

Chapter 851 Tales

Ilea arrived at the new settlement created by the Druned and populated by both the stone golem type beings and the Mava. Compared to what she felt was an isolated but powerful tribe or settlement when she had first met the Mava on their tower, this felt like the gathering of a nation.

Magic lit up all over the place, creatures hunting each other for fun or competition. Druned working together in clusters that reminded Ilea of her encounter with the Earth Elemental in the Isanna desert. Structures rose as if conjured from thin air, interlinking with the existing architecture all around. A city born in the sand, raised by the experience, collaboration, and power of a species she hardly understood. Protected by nomadic fox beings strong enough to rival Elven kind or any other predators and civilizations in the surrounding territories.

There were thousands. Both of the Druned, and the Mava.

Ilea landed on one of the outermost structures, holding on to the swaying bridge connected by stone links and roots. Her weight was of no issue. Druned both floating and walking on the bridges passed by with neither greetings or commentary. Only to group up for the next building project to be raised from the endless desert.

She stood there on the bridge and smiled as she looked at the magical lights, the fires, and rising structures.

“*Impressed?*” Ren Va asked, the fox landing on the roots of the swaying railings.

Ilea considered. She had seen the capital of Lys, had seen the battle between the Meadow and the Daughters of Sephilon. She had entered the Still Valley, and seen one of the Elven Oracles. All of that had been impressive, and so was this. “*No wonder your kind has been around for so long,*” she said ultimately, more just glad that she had managed to make an impression on some of them. “*I guess that Heart was quite important after all.*”

The fox chuckled but chose not to address her words. Instead he ascended once more. “*Feel free to linger, or to explore. The word of who you are and what you have done has surely spread. By nightfall, follow the Mava to the center of it all, if you wish to see the Heart bloom once more.*”

Ilea watched the fox leave, standing on the bridge with her mantle shrouding her in ash. *And he just leaves me here, to explore for myself,* Ilea thought. She smiled at the idea of inviting Mava into Ravenhall to just let them explore without any guides or informing the populace. Most certainly not something any reasonable ruler, diplomat, or stateswoman would allow. It was however, something she herself would do.

Maybe I’ll get some Elven Mava Meadow hybrid option for my next set of evolutions, she thought, deciding to explore the strange city without using her wings for the time being. Instead she walked along the bridge and found herself standing on a tower at the other end. Below she could see Druned moving about, and a large bonfire with several Mava lying close.

There were neither stairs nor ladders on the high tower, and so she simply jumped down. Ilea hit the ground with a reverberating impact. *Dense is good,* she reminded herself and looked up at the cliff side leading to the bonfire. *I can’t make that jump.* Her fourth tier activated for a single moment, runes lighting up as arcane power flowed through every fiber of her being. Ilea crouched and jumped, a small shock wave of air and sand rushing out from where she had stood. She flew and

grabbed on to the ledge, pulling herself up with no effort before she landed atop and close to the bonfire she had seen.

Only two of the Mava turned her way, the rest either eating or asleep.

“The godslayer, so the word was true. Are you the wielder of the creating flame?” one of them spoke, a small fox with copper colored fur and orange eyes.

Ilea set alight a speck of floating ash in response to the question.

“Then is it true that you are the bearer of gifts from the great and renowned Popi?” the other fox asked. A few more of the nearby Mava stirred at the mention of the name. Though telepathic, Ilea assumed the fox was sending her words to everyone nearby.

She grinned and summoned a single cake. *All they really want.* She set it down and continued on her way, leaving the ensuing battle behind herself, though she didn't miss the growls and flares of magic. *None of them seem to care much for my title or level. They just want cake.*

Might just be they have a different way to look at power. As if they're nonchalant about it. Just something some beings have. They're at least not attacking me like Hak Ro did.

She wasn't sure as to how the foxes viewed her but neither felt particularly interested in prying too much. They invited her to join their fires, feasts, and bouts as she continued into the strange landscape she may have described as ruins without the numerous present creatures. Some of the foxes followed her for a time, some even asking questions, but they left as they came. A novelty to look at and to talk to. Something to pique their interest for a short while. Nothing more, nothing less.

She assumed they had all seen their fair share of interesting things in their long lives, and essentially living in the wild. Not quite the same experience as a human identifying her as a three mark Godslayer inside the more or less safe walls of their cities.

Ilea distributed cakes as she saw fit. It didn't come as a massive surprise that many of the foxes knew of Popi, perhaps even more than knew of her.

She ate her share of food in turn, mostly various monster meats prepared with magic. The mava used spices liberally, some better at cooking than others.

