

Chapter 859 Constructs

“Lilith of Ravenhall, first of her name, queen of the Accords and hunter of drakes. It’s been two hours.”

Ilea opened her eyes. It had only felt like a blink. She took in a last deep breath before she started moving again. Wings spread and raised her up as she looked around. None of her ash clones had returned. *“Thank you, elder tree,”* she sent back to the Meadow, ignoring the ridiculous titles thrown her way.

Is this good enough a shot? She really didn’t feel like making sure the city was one hundred percent cleared. Waiting as long as she did, and knowing how fast her ash clones were, she was confident that at least the vast majority of golems had been found and destroyed. Testing her capacity, she found that the limit remained the same. Which meant that none of the clones got destroyed.

Ilea dismissed them all and sent a message to Aki. *“Found an ancient city. Tons of treasures. Maybe one of those flying teleport platforms?”* Ilea opened a gate to Iz a moment later, large enough for one of the modified Destroyers to fly through.

A few seconds passed before the first Hunter Praetorians came through, landing nearby as a Destroyer flew in. Centurions followed. A single Executioner moved down through the air as the large flying machine shifted to deploy its teleportation gate.

Green eyes glowed as the silver being took in the surroundings.

“This place is…”

“Paarah,” Ilea sent.

The Executioner remained quiet for a few seconds, the gate thrumming to life ten meters away, more machines appearing near instantaneously.

“The lost city of Paarah… west of even the Sava desert. Of course…”

“The Druned were involved in building it. They asked me not to share this with anyone until the city is cleared of its remnants. Four mark Golems. I tried my best to clear them all out but I suppose there could be a few still lurking in basements and such. Just don’t bring anyone here that couldn’t handle that.”

“There are few that could,” Aki spoke. *“This is… a find, I’ll say that. What can we take?”*

Ilea smiled. *“The Druned hold no claim to the city of Paarah or anything within. Which means this is essentially just a ruin. Knock yourself out. I already collected a bunch as well,”* Ilea said and summoned all the books and treasures she had taken before fighting the first warrior.

The Executioner took one of the books and looked through it. *“This is in common. And the… so it’s true. Elves, dwarves, Mava, and orcs, all living together.”*

“Found skeletons too. But I’m not sure what exactly happened to the city,” she said and quickly shared her findings, the first warrior, and the crown.

“The Taleen had found a few of the Sanguerrihn’s artifacts themselves, and they lost three entire cities to them, with heavy losses to retake them and bury the artifacts.” Aki informed. *“And those*

are just the incidents they managed to link to the cursed artifacts. I suspect there was more. Stories from the Pit as well, but fewer. There are records from the Soul Forge as well. Khan Joggoth supposedly tinkered with a few of the artifacts but found them wholly unusable for any purpose besides destruction, and far too chaotic to be used in any way. He buried them as well."

Ilea summoned her hammer and looked at it. *"How many of these things are out there?"*

"My collective records define twenty six objects. Adding the crown you have mentioned, that makes it twenty seven. Possible leads and unsolved settlement wide catastrophes, it could be more than a hundred, but causes for such events could as well have been four mark monster attacks, Ascended, demon summonings, various magical experiments, or other relics unrelated to the Sanguerrihn. Elven attacks, rivaling civilizations, civil wars, slave uprisings, and so on.

"I will speak to the Accords, and have considerable resources allocated to clear this city and have the knowledge studied. Paarah is one of many mysteries left entirely unsolved and lost to time. I had categorized it as a fairy tale. Perhaps I should reevaluate some of those categorizations."

"Perhaps you'll solve a bunch of mysteries with the knowledge gathered here," Ilea added.

"Most certainly," the Executioner spoke. *"I will inform you, should there be golems left."*

"Thanks," Ilea sent. *"Oh, and the crown told me to seek the depths of Paarah. I'd go look for that after I take a quick bath, but maybe you can search as well. The sewers aren't large enough to enter, so it's not there, but maybe there's something deeper."*

"I'll let you know if I find something," Aki sent and got to work.

