

Ilea casually ate from her plate as she leaned against the crystal tree of the Meadow. Monster ribs. Not quite as fancy as Keyla's cooking but there was just something satisfying about a simple and good piece of meat.

"Carnivore," the Meadow sent.

"Omni, actually. I do eat my vegetables," Ilea sent and smiled at the crystal branches above her. "How's the weight by the way? Manageable?"

"You have improved your density. To a reasonable degree, yes. Even the Fae agree. But you're talking to a master of earth and space magic. Your weight is insignificant in the face of my power."

"Good," Ilea sent and kept on eating. "You can let Aki know I'm here and I'm happy to hear about the interesting thing he had to propose."

A mere moment later, an Executioner appeared a few meters away. He gave her a nod in greeting. "I heard about Leia. I'm glad it worked out."

Ilea smiled. "Me too." She was still eating. "What did you need me for?"

Aki's green eyes glowed. "The Maker. Sanguerrihn of Paarah."

Ilea raised her brows. *Right.* She thought back to their battle, shuddering when she remembered the Primordial Curse. *That was before my evolutions. Close one that.*

"Savien was his actual name, right?"

"Savien Velmark," Aki said. "According to the history we found in Paarah."

Ilea had met the dwarf and he'd fought her near immediately. And he definitely thought highly of himself. If she was to meet him again, she decided at the very least not to use his titles. *He did hold some high position in Paarah before his family was killed in some political scheming. If I remember correctly, that is why he then essentially turned into the curse mage he is known as today. Or that was Aki's theory at least.*

"Has he moved out of his lair?"

"He has not. At least not according to our readings. However now that most of the surface is uninhabitable and we're expanding our efforts to make underground settlements more hospitable to humans and other species normally used to the sun, one thought inevitably went to Paarah. We have plenty of Taleen ruins around but the enchantments are different and from what I've seen of Paarah, the city is surprisingly well maintained still."

"Must've been the golems I destroyed," Ilea suggested.

"That too. They also used different runes in their enchantments and compared to the Taleen, their priorities in city building were vastly different. And to be honest, their ability too. The Taleen excelled with machinery, the Core I'm in being the very pinnacle of their creations. Paarah had more of a focus on culture and quality of life. It would be nice to have the city in our control, and to have people moved there to study their enchantments. Without a potentially volatile and highly

dangerous four-mark curse mage in the vicinity. If you feel ready to face him again. I don't think few others would be up for the task, if any. You're the only one who's fought him before."

"The Primordial Curse," Ilea murmured. The last time she had faced the dwarf, she had nearly died, just barely able to escape and heal herself. She had even gotten a title for that. But she hadn't been a four-mark.

And she herself had not yet been a wielder of a primordial force.

She didn't think it would be perfectly safe, but if anything, she could test her powers against yet another four-mark. And with him removed from the picture, they at least wouldn't have to worry about new cursed artifacts showing up. Just the ones he'd already made.

With all my fourth tiers, I'd be surprised if he could even touch me. Though I suppose I shouldn't underestimate another wielder of a primordial power. Even though he seems to mainly be a crafter.

"You want me to fight him?"

"I don't want him in the vicinity of Paarah. Maybe he can be convinced to leave, though I doubt that."

Ilea agreed. His workshop felt very much like a permanent residence. Nor had he seemed particularly open for discussion. She would give him a chance but he had already tried to kill her once.

She wiped her mouth with ash. Her plate was empty. "Right. So when do I leave?"

"I'll inform some of our strongest fighters that they should be on standby in case you need help," Aki said. *"Let me know when you feel ready. I have a gate prepared for you in Paarah."*

"I'm ready to leave now. Let me know when you have people on standby."

Ilea waited for a few minutes until Aki confirmed that both Verillion and Nelras were ready to step in and help in case she couldn't handle a fight and couldn't escape either. A low chance, they all thought, considering her space magic.

Aki showed her to the teleportation platform to see her off. *"Good luck. And do be careful. Worse comes to worst, we just write Paarah off as a curse contaminated zone."*

"I'll try not to show off too much," Ilea said. "Just a little." She nodded to him with a smile and disabled her space magic resistance, enveloped by the teleportation spell.

She appeared a moment later somewhere in Paarah. Teleporting up, she checked the direction and teleported again, still remembering her last journey down below the city and towards the curse mage and his underground lair. The city lay quiet and still. Eerie, now that even the golems were gone from its streets.

A few dozen teleports later, she found the silver bridge leading to the fortress of the Sanguerrihn. She tapped one of the blue lanterns that stood guard over this ancient place. It flickered with light just as it had when she'd first come here. And she could see the lights coming from the many floors of the Maker's workshop. If she had to guess, she would assume that he was home.

