecting none of the flickering flames that clung to floor and walls. Before it stood a dwarf clad in dark stone and silver armor, runed silver bracers, dark metal boots, and black leg guards flickering with wisps of flame. His hair was a dark brown, long and fine, remnants of frayed braids visible within.

A simple silver hammer he raised, and brought down onto a glowing piece of metal with reverberating sound. Fire and heat rushed out with the strike, spreading through the dome accompanied by voiceless whispers.

The dwarf stood and lowered the smithing tool held within his hand.

“So it was you, to defeat the First Warrior.” he spoke with a deep and calm voice, turning around to look at her.

Ilea raised her hand and waved, looking at the rough face of the dwarf as she used identify. A long beard reached down towards his stone chest armor, a slightly crooked nose above, and two eyes entirely of silver.

***[The Maker – lvl ????]***