Ilea took a last look at the platform, various guardian variants already swarming the ancient city. *I love that little dagger.*

She summoned a gate to the domain of the Meadow and stepped through, asking for a teleport to her room before she heated up her bath. In her dominion she could already see the first books and documents from Paarah appear within the Soul Forge, Centurions entering to sort through everything as they surely worked with the Meadow to categorize and document the ancient texts.

Feeding the super computers, Ilea thought with a smile.

"Stumbling into new major discoveries," the Meadow sent.

"I was sent there by the Druned," Ilea said. *"I didn't just randomly find the place."*

"Are you interested at all in what you found? Or do you want to fight the next monster?" the being asked.

"I would've assumed it'd take some time to figure out," she said. *"I'm not disinterested. And I do have a place I want to visit next. I also have this."* She summoned the metal box. *"Inside is a powerful divine artifact. Thought you might want to have a look at it."*

"The Crown of Authority, yes. I'm informed. The casing matches what we have learned about the artifacts," the Meadow said.

"I assume it will be safe with you?" Ilea asked.

"Can I open the box?" the Meadow asked.

"Sure," Ilea answered, watching as the box opened with the help of some space magic, the crown hovering upwards.

Silver threads shot out and were immediately stopped by a powerful spherical barrier all around. *“An interesting creation. And yes, I do believe it will be safe here. Owl will want to have a look as well.”*

“Soul magic?” Ilea asked.

“Indeed, though not mainly. Whispers. Remnants,” the Meadow said.

“Well do let me know if you find out anything interesting,” Ilea said.

“We will work through everything that arrives, and I’ll inform you once there is something to share. Do enjoy your bath,” the Meadow sent and let her be.

Ilea opened her eyes when the voice of the Meadow spoke into her mind.

“Aki just reported that he found another golem.”

“Shit,” Ilea sent and stood up, her mantle forming and her heat gathering, all the water still on her evaporating instantly.

“The Guardians are engaged in battle, but he requests your assistance to minimize destruction,” the Meadow sent.

“I’ll be right there,” Ilea sent. She wasn’t sure if it had been long enough for her destination in Paarah to be available again, but the spell manifested as she willed it.

Ilea was moved through the fabric before she appeared in the ancient city half a world away from the domain of the Meadow, and the headquarters of the Accords.

She teleported up and out of the mansion and charged her wings, flying over the city until she came up on the fountain square. She immediately saw the Prototype Destroyer floating a few hundred meters away, two more Destroyers flying nearby. Three Hunter Praetorians stood on a few of the large mansions surrounding the devastated square, all of them shooting arcane arrows towards the enemy. The projectiles vanished right after leaving the bows.

She slowed, seeing destroyed Centurions and Guardians littered near where the teleportation Destroyer had been situated. *At least he managed to move it away.*

Three Centurions remained, one of them a close combat variant. Behind them moved the singular Executioner Aki had sent to the city, likely to oversee everything. Dents showed on its regenerating silver armor, the purple shield flickering back to life.

He’s spread so thin. Ilea remembered the show of power in the outskirts of Nipha, every machine now either protecting the various cities of the Accords, working to provide logistics or other services to their allies, or searching for Ascended facilities throughout the continent.

“This all you have available?” Ilea sent, charging forward as she saw an axe cleave into the side of the close quarters Centurion. Metal bent under the impact, the machine stumbling to the side with its six legs before another axe cut down from above, through the machine’s head and deep into its torso.

“Please don’t interfere quite yet,” Aki sent, the eyes of the Executioner shining bright.

The Paarah warrior charged another Centurion, arcane arrows exploding on the ground behind him.

The level three hundred machine stood with its spear held up in a defensive stance. It moved backwards as fast as it could as the second Centurion circled the golem. Neither managed to keep up with the charge, the first one struck with an axe that bent the dark green spear, the other one sent careening to the side, its left shoulder ripped off by the fast axe strike.