Ilea breathed in, feeling the quiet whisper of the primordial curse, weaving through the fabric. Last time it had mostly just been a faint curse in the background, an unknown still to her.

Now that her perception had grown, she could tell that it was something foreign, not quite keeping to the same rules as most of the magic that she had seen and experienced, curse or otherwise. It felt intriguing. Almost as if it had a faint presence. It didn't feel similar at all to the Primordial Flame, and still, it was the closest thing she could compare it to. That and what she'd felt when seeing the Source within Ravana.

She considered switching her titles to the one she had gotten from her previous survival of the curse. *The Untainted*. She decided against it. Dragonslayer was better, and she could still switch it out on the fly if it became necessary. She had survived the curse without it, and without all the power she had gained through her evolutions.

Right now, she could tell the curse remained dormant, neither here nor gone entirely. *Is he keeping it present in some kind of passive state, as a warning? Or is this just the result of having the power in the first place?*

"He did not seem to like visitors," she murmured, and started walking down the silver bridge. It bore her weight.

She didn't make an effort to hide in the slightest, knowing that he was very likely aware of her presence. That or he was focused on his work.

Ilea reached the other side and opened the door.

The entrance hall felt cold, the blue light and dark marble suggesting this place belonged to someone very rich or important, or both. Ilea didn't much care this time around, walking up to the once more shut double doors to the Maker's workshop before she opened them. With her hands. She felt the heat and curse magic wash into her as she stepped inside but this time around it felt far less imposing.

She had killed a dragon. She had fought the First Ascended.

For this, she was ready.

Ilea saw him standing there, hammering away at a grotesque looking silver creation that had several sets of differing arms and legs attached. She glanced up at the blackened monster pieces still hanging from the ceiling.

He didn't turn to look at her.

Ilea took a few steps towards him and into the dome like hall. "Lovely, this place. Really quite charming."

The monotone hammering stopped.

He turned, and glared at her with entirely silver eyes. He did not look pleased to see her. To see anyone, she imagined.

"Hello Savien. I'm back."

He squinted at her. "The beast." He raised his brows. "So it is true. You have survived. That is, unexpected. Strange. Impossible. And yet you are here, standing before me. Or an illusion? Is it tricking me?" He looked up and glanced around, as if to find an invisible specter.

"I'm real. And I came here to ask you to leave," she said.

He laughed. "To leave. She came to ask me to leave. And why, creature, should I do such a thing?"

“Because we don’t want to have a dangerous curse mage near one of our settlements.”

“Oh. Yes. Paarah. The ancient ruin still attracts scavengers, kings, and emperors alike. But make no mistake. It shall remain ruin, for all time to come. I will not move. But you... something is different about you.” He lowered his arms, staring at her. “There is... something there.” His eyes went wide. “Oh. It is... no... it cannot be... I was supposed... supposed to be the only one.” He touched his head and staggered to the side, then growled at her.

What does he mean?

“You don’t have to leave. I could try to heal you,” Ilea said. “Heal you from the curse. From whatever madness that has made you... into what you are.”

She didn’t know how much of him and what he’d done in the past was really him, and how much of it was the curse or maybe even something else. If part of him was a mere beast and deep down, he wished for that to be over, maybe now, she could help him.

He started cackling, then quieted and narrowed his eyes.

“No, no, no, no. You. You are no saint. You are a monster.” He raised his hammer, silver flowing into existence and rushing at her. “Just like me.”

Ilea’s pyroclastic flow responded, ash and volcanic glass crashing into silver, both forces at a standstill. She didn’t push, instead focusing on the dwarf.

Ilea narrowed her eyes, and pushed healing into him. If there was something there from whoever he had once been, then she would at least try.

“Cosmic... energies,” he said and staggered back, touching his brow. He smiled then, a bitter expression. Then he stood straight, power rushing out from his form, his gear thrumming with magical energy, the whispers of the primordial curse coming to the forefront. “No, Dragonslayer.” His voice was quieter. “This, is who I am.” He spread his arms and the hall quieted. His glare was focused on her, magic pulsing around him, flame and silver. “And this is who I will remain.”

Ilea heard the waves of an ocean. Endless. Serene.

She looked at him then, with pity. How many years had he been down here? How many years had he forged, cursed and consumed by hatred? What he had done, it could not be undone. But with time, he could have changed, could’ve built something better, could’ve been something more. “Your past is your past. You can choose another path.”

He shook his head. A fast motion, his eyes wild. “No. No. You have come here, with purpose. And your will stands against mine. Now... show it to me. The flame.”

She could hear and feel the whispers of the primordial curse, weaving past the fabric itself. She could see it, as if tendrils of nothingness snaked their way through their reality.

The curse shifted. Ever so slightly. From there.

To here.

A presence.

