

Chapter 852 Life

Four platforms were easy this time. She nearly finished the fifth when the structure toppled over, ever so slightly but it was enough. In the last moment, she could see the web of carefully placed cracks, as if the puzzle finally formed in her mind.

“Well done,” she said. *“I missed the entire section,”* she murmured. Her Fourth tier came and went several times during the game. She didn't know if there was a time limit between building but even with her considerations, she didn't take much longer for her turns than the being before her. *Doesn't hurt to ask though.*

“Is there a time limit between turns?” she asked.

“Five minutes, with this version,” the Druned replied near instantly this time.

“There are other versions with other limits?” she asked.

“Yes,” the being spoke but did not elaborate further.

Ilea imagined two Druned sitting somewhere on a mountain top, their tower reaching tens of meters in height with the last finished platform over a year past. *Would they plan in for wind, dust, and snow?* She nodded to her self. *Of course they would.*

Another game came and went. Once more she got to the fifth layer. She was closer this time. The game after was worse, but on the third one, she managed a stable fifth platform.

Ilea watched as the Druned built the sixth, her mood dropping instantly when her Fourth Tier kicked in again and she recognized the complex connections running through all the layers, all the way up to the newly formed sixth one. It finished and she knew she had lost. Any ash she would place would bring the tower to a collapse.

“This is insane,” she sent.

The Druned did not reply.

“I don't think I'll ever match any of you in this game, but I'll try again,” she said.

“You are adequate. For a human,” the Druned spoke.

“I try whatever I can. But I'm best at fighting. Any other challenges you might have for me?” she sent.

The Druned didn't speak nor move, but it kept its head angled towards her.

Ilea waited for ten minutes until something changed. Instead of receiving an answer however, more Druned gathered nearby. It wasn't obvious, but she was observing her surroundings quite carefully, with little else to do, and determined to wait out the Golem. She had piqued its interest. That much she could tell.

“Friend to the Fae,” a new voice spoke. It almost sounded the same as the Druned she had played with, but the echoes were a little longer.

“Friend to the Mava,” another voice.

“Godslayer. And human,” a third voice.

Now the Druned who had played moved its head, upwards slightly. *“Ilea of Ravenhall. You seek a challenge fit for one such as yourself.”*

“I do,” she sent back.

“It could mean death.” Another voice.

“I’ve faced death many times,” she sent.

“There is no glory.”

“I don’t care,” Ilea spoke.

“Why would one such as thee, seek challenge from the Druned?”

“I have faced Elementals, and Gods of other realms. Is it so strange that I would ask you for another challenge?”

Another few minutes passed.

“You are. Eligible,” one of the voices spoke.

“We shall talk to you, once the suns rise again. Meet us at the southernmost point of this settlement,” one of the Druned sent before they all started to move away once more.

“I will,” Ilea sent before she turned to the one she had played with. *“Another round?”*

The being began to clear up the mess from the last game without another word.

Ilea played for another few hours. She didn’t get past the sixth layer.

When the suns started to set, she soon started to see the first groups of Mava move westward and towards the center of the newly built settlement.

“Guess that’s the sign to leave,” Ilea sent to the Druned who had patiently played the balance game with her. *“Will you be watching as well?”*

She didn’t expect an answer, but received one nonetheless.

“The Heart of Verivyen was given to the Mava. It is honor enough, to be near when it once more takes root within this continent.”

“Fair enough. Thanks again for the games, I know I’m not much of a challenge to you,” she sent to the being and stood up.

“Patience and learning. A new mind, yet to be tainted by knowledge, is valuable. Thank you, for your time,” the Druned replied.

They’re far more eloquent than I thought. Guess they’re really just anti social. But once you get to know them, she thought and found a group of Mava running in the distance. *“I’ll see you around!”* she sent and rushed off.

Ilea found herself enjoying the run quite a lot after so much sitting. The game had occupied her mind for hours. In some ways she understood now how beings like the Meadow could sit around for

years just contemplating magic. If there was no need to eat, drink, and sleep, one could really get lost in certain activities. She still didn't think either was for her. Magic she liked to use, not extensively study, and while the game was a pleasant distraction, it mostly served as a new shiny thing to explore. Before she went back to fighting. And her other much more important hobbies, like food, flying, and food. Fighting too.

Couldn't forget feasts either, she thought with a grin, jumping over rocks and climbing structures as fast as the foxes. She formed ashen handholds to pull herself up, each grab propelling her for several meters despite her weight.

Gods, I love my body.

Coming up onto a massive stone sphere, she watched the Mava jump off, a few of them calling out.

She followed, flying through the air without wings before she impacted the sands below, digging deep into the ground before she moved up again. The motions were easy, thanks to her second tier of Sand Magic Resistance. She wasn't quite as graceful as the Seekers of the Foundation, but for a non sand mage, she at least felt like she was pretty impressive.

Ilea kept running until she came up on a high dune, slowing to a stop at its peak.