The Executioner charged forward, running near as fast as the magical charge of the four mark golem. Its arms shifted, from blades to hammer like fists. Dodging under the first axe, the machine took the second one as its bright purple shield flared up, exploding with a flash. Impacts resounded as its hammer arms struck the side of the large golem with purple void magic explosions, bits and pieces of stone sent flying to the side with chunks vanishing entirely before the Executioner retreated with a fast jump. Another axe swing just barely scraped past the machine's torso, leaving a furrow in the silver metal.

"You're not dealing enough damage," Ilea sent as she watched the golem finish off the damaged Centurion, two of its arms shoveling debris back into the destroyed section of its side.

"I do not plan to defeat it," Aki spoke. *"I am learning."*

Ilea raised her brows. *Well, if that isn't fucking scary.*

"I will tell you when to interfere," Aki sent as his Executioner charged forward once again, the cut on its torso repaired once again as its shield flared to life.

She saw the Hunter Praetorians leave, no longer taking part in the battle. *"Did you just stall until I got here?"*

"I've been collecting data with a reasonable risk. Now that you're here, the risk of losing an Executioner is zero percent," Aki spoke as his machine dodged the charging strikes of the four armed golem. Not a single hit struck but the silver machine was getting pushed back. Finally he managed to land a strike but nearly lost his shield again.

"Your confidence in me is flattering," Ilea sent with a dry tone.

"It is based on the evidence you left behind. How many were there? A hundred? A thousand?" the machine asked, continuing to dodge, occasionally getting in a strike or two. The impacts weren't as strong as Ilea expected from an Executioner but then the golem didn't really allow the machine to fully exert its force. The difference in strength and weight was obvious. Perhaps if the golem had been a beast of flesh and blood, with little ability to regenerate, the machine would've had a chance, but as it stood, it was a losing battle. That or a stalemate.

"I didn't count," Ilea said. Watching the two fast moving constructs made her think back on her first fight with an Executioner. *Both are fucking scary.* She smiled as the shield shattered again, bits of rock cut away from one of the golem's arms in turn. Both were adjusting, but when it came to progress, the machine was ahead. She would still bet her gold on the rock being that seemed partially resistant to the void magic blades and hammers. If only based on the weight and damage advantage.

It's closer than I thought.

Aki got in more hits as the seconds passed, his confidence growing with every dodged blow as the golem failed to learn quite as quickly. When two minutes had passed, Ilea watched as the golem rolled onto the ground with wild strikes of its axe keeping away the Executioner. She had seen the

move a few times. Much of the damage dealt to the golem was repaired with the maneuver, stone molding with stone as it once more brandished its axes.

The Executioner wasn't running low either, its silver body recovering fast from the hits that it took, the machine never overextending, always ready, every move as well executed as it could have been.

"I believe this is as far I can push it," Aki sent. "It is no longer efficient to keep this going. As enjoyable as it would be to perhaps find a way to victory."

"Right? You remind me of myself," Ilea said as she appeared in front of the golem, her runes lighting up as arcane power flooded her system. She breathed out and teleported a second time when the axes came her way. Three fast strikes broke through the left leg of the creature, explosions of bits and pieces of rock reverberating as she danced around the being, familiar now with the range and power of their axes, familiar with their movements, and the strength she needed to deal damage in the most efficient manner. A few more strikes and the being collapsed onto its arms, letting go of two axes in the process.

Two golden shields flared up and slowed the strikes, the axe blades scraping against Ilea's arms as she rushed forward, her fist impacting the stone chest, followed by ten more strikes as she built walls of ash around herself to defend against the fists and awkwardly angled slashes. A last punch ripped through the being as ashen limbs cut into it and pulled outwards, rubble sent flying as another noise resounded in her mind. Accompanied by no level ups.

Her runes stopped glowing, long before she reached the half point of her health.

"Thank you for the assistance," Aki said.

