

## Chapter 828 The Tower

Ilea grinned as they approached the colossal tower in the middle of the endless sands. Its dozens of layers each littered with confusing interlinked stone stairwells, rooms, and purely aesthetic creations as far as she could tell. She wondered how exactly the relationship between the Mava and Druned worked, but was quickly distracted from the thought when she saw the first stone golems moving along the side of the tower.

Some of them she saw looked vaguely humanoid, with two stone legs and two stone arms, a few of them missing a head, others sporting three. Others had four legs and a single arm coming out of their torso, some yet floated, mere silhouettes more like modern Earth drones than anything else she had seen before. They all were various shades of gray, angles, scratches, and sharp edges defining their features. None of them had eyes, at least not any that Ilea could perceive. Some of their hands ended in stumps, others with many fingers or different tools.

They moved along the stone surface with their magic, either sliding along the gray surface of the tower or digging into it without leaving any blemishes behind.

Ilea landed with the Mava near her on a floor at least a few hundred meters above the sandy grounds below. She could feel the wind but not a single speck of sand reached this high, not right now. There were pillars and walls keeping the many layers above standing, a single slightly spiraled center coming up from the floor below and going up through the ceiling. The structure was even larger than she had assumed from a distance, reaching a near thirty meter diameter, though much of it was occupied with strange shapes and pillars.

She watched the Mava walk and float past and through the obstacles, some of them jumping atop the stone while others yet teleported away. *Like a massive cat tree.* The comparison immediately made her think back on the ruins she had encountered with Octavia. It made a little more sense now. She smiled when she saw two small Mava shoot spells at each other as they rushed through the maze, jumping atop stairwells before vanishing to the floor above.

*“You must think us strange creatures,”* Ren Va spoke as he landed on a nearby stone triangle, somehow balancing atop it with two of his legs. *“To live in such a place.”*

Ilea raised her brows and smiled. *“Why do you think that?”*

*“Do you not build walls around your settlements, and square shaped homes to reside in?”*

*“I mean sure, but you don’t seem in need of much shelter, or walls to keep monsters out. If anything that would deter the hunt,”* she said and laughed. *“Maybe I should hire some Druned to build a settlement for high level humans.”*

She thought of the Elves in the Descent, or just Hollowfort itself, neither providing perfectly reasonable living conditions for a low level human.

Ren Va looked at her for a while. *“I might have to recheck my knowledge on humans. You are quite unlike what I expected.”*

*“Not the first to say that, I suppose,”* Ilea sent as she flew over a few benches and an upside down stairwell that led into the solid floor. Landing, she watched two stone golems ahead of her, each vaguely humanoid. She could feel the earth magic as stone formed from thin air, thin layers added

to the floor in a circular shape, intricate patterns with tiny spheres and pillars appearing on the base before another layer formed atop.

Three Mava watched her from behind a set of shapes, their eyes curious and focused on her wings. She let them. Word would surely travel fast and they could ask if they wanted something.

“Greetings,” she said to the Druned in front of her, receiving no reaction. She watched as the second one raised its arms, shapes appearing on the second layer. At least fifty different ones, before once again another circular stone layer less than a centimeter thick formed above. She waved at them but got no reaction.

### ***[Earth Mage – lvl 300]***

Both had the exact same level and description.

“Greetings,” she sent instead, targeting both of them with her telepathy.

They each turned her way, stone heads with no eyes, mouths, or noses looking at her as they remained in silence.

“*I didn’t want to interrupt. I’m new here, a guest of the Mava. Ilea, it’s nice to meet you,*” she sent after ten seconds had passed.

The creatures watched her for ten more before they resumed whatever they were doing.

*No interest? Or do they not understand me?*

She watched as the first golem started to use its magic once more, adding to the second layer of the growing structure. Looking through her dominion, she could see Octavia talking to a few Mava, Na Si stacking the snake meat chunks, and finally focusing on Myr Iva, who was obviously glancing her way a few times but tried to act uninterested as she lay atop a stone pillar, her tails moving in lazy patterns. “*Can you help me with something?*” she sent to the fox.

Myr Iva’s ears rose up instantly, her eyes opening wider before she turned her head towards Ilea. “*What do you need help with?*”

“*Do the Druned not speak?*” Ilea asked.

“*Only sometimes,*” Myr Iva sent.

“*Sometimes... with everyone?*”

“*Sometimes, with some of us. I have spoken to them many times and only received answer thrice,*” the fox replied.

“*That’s curious. Any idea why?*” Ilea asked.

“*Ohn Ika says they will listen but dismiss most. You can try to find out if they will answer you,*” Myr Iva sent and smirked slightly.

“*Not very helpful. I’m sure you know more,*” Ilea said, furrowing her brows.

“*I might!*” the fox said.