The suns had nearly set, the sands painted in a near orange hue. Before her, Ilea could see a sprawling space. Kilometers of flattened sand, dunes all around. At the center stood a structure made of stone. A few hundred meters high and thrice as wide, all of it resembling the leaves of a blooming flower. Not quite tulip nor rose.

"You really outdid yourself," Ilea murmured, now seeing the hundreds of Mava walking over the dunes and towards the massive flower. *Looks like a pilgrimage.*

That or a music festival.

Ilea sighed. *I do miss modern music.*

Suppose this sight makes up for it. Kind of. She smiled to herself and started sliding down the side of the dune, Mava to her right and left doing the same, some walking, others instead flying.

Compared to the festivities she had observed, the foxes here did not cast any overly flashy spells. Flying and perception abilities were present of course. Ilea watched the congregation in silence, most of the foxes doing the same due to their likely innate ability to communicate via telepathy. Glancing behind herself and scanning the nearby dunes, Ilea realized there were no guards at all. No dedicated defenders, no perimeter, nothing.

I suppose it makes sense with the gathered power here. Weird that I even noticed it.

When it came to larger groups or settlements, she had gotten used to walls, defensive enchantments, guards, and dwarven machines. To see something this large not defended by something like the Meadow, without any defensive measures in place, it just felt a little strange. But then the people around her was quite different than most humans. She was sure they could face near every threat she had faced before, with their combined spells, and the high level individuals that were surely present. And if they couldn't, they could probably still escape.

She soon reached the flower itself and passed below the stone blossom winding up towards the skies. The long shadow cast by the structure truly showed its scale.

Inside the flower was nothing but sand. Mostly flat, occasional winds slightly moving the surface. Ilea saw various spells now, foxes climbing up the inside of the blossoms to get a better view of the

center, or so she assumed. Many were simply gliding in the winds, some floating with various wings, while others stood on conjured platforms.

Ilea herself chose to stay where she was, standing among the many foxes who remained on the ground. She could feel the excitement in the air, hushed quipping voices resounding, strange laughs and giggles coming from the fox like beings.

"You came!" Myr Iva's voice sounded out in her head.

Ilea found the source of the mental connection and glanced over, finding the enthusiastic fox standing amidst a slew of others. *"I did. Didn't expect you here,"* Ilea said. *"But I guess it makes sense. Did the others crack the seals yet?"*

The fox shook her head. Somewhat violently. *"No. They are struggling. But it's no wonder. I'm great. Maybe they aren't?"*

"That might just be it," Ilea suggested.

"I will return daily to check in, as I discussed with Aki!" Myr Iva spoke. *"Are you excited about the Heart?"*

Ilea smiled. *"I don't really know what to expect."*

"OH! Well, you'll see! There are tales of it, tales and stories. I haven't seen it either," the fox said.

Right. I mean the Heart was gone for what I assume thousands of years. Ilea wondered how many of the foxes were old enough to remember the Extraction. And if they did, did they care?

"Well, let's hope it's exciting," Ilea sent back and saw the fox nod enthusiastically.

Ilea didn't have to wait for long. The crowd grew until it seemed like every Mava in the new settlement had gathered within the stone flower. Thousands of them standing in the sand, flying, or hanging on to the large stone blossoms all around.

A few flying figures gathered at the center, among them the form of Ohn Ika.

"Welcome, Skal of the desert. Kin, all," a voice rang out. Not that of Ohn Ika, but female.

Ilea assumed it was the silver fox at the center, her eyes lacking pupils, her form smaller than that of Ohn Ika. She hovered in the air, eight tails flowing behind her.

"Welcome, Lilith of Ravenhall and of the Accords," the voice added, many of the foxes turning their attention to Ilea.

Yeah. I don't like that, she thought, raising her brows. She was poised for something to happen when the attention shifted back to the Mava at the center.

"Tonight, we celebrate the return of the Heart. A gift given to our ancestors, to cherish."

Cheers resounded all around, spells flashing up and shooting to the skies. Hundreds at the same time. Everything calmed once more a few moments later.

"Now share with me, your magic." the Mava spoke, her tails moving out when the others at the center formed a circle around her.

Ilea felt the thrum of mana, a flow from all around towards the center.

“And let us plant again, into the sands, what has once been taken,” the Mava spoke, when the pulsing black and white heart appeared in front of her. Floating, then descending.

Ilea watched as a flow of visible magic moved to the foxes at the center, then down into the descending heart. She saw the sands on the ground start to turn, swirling upwards as if to grasp the pulsing Heart of Verivyen. A pulse of magic, then another. The heart thrumming. Beating with the power of thousands of Mava.

Ilea didn't try to add her own mana to the mix, not wanting to interrupt the complex ritual woven between the many mages. She simply watched as the beating heart joined into the sands, the first rows of Mava pushed back by the increasingly powerful pulses. For several minutes, the stream of mana continued, many of the Mava near her sitting down, spent and exhausted, their connection to the ritual gone. Others continued or rejoined when some of their mana had returned.

