

Chapter 826 Flame

Dunes rushed past below as Ilea flew with her charged wings, following the fast moving divination mage in search of the Mava. Octavia occasionally adjusted the direction slightly but it seemed her spell had worked. That or she was just exceedingly confident in her ability to find the desert dwelling foxes.

The landscape changed slightly as they moved farther west. Outcrops of rock and small mountains visible between the sands.

They found two more ruins in the next few hours, each of similar size but vastly different in design. One was built against the side of a small mountain, platforms jutting out of the rock to allow beings to traverse the various angular buildings downright fused with the steep decline. The settlement reached to the very peak of the small mountain.

The second settlement looked like a bowl, built between four massive dunes. It was layered into three sections, each one deeper than the previous. Openings both holes and doors led below into an underground labyrinth of corridors and rooms. Ilea saw bones of various animals and even found a group of level two hundred rat like monsters residing in the otherwise abandoned settlement, though no sign of the Mava, no furniture, no writing, no paintings.

She left the monsters alone, following Octavia into the expansive desert. So far she had yet to receive a message from any of her allies. Ilea assumed the planning and communication used most resources available to the Accords. She saw Octavia slow down atop a nearby dune and followed suit, looking out over the vast desert when she spotted a single line in the distance. A slightly angled tower, reaching towards the sky. Distant, thin, and ridiculously high.

"I believe we have found them," the woman spoke.

"That thing doesn't look stable," Ilea said, though she had noticed none of the settlements so far seemed to have been built with longevity or security in mind. At least not in the way she understood those words in connection with buildings.

"The Druned do not build for stability. They build for challenge."

"Challenge to others or themselves?" Ilea asked.

Octavia thought for a moment, looking out into the desert. *"I don't know. It's possible that both apply."*

"Wonderful," Ilea mused. "So should we go say hi?"

"The Mava are curious. Signaling our presence is better than treading on their territory uninvited."

"I see. And how do we do that?" Ilea asked.

Octavia smiled ever so slightly. *"With magic, of course. Something that is visible from this distance, the more impressive the better."*

"Do you have anything like that or should I give it a shot?"

"I could provide something that may lead them here, but I have never been one for displays of flashy magic. I find that it attracts both the attention of dangerous humans and monsters alike."

Ilea felt the heat rise within herself as a smile came to her face. “Yes, that’s kind of the point.”

She waited a few seconds before she raised her arm towards the sky, releasing Embered Heart in a chaotic cone like beam. The display lasted for less than two seconds. It was certainly impressive from where they stood. “Think they even saw it? We’re pretty far away.”

“*That wasn’t just one spell, was it?*” Octavia asked.

“It’s stored heat, released in a single blast and enhanced with the flame of creation,” Ilea explained. She saw something move in the distance. Small dots. Flying. Two were covered in fire, one of them with the same coloration as her spell. *Kin*, she thought with a smile, feeling a strange connection she hadn’t felt before.

“*I can feel their presence. They have noticed us.*”

“I know. I can see them coming,” Ilea said, the two of them floating above the sands, one with magic alone, the other with her wings of ash.

It took mere seconds for the beings to cover the distance, the loose formation the eight creatures had flown in at the start already broken when they were a kilometer away. Perhaps there had not been a formation in the first place.

Ilea squinted her eyes to see. Foxes, with a varied number of tails and other extremities. All but one were wielding visible magic. Their sizes were different as well, though none were close to as large as Catelyn’