She smiled. “*Very well. So it’s a challenge.*”

Ilea sat down near the two golems, using her dominion and spacial perception to see if she could figure something out about them. She didn’t bother them with talk any longer. As time went on, the

small set of platforms created by the two golems grew, ever upward. Soon they started to increase the diameter of the disks set atop the now hundreds of supports below. There were patterns, she noticed. Patterns and inconsistencies. The former in how the tiny supports between each disk were placed and the latter in the form of less magic used in the creation of some tiny support bits.

She opened her eyes wide and smirked. *It's a game.*

The realization came to her right when the small tower started to topple. The golem to the right had won. They lacked enough discerning features for Ilea to individually recognize them in a crowd. Even the magical feel she got was downright the same.

*So I could try to tell them something, or show them my magic. The Mava reacted to my fire.*

She burst out in flame, though the only reaction she got came from the foxes that had been watching, two of them quickly rushing away while the last one opened its eyes wide. The Druned however, did not react.

Instead, they got rid of the toppled bits, not even letting it fall before the stone returned to magic, only the base platform remaining.

Her flames vanished again.

*"I saw some of you in the domain of Audur,"* she sent, but again, there was no reaction. This time the two didn't even look her way.

*Hmm.*

*I'm not giving up this easily.*

She waited until the game was reset before summoning ash. A disk formed, about half a meter in diameter, including a few dozen tiny supports, all of which floated towards the prepared platform.

*"May I play?"* she sent.

This time the Druned turned her way. They waited. Ten seconds, twenty, then the one on the right answered.

*"Your turn. It topples. You lose."* Its words were spoken deliberately, the voice deep and echoing. As if large drums played in her mind.

*"Should we bet something?"* she asked, placing her supports with the help of her dominion and spatial awareness.

The Druned watched her, then they turned to the small platform she had placed. Ten seconds later, the same one answered.

*"No."*

She smiled, sitting with her legs crossed in front of the platform as the one who had won previously created a set of stone supports to place onto her circle of ash.

*"Amusing,"* Myr Iva sent.

*"Did I do something culturally unacceptable?"* Ilea asked.

*"No. They always play, if you ask,"* the fox replied.

*"How is it so amusing then?"*

*“You’ll learn. In time,”* Myr Iva said.

Ilea didn’t have to wait long. She took her time to analyze the supports her opponent had placed and set to add her own. Even before she could place everything, the tower started to collapse. Of course she could’ve tried to shift things around or to manipulate her ash to stop it but she had not seen the golems try such a thing before. She had lost. After one single platform.

*What did I miss?*

She heard the fox laugh into her mind and ignored it.

The Meadow had presented her with puzzles to train her space awareness and manipulation. And now she was losing in a game of stacking? She didn’t know how the game was called but stacking seemed appropriate.

*“Again?”* she asked the golem.

It didn’t reply but dissolved its stone, the other golem stepping aside before stone formed around it. Its humanoid shape was added to until a solid and smooth cube remained, sinking slightly into the tower platform before it remained at a slight angle.

Ilea watched the process with wide eyes before she tried to look at the surroundings, using all her senses. There was magic present, but not enough. Then again, the cube itself had changed. Did the golem move through the stone or deactivate somehow?

*“Is the entire tower here made up of Druned?”* she asked the remaining golem, not expecting a response.

It looked at her for about ten seconds. *“No. That is silly.”*

*“I suppose it is. I don’t know your kind. Apologies,”* she said. *“You start this time.”*

The golem didn’t reply but started forming stone shapes again a moment later, Ilea focusing more this time, her entire world reduced to the small platform.

She lost again.

Then again. And a fourth time.

The Druned never stopped playing, never seemed annoyed, nor did it offer any advice. It simply formed the supports and placed them.

Her awareness and magic perception helped, but it just wasn’t enough. There were too many facets, too many intricacies. At first she had thought it a simple game of balancing stone but as time move on, she started to see feints, offenses, defenses, ideas hinted at but yet to be executed. She was taken out of her focus when Ren Va spoke into her mind.

*“The feast is ready, human.”*

*“Let me finish this one,”* she sent, focusing back on the game. She lost again but the smile didn’t leave her face. Four platforms toppled. For the first time she had managed to keep the base stable, forcing the Druned to add its second platform. *“I’ll have to join the Mava for now, thank you for the games. If I find time, I’d like to try again.”*

She waited for the Druned as both ash and stone vanished into mana.

*“Learning fast, human. I shall be here,”* the Druned replied.

*“Awesome. I’m Ilea by the way,”* she said and stood up, bowing lightly to the being. It didn’t reciprocate the gesture but she hadn’t exactly expected it to do so. Shaking its hand seemed a bit too aggressive.

*“I thought you foolish, but you got to four platforms in the manner of a few hours,”* the fox said, a wide grin on its face.