The line of Mava soon reached her, the beings pushed away by the dense tapestry of magic. Some damaged but quickly taken care of by nearby healers. Those at the center remained, as did others, standing firm against the beating of the buried heart. Ilea was one of them, the exuded power nowhere near what she had felt from the Wind of Aveer.

And then it stopped.

Everything was still, quiet.

Ilea saw a wisp in the fabric, moving towards the center, followed by more. Dozens at first, then hundreds, thousands. A swirl of space itself coalescing into something new. Ilea's eyes went wide when she felt a presence. Familiar, and yet entirely new. She held her breath, and felt the hair on her neck stand up. Her Fourth Tier activated an instant later, followed by the Primordial Shift. Instinctual perhaps. It was all she could do against the terrifying truth she perceived with every cell of her being.

The ground shook and thick roots of wood sprouted, shooting out in every direction as rain started to fall. Sand turned to earth, flowers sprung to life. The very ground split as rivers flowed to fill the gaps.

Ilea could see all that with her eyes. She could hear the rejoicing Mava, knew on some level that life itself was formed through magic.

And yet all that she could see, was fire.

Wings. Too many to count. Too strange to perceive, and yet she knew them to be there. Wings of fire. White and black. The fabric itself stood still. Shattered and alight with the flames she knew so very well. But not her own.

“Arbiter,” a thousand voices resounded. A thousand eyes. A thousand minds. A thousand wills.

Ilea screamed within her Shift. She screamed at what she could and could not see. At what she now knew. Or thought to know.

“Arbiter and friend. Dost thou not see?” the thousand voices spoke.

Ilea snapped up, her scream gone as she remembered, but for a moment. She looked up within her Shift. There was no danger here, she knew, and yet she dared not end her spell. Tears rolled down her cheeks. Her eyes and mind aflame. She was blind, or thought to be. Moments only, and then the truth returned.

“Be not afraid, Ilea,” the voices sounded close and distant, intense and quiet, still and so loud Ilea felt as if her head would split.

She could not breathe. Could not move. She could only see, and feel, as reality itself was bent to the will of a god.

Once more she felt the attention of the being, or beings, shift in her direction. As if the very oceans of the world chose to look her way. She could not help but be afraid, and yet she pushed her skills, felt the arcane flow through her veins, her own fires defiant against the primal inferno she could perceive all around.

“Arbiter, Valkyrie of the Fae, and friend to Violence. Show thy flames!” the voices spoke and demanded. They asked and pleaded, were caring, loving, passionate and joyous. All at once. All knowing. All seeing. All present. As if the very world had converged at this point in the fabric.

How could she refuse?

Ilea felt the arcane surge within her. She screamed as her power rushed out, white flames extending from her Shift, out into nothingness, out into the world. She felt her magic mingling with the presence, felt it take shape, molded with perfect mastery. Trees and flowers, built from their very core, brought to life with the very flames that she willed into the world.

Her shift ended, her fires gone, when the fabric returned to what it should have been, what it always was, and would be.

Ilea stood, tear streaked face and hands trembling. She fell to her knees when the arcane left her body, Reconstruction bringing back her health as she gulped and took in the first breath in what felt like an eternity. Trees and roots were all around, chirping birds, leaves moving in the wind above, the sound of water.

She shivered, and turned to see a few of the Mava rush her way, concern and fear in their eyes.

“Are you there!” Myr Iva spoke, the fox running past the more hesitant Mava.

“I’m here,” Ilea sent back, brushing away the tears clinging to her face. She turned back to the trees but instead looked at the ground. Dirt. Dirt, moss, and grasses.

What did I do?

She looked at her hands and summoned a bit of ash, setting it alight with the flame of creation.

What did I see?

She gulped again and shook her head.

“You were screaming, and sent out fires all around! That was quite dangerous. Did you want to kill and eat us all?” Myr Iva spoke, rushing up to Ilea and circling around her. The Mava’s tails embraced her in a fluffy hug.

“You didn’t see?” Ilea asked, her voice hollow.

“See what? The birth of the heart? Roots and trees! Life!” the fox spoke, stopping in her tracks and looking into Ilea’s eyes with her own.

“Fire,” Ilea spoke. Quietly. As if not to disturb the lingering sense of divinity.

“Your fires. As I said, you burned some of the trees. Many were concerned, but you seem fine. Safe,” the fox spoke.

“Not mine...” Ilea murmured in her mind.

“Not yours? Was there someone else?” Myr Iva spoke, intrigued now and moving closer, ever so slightly.

Ilea nodded. She opened her mouth and closed it, thinking back on the wings, the eyes, the minds. A ringing came to her ears and vanished a split second later, healed away by her recovery. She knew she had only perceived as much as her mind could take.

She collected her thoughts for a few seconds, taking in a deep breath before she spoke.

“Just a Fae,” she said with a slight smile.

“One was here? You didn’t say you brought another one!” Myr Iva rejoiced. *“Like the one riding your shoulder when we first met, yes?”*

“Something like that,” Ilea replied with a slight smile, looking up towards the star laden sky hanging above the desert. *Something like that.*