Ilea bit off a piece from the skewer, watching a few Druned play the same game she had seen them play before. She raised her brows and glanced to one of the Mava nearby. *“What kind of meat is this?”*

The Mava glanced at her. His fur was brown with a touch of green, his eyes near black but retaining some of the color of his fur. A level four hundred wood mage. *“Horn ram from the northwest. Boring to hunt, but their meat is plenty.”*

“And the spices?” she asked, not exactly expecting an answer. She had tasted plenty of spicy food in Elos but this one she assumed was borderline uneatable for most humans.

“I don't know what it's called. Different ones,” the fox said, sniffing the air a few times.

Ilea watched the balance game between the two Druned, raising her brow after a few seconds. *“Do you cultivate those yourself?”*

“No,” the Mava said.

“The Druned then?”

“From Orcs in the north. Some of us like to trade with them,” the Mava explained.

“I thought the Cursed Marshes were separating the desert and the orc lands,” Ilea said.

The Mava just shrugged. *“I don’t know how they pass the Marshes. The ones I’ve seen and fought were certainly not strong enough to survive in there. Maybe they have secret passages. Who knows.”*

“You never cared to find out?”

“It’s cold and wet up there,” the Mava said with a hint of disgust.

Like the UK, Ilea thought and nodded sagely.

She kept watching the game as she finished eating the skewer, the Mava speaking up after a while.

“You are interested in their game?”

“I played and lost before,” she said. *“You?”*

“I never cared to try. I do what I do best, and they do what they do best. I don’t care much for those games, but I have occasionally helped decorate some of their structures,” the fox spoke. *“But do not interfere in this challenge, they do not take to that kindly.”*

“I didn’t plan to,” Ilea sent. She knew the two Druned were not the same ones she had seen playing in the tower. *Maybe I should ask them to play. My Fourth tier might help.*

“You’re not from the Skal I visited before, are you?” she asked the Mava.

“You have met the Skal of the Snake, have you not?” the fox said. *“I am Ger Ikir, Skal of the Worm.”*

“Nice to meet you. I’m Lilith of Ravenhall,” she said.

“The Godslayer, and the one to return the Heart of Verivyien. Yes, much is said about you, and the gifts you bear,” he spoke, squinting his eyes slightly.

“You don’t seem particularly happy about that,” she said.

“Walks on two legs and bears gifts. I wonder what your motives are. Though I won’t deny you my respect for the return of the Heart. And for your impressive power,” Ger Ikir spoke.

“I came with a warning, and hope to get some help and information from your kind. Very little is known about you in the human plains,” she said.

“The suns and all that, yes. It is quite troubling. I trust the word of Ohn Ika and will do my part, should this conflict come to pass,” the fox spoke. *“What kind of information were you looking for?”*

“Then, more about the Architect, and what you knew about the events three thousand years ago. Now, not sure. I’m looking for high level monsters to fight,” she said.

The fox grinned slightly. *“I see. Yes, a being like you would not slay gods without the wish to do so. An effort to prepare for this threat you have shared with us, or do you merely enjoy it?”*

Ilea glanced at the fox before she crossed her arms and moved her attention back to the game. *“A bit of both, I suppose.”*

“A good way to justify risk. Be careful on the path that you are on. Many have fallen, though I suppose I’m neither the first one to tell you this, nor the one you would listen to. I have heard stories, much like everyone else you will find here, of high level beings. Legends that have wiped out entire Skal, have flattened settlements, have fought Elven Monarchs and survived or even won. Though you are not looking for stories, I presume?”

“Stories are fine, but yes, precise locations would be more beneficial. Dungeons and the like,” she said.

“Of course. A hunter of gods,” the Mava said and chuckled. “Though you are the first I meet who can claim without lies to have slain one. The Marshes would serve you well, I think. Strong Mava have not returned from their ventures into those lands. It is said that crazed beings of pure magic roam those cursed lands. Creations of wretched intent, hatred, and cruelty.”

“What are they like? Their levels?” Ilea asked.

“Four marks, and I hear they are varied. Not of one kind. Monsters one and all,” Ger Ikir said.

“Have you fought them?”

“No. They do not roam outside of their Marshes, and I do not enter their lands. Just the way it is supposed to be.” He smiled.

“I’ll have to see it for myself,” she said.

“And so you will. There is one other thing I could think of,” he said.

“Another place?” she asked.

“Perhaps,” he said and licked his lips.

“You’re not giving it to me for free,” she said.

“I will, if you ask. Though I have heard stories of the great Popi,” Ger Ikir spoke.

Ilea rolled her eyes and summoned a cake. *“Information first.”*

“Of course,” the fox said and stood up, moving closer. He glanced around as if to check if someone was listening to their telepathic conversation. “It is a story told to me by Toq Meer. She was the oldest Mava in our Skal. She was-” He paused and considered. “Special. Toq Meer conversed not only with Mava, but with all kinds of creatures. Often she returned injured, because of monsters she tried to converse with. Most think her gone, lost to some powerful being beyond the desert. Some think she went into the Marshes, others think she went into the seas.”