"No worries. Your machine did better than I thought it would," she said.

"The Druned are impressive. To think they could stand against the pinnacle of Taleen creations. It would have been interesting to see this variation when it still possessed the full extent of its sapience."

"So they are Druned? And you're saying these variants were Intelligent beings once?" Ilea asked.

"Yes to both, according to the records. Something changed that, but it appears only for the battle variants, not the builders now living among the Mava. At least not to many of the builders, it is possible they were destroyed in the initial assault."

"Any clue what happened? I assume it has to do with the crown?" Ilea asked.

"There are dozens of hastily written messages found throughout the city that indicate an instant change within the golem behavior. Most people were killed instantly, by the very beings they designated as their guardians," Aki spoke.

Ilea gave the machine a look.

"Are you implying something?" he said.

"Not at all, machine being in control of our guardians."

"There are motions and suggestions to limit the reliance on Guardians, and I very much welcome them. Either way, I will do my duty," the Executioner said.

"It was a joke, Aki," Ilea said. "You know I trust you. That's why I even took you with me into the core."

The Executioner looked at her and nodded after a few seconds. *“I know. You... are one of few with that sense of humor. I’ve already learned not to joke on such topics. The power I wield, is enormous. And thus the duty that I bear.”*

Ilea smirked. *“I know how you feel, though I guess my sense of duty is not quite as ingrained.”*

“Of course,” Aki said.

“Oh, so you Can be sarcastic,” Ilea said.

“I did spend some time with you, yes. And the Meadow enjoys such behavior as well.”

“Right. So the crown or a curse or something else changed the behavior of the Druned, even though they were intelligent beings?” Ilea asked.

“I only have records. They are golems, that is true. And some of the books suggest they have not naturally awakened but were instead created. Here, in Paarah, before it became quite as grand as it did. And in the end, they caused its fall. Why exactly, I don’t know, but while intelligent, my very existence proves that constructs can be manipulated or taken over. The Taleen machines are autonomous to an extent, more so with the higher leveled variations, but inserting myself as a dagger allowed me to take over.

“I even suspect tools could be made to do the same things to humans or other awakened beings, but such would have to be more complex.”

“Like the corruption in the Descent,” Ilea suggested.

“Taking over, yes, but not control or complex commands. The golem was not a mere beast,” Aki said. *“But we will scour the entire city and find out what we can. I already found several places for you to investigate in regards to the depths you spoke of.”*

“That would be lovely, sure,” Ilea said.

“Then you may follow this Guardian,” the Executioner said and pointed to another machine running to join them.

“Really running low on personnel there,” Ilea said.

“The entrance is small,” Aki said.

“Sure, sure,” Ilea answered and tapped one of the Executioner’s legs before joining the waiting Sword Guardian. *“You look new,”* she sent to the machine.

It didn’t reply.

Instead it ran towards one of the streets leading away from the square.

Have they always been so slow? Ilea wondered, following the machine a meter above ground.

Aki hadn’t lied. They reached their destination two minutes later, inside of a rather modest looking house compared to the neighbors. Ilea was led down into the three story cellar, the door really not quite suitable for an Executioner, though they could’ve just destroyed the floors.

She already saw the fissure in the wall through her dominion. Reaching the lowest floor, faint blue light shined from an enchanted device fastened to one of the walls, its design mimicking a candle.

The stone cellar was empty, the only noteworthy thing a wide crack in the opposite wall. Beyond was an unlit natural looking path leading down.

She glanced at the waiting Guardian, seeing the reflection of blue light on its green metal. *This thing is spotless. Seems it was produced recently.* “You can just wait here for me,” she said. Ilea looked at the machine, unsure if it understood. Walking towards the fissure, she found it following her.

However when she stepped into the darkness, the Guardian left.

Guess it had orders.

She looked at the jagged rock on each side of the long and winding tunnel, the ground everything but even.

Let's see what the ancient crown wanted us to seek. She smiled and walked into the darkness.