Ilea felt it for a moment, right before her flames and cosmic magic erupted, True Reconstruction and the Primordial Flame burning away the sense of dread, pushing back against the might of

whatever the Maker had summoned into this world. She stood amidst the pressure of an ocean, the weight of another reality, a reality where all decayed, all was drowned. It did not belong.

She could see the Sanguerrihn amongst it all, his expression strained. He twitched again and again, gritting his teeth before he raised his arms towards her.

The pressure increased, the silent whispers all present now, all of her skills and resistances just enough to keep her from teleporting out. Her ash decayed as she created it, her cosmic shields flared out in moments. But her fires remained, swaying in the dark. She grit her teeth and pushed back.

She knew that what she saw and felt was not from this world, not meant for any world.

Ilea felt her heart beat, fast. She felt the fear that nearly gripped her, in the presence of something that could not be faced, could not be beaten. But she had felt that way before. And she herself wielded one such force. And so she stood, palm raised before her and enveloped in the yellow fires of the stars.

Ilea looked at the dwarf as his complexion paled, his silver eyes darting around, his hands shaking.

Is it my flames, or the curse he bears?

She watched the magic all around her. Primordial forces tearing at each other in a way she had not perceived before. The fabric was no longer here, their space here now separate from the rest of this realm. She narrowed her eyes and activated Sunbound Creation.

Her flames flared up and out, everything burning away in the light of her fires. A mere moment and the flames reached her foe, leaving the dwarf staggering back, the presence of his curse gone in the same moment, all of it burned away into nothingness, the pressure pushed back and overwhelmed.

She stepped out of her creation and teleported close, grabbing him by his armor. She saw a bright spear of arcane lightning forming in his hand and slapped it away with her free arm, ignoring the arcane magic that thrummed out.

“We will not be fighting here,” she said and formed a gate behind him. She held onto him and pushed, silver and fire burned away by the primordial flame as he screamed and summoned his magic. Ilea held on, and walked through the gate she had created.

Into a realm that she knew very well. Frozen sand cracked below her boots. The gate closed and they were left alone, in a vast desert.

The Maker slammed his flaming silver hammer into the side of her head, a shock wave of heat, fire, and silver erupting past her and into the sands.

Ilea stood, and watched him, then threw him back with a push of space magic, watching as he landed and skidded to a halt with a growl.

He looked around, to the storms ravaging the moon of the Meadow, a few distant Daughters of Sephilon floating in the sky. “You did not burn me.”

Ilea looked at the wracked landscape, then glanced back at the dwarf. “I’m a four-mark, Savien. I have cosmic healing that can reform what you are. And I have powerful allies. Resources. We could remove the curse, if it is such a burden.”

Perhaps she offered her help again because she felt bad that they were essentially taking over Paarah, or because she invaded his home. Even with what he was doing there, it didn’t feel right.

Or she saw something there, in the few glances and words that were not filled with hatred. A dwarf, once, not a monster. A brilliant mind, a smith like no other. And she knew that with her magic, things *could* be different.

He smiled again. He looked tired now. Older, and worn. “You ignore my titles, my history. What is your name, Dragonslayer?”

“Ilea,” she said.

“Ilea. A strange name. For a strange human, with strange magic.” He looked up at the sky, then back to Ilea. “I’m sorry. There is no curse to remove. I *am* the curse.” Silver formed next to him, a copy of himself appearing before his gear started thrumming with magic, denser than before. “Even with your might. Time has its way, and some things, cannot be undone.”

Flowing silver formed around him as he charged.

Ilea met him.

Her fist clashed with his hammer, a purple glowing piece of reality disappeared, carved out with void, to absorb the cosmic magic that pushed past, his flames all the while flowing over her, silver and burning ash forming a maelstrom around them. His copy rushed her and she teleported it a few hundred meters away, then kicked at Savien. It felt like she’d hit a chunk of steel, the impact dull. The ground below and behind him cracked, frozen sand shooting up and out.

“Dragonslayer,” he said with a grin and punched her.

Ilea’s Fourth Tier Reconstruction stopped the blow, fire and silver washing over her, searing the ground behind her. She met his eyes, and found them focused. And she smiled. *Very well, old man.*

On Erendar, I will not have to hold back.

She grabbed onto his arm and twirled, spreading her wings before she threw him and followed, her speed increasing as she caught up and punched down on him, void shields appearing here and there but not fast enough. A few of her punches went through and left him crashing into the ground, tumbling several times before wings of flesh burst from his back, the dwarf flying now but slower than Ilea.

She crashed into him with speed, taking the full force of his hammer strike and an explosion of heat and fire that would’ve incinerated her a few years back. Shock waves extended outwards from the impact, the dwarf skidding to a halt as Ilea slowed and landed, walking towards him.