“But you know where she went,” Ilea said.

He grinned. *“Perhaps, though I do not presume that she told me the truth. Nobody knew, and she was special. Lost perhaps, in one way or the other. In the last few years before she left, I often saw her talking to the Druned, bothering them to the point where they avoided her. Until one day when I found her triumphant. I had listened to her here and there, her stories amusing enough, even with the repetition. She had found out something from the Druned. A challenge. The ultimate challenge of the Druned, given only to those that they truly trusted. That they deemed worthy.”*

Ilea raised her brows.

“She claimed to have learned the location of the sealed city of Paarah. There are stories here and there, that mention the name. They make little sense. Orcs and Elves of all beings ruling together,

deep below the westernmost mountains of these lands. I thought it peculiar, that Toq Meer would learn of it from the Druned. Nothing I have heard or learned since has offered a connection between the two. I thought it peculiar, but it's possible I suppose. These golems have once served a purpose. Many have mused on what that must have been, but nobody knows where they have come from. Who had created them, or if they too have been born of magic.

“A legend as old as Paarah. The ultimate challenge of the Druned. Who knows what it might entail? Toq Meer left on her journey one week after, and she has not since returned,” Ger Ikir spoke.

“How strong was she?” Ilea asked.

“Stronger than me. Not as strong as you are. I do not know if this ancient city remains, or even existed. Nor do I know if you would find a challenge there. But it might be worth your time, to talk to the Druned. The gods of these lands are ever moving. And so are we. Seldom do our paths cross, and even rarer is a violent clash. But a city. A city does not move,” he spoke and smiled.

Ilea moved the cake with her space manipulation. *“It's an interesting story either way. I'll see what I can find out,”* she said. *Could be something akin to Tremor. But Orcs and Elves ruling together?*

“Before you eat. How do the Elves treat the Orcs?” she asked.

“Their lands, much like ours, are separated by the expansive Marshes. But Elven kind is not known to be gracious to those not their own,” he spoke and paused. *“And neither to their own. They are a violent people, where sheer power rules. The same is true for Orcs as far as I know.”*

“So a city ruled in collaboration between the two would be very unlikely,” Ilea said.

“More than unlikely. A legend. An amusing story perhaps, but nothing more,” the fox spoke.

Ilea send over the cake and ignored the following violence.

Elves are violent, but the Cerithil Hunters are proof that they can change if they have reason enough to go against their Oracles. Maybe the same is true for Orcs. If they're capable of trade with the Mava, they're capable of trade and perhaps building a settlement with another species.

She turned to the two Druned, the structure they'd been building for their game toppling about a minute later.

“Greetings. I'm Ilea, guest of the Mava. May I play?” she sent to the two of them.

Both of them looked humanoid, one standing and one sitting. Neither had any facial features and both were earth mages at exactly level three hundred.

They turned her way and waited for a full ten seconds before the one on the right replied. *“You may.”*

Ilea smiled and joined them, watching as the other Druned walked away without a comment.

“Is it always just two players?” she asked, summoning her ash to build the base.

“No,” the Druned replied and then fell silent.

Probably shouldn't talk while we're playing. She considered it her only way to even interact with them for now, so she considered her questions. Asking about Paarah could reveal information that she should probably not have. Asking them about monsters or dungeons would likely not lead to anything either, though both questions were worth a shot.

Ilea had learned plenty from the previous games, but she still lose halfway through setting down her second layer.

“You played before?” the Druned asked. Its voice sounded just as deep and echoing in her mind as the last one she had talked to. Not quite the same, but similar enough.

“I did,” Ilea answered. *“You don’t mind if I use all of my magic, right?”*

“I do not,” the Druned replied a few seconds later.

Ilea nodded and activated her Fourth tier. All of her skills benefited, and she could tell immediately that it would help with the strange balancing game of the Druned. Of course her initial intent was to find out more about Paarah and the supposed challenge that Ger Ikir had mentioned, but already she was absorbed by the detailed platform appearing before her.

The puzzles of the Meadow had always been tailored to her current skill. They had space magic in mind and were meant to bring her further. It had never truly been a competition. This however, was different. The game was not about space magic, but her space magic helped. While she knew the Druned understood everything about the platforms, knew every intricate little detail and how to keep the balance just perfect enough to have her attempts topple it, she herself had the advantage of several perception skills boosted by her arcane Fourth tier.

Ilea was a novice earth mage at best, and certainly no engineer, but with all of her abilities, she could brute force some understanding of the problems before her.