She noticed now that there were a few dozen Mava watching her from various spots on the nearby stone. She squinted her eyes as wisps of white flame formed. Many of them rushed away. She didn’t feel like being watched like some circus animal.

*“You say that like it’s impressive,”* Ilea said, turning back to Ren Va.

*“It is. Very much so. I have only managed to reach eight platforms twice. What you accomplished, few Mava have done, though I suppose fewer are interested in learning the game,”* the fox spoke.

*“I’ll try again when I find time. Feast?”* she asked, sniffing the air but finding little proof of what the fox claimed.

Ren Va smiled. *“Not on this floor, human. We must rise,”* he said and started flying.

She did the same, spreading her wings before she glanced to the golem. *“Do you know its name?”*

*“I do not, but I can lead you to this place again. They return to their favorite spots, generally,”* he said, leading her out of the tower and then up, other foxes rising as well, many of them climbing instead of flying with magic.

*“That’s good to hear. So what exactly is the deal between you and the Druned?”* she asked.

*“They build, and we let them build,”* Ren Va spoke as they rose.

Ilea started to hear sounds by now and she saw spells firing out into the open. Music. Fast hisses interspersed with growls and the hissing of fire. *“That’s it? Sounds a little too simple.”*

*“I thought the same, Ilea. We provide protection to them, we admire their work, we live in the homes they provide, rest on the stone they create, we appreciate them and so they appreciate us, but that is what I thought. What many of the Mava think. Though I do not anymore believe that the Druned are the same. It is not an alliance, a truce, or a treaty. It simply is. They build. And we let them build.”*

*“Simple,”* Ilea sent with a smile. The connection between them seemed almost inherent. As natural as the cycle of mists and storms. She wondered when it had started. If there was some ancient Mava that talked to the Druned or if the needs and wants of their species simply happened to align incredibly well. The smell of roasting meat started to distract her, the newcomers flying up and into the wide open layer of the tower.

The same obstacles were present, though there were fewer than at the layer farther down. Several hundred Mava lounged about. Some were cooking with magic, others performing music on instruments summoned from their Classes, some were chasing each other, though most were simply watching, perhaps talking with each other through telepathy. There were all kinds of colors, all kinds of magic. Ilea’s perception was a bright mesh of different schools, what she felt suggesting many foxes in the three hundreds and above.

*“Is that the entire Skal?”*

*“Those who felt like coming,”* Ren Va spoke.

*“When is the food served?”*

*“When it is ready,”* the fox replied. *“Enjoy yourself.”*

Ilea grinned, watching the absolute chaos with delight. *So many orderly meetings of the Accords. They don't even have chairs here!*

She drifted into the commotion with glee, watching the magic until one of them brought her a floating plate with seared meat on top, spices decorating the fine cut.

Ilea used her ash to take over, looking at the nearly yellow fox with red eyes. *“Thank you. Here, something in return,”* she sent and summoned one of the cakes from Popi. *“Made by my friend Popi, a baker from the city of Ravenhall.”*

*“It's beautiful!”* the fox sent. *“What do I do with it?”* she asked a moment later, the cake floating atop a disk of ice.

*“It's food!”* Ilea sent and bit into the meat, savoring the fatty taste and delightful herbs. The snake meat wasn't tender by any means but it had been prepared perfectly.

*“Food?”* the fox asked as curious eyes wandered towards the cake and the ash covered human. He didn't seem convinced.

*“Trust me, try it,”* Ilea said and used a tendril of ash to carefully cut a piece out of the cake, moving it towards the fox with her space manipulation.

It hesitated but curiosity and perhaps peer pressure won out as a few dozen foxes had started to watch them.

The Mava bit down. Then chewed. Mouth still full, his eyes opened wide, the ice holding up the cake shaking before it vanished. Ilea caught the falling cake with her space magic. The Mava gulped, tears forming on the edges of his eyes before his mouth opened slowly, sharp teeth showing as he floated up and forward, closing his mouth around the rest of the piece. Cheeks bulging, the Mava closed his eyes and cried in silence. He shuddered, then gulped, burning eyes opening before he rushed towards the floating cake.

What followed was a massacre. Tails moving out, ice shards embedding into the floor and ceiling, cake bits flung aside. A twitching fox remained, its movements slow, eyes upturned and whispers uttered.

Silence reigned until some of the Mava started to lick off the bits and pieces that had been flung aside.

*“Is there more?”* one voice reached her. Careful. Small.

*“What is this creation?”* another voice. Questioning.

*“What is it?”* This one was demanding. Aggressive.

*“My name is Ilea. Let it be known, that Popi of Ravenhall sends his regards,”* Ilea said, spreading her ashen wings as she ascended before the gathered Mava. White flame engulfed her. And then the cakes appeared.