More durable than the Architect. As I would’ve expected from an ancient dwarf. He’s from Elos after all.

She summoned her ash to stop the silver flowing in from above. With focus this time, pushing out with her limitless harmony, burning ash and volcanic glass enveloping all, burning away the silver, ground, and air alike. She kept walking closer and charged her Fabric Alteration.

Savien stood his ground, amidst it all. He summoned waves of fire that parted the burning smoke and ash. A focused expression on his face, glaring at her with his silver eyes. He spat blood, the slight wounds on his face healing before he rushed her.

Ilea raised her palm and she sent a wave of space magic into his form.

His chest piece thrummed with power as he was instantly sent flying, hitting the ground a dozen times before he crashed and skidded, blood on his face as he pushed himself upright, down on one knee. He grinned now.

Ilea saw how he started to heal and teleported right in front of him, a few hundred meters away. She raised her palm and used Cosmic Deconstruction, not as intrusion but as a broad wave.

He staggered back, the skin on his face showing slight cracks.

Savien formed a spear of arcane lightning and threw it at her, from two meters away.

Ilea stopped it with her will on space itself, the purple lightning hanging in the air for a moment before it exploded, spreading out and burning into them.

Ilea pointed and Savien looked up to see a monolith of volcanic glass coming down towards him. She could feel his teleportation spells fail against her aura, and she held him there with Fabric Alteration when he tried to fly back.

She stood, the shockwave of air, splinters of black glass, and frozen sand spreading out as the monolith crashed down and shattered for ten entire seconds.

Ilea smiled when she saw her foe stumbling out from the debris before he turned and looked at her, his breathing ragged.

“This is your last chance, Savien,” Ilea said.

Savien stood, meeting her eyes as blood flowed from wounds on his face, one of his arms limp at his side. Then he turned his back to her.

Ilea breathed in deep and raised her index finger, a yellow flame coming to life, slowly spreading over her armor and wings, spreading out over the ground, bright burning smoke and ash enveloped with the bright light of the Primordial Flame.

His chest rose before he breathed out. He touched the straps of his chest piece and took it off, throwing it to the side. Then he took off his bracers, and more of his gear, standing in the end with clothes made for a smith. Any smith.

He glanced back at her. “If you must take that old ruin. Make it something better than it was.”

“We will,” she said. Ilea narrowed her eyes and tried to heal him once again. She had healed thousands and yet this dwarf she could not touch. *Stubborn old smith.*

He smiled, then turned his head back to look ahead of him. “It is good, to have seen another realm. Now, please. If you are so bent on healing the world, Ilea. Then finish, what I never could.”

It was strange. To fight this four mark dwarf, this legendary figure. And to realize that he posed no threat at all to her.

It made her feel like an executioner rather than a fighter or adventurer. It was frustrating. Because she knew that if he wanted to, they could find a way. If it was just her, and if he was just a powerful dwarf, then maybe she would leave him here, would check in on him and try again.

But she knew that this was not just about her, and this was not any ordinary dwarf or mage. This was the Sanguerrihn, maker of cursed items that had destroyed entire cities. She could not make sure that he found no way back, and he had the potential power to destroy everything the Accords had left.

She focused now, her flames burning brighter. “So be it. May you find peace, Savien of Paarah.”

Ilea went into her Sunbound Creation, her flames flaring up and washing over him, burning away in moments, everything that had remained of the Sanguerrihn.

Ilea raised her brows when for a moment, the curse returned, stronger than before, an ocean storm lashing out one last time into her reality, leaving a single crack in her creation, stopped by her flaring fires just before it reached her form.

She fueled the flames until nothing of the dwarf or curse remained.

Ilea breathed in the cold air that rushed in to fill what was burned away. She looked up at the distant eclipse of Sephilon. Then she sighed and stored all the enchanted items he had left behind. She would take some time before she would look at them.

‘ding’ ‘You have killed [The Sanguerrihn of Paarah - lvl 1103 / The First Artisan of the Primordial Curse – lvl 1083 / The Living Heart of Silver – lvl 1095]

‘ding’ ‘The Cosmic Immortal has reached level 1012 – Five stat points awarded’

‘ding’ ‘The Pyroclastic Storm has reached level 1009 – Five stat points awarded’

‘ding’ ‘The Sunforged Realmwalker has reached level 1010 – One stat point awarded’

‘ding’ ‘You have defeated the wielder of the Primordial Curse – One Core skill point awarded’

Was it the nature of the curse that made him what he had become? Was he still holding on to ancient hatred? Or perhaps it was not the curse at all but the power that it gave him which fueled his pride.

An ancient curse. An ancient dwarf. She had hoped for more of the latter but in the end, maybe he was right, and they really were one and the same.

But he is gone now either way. And his hold on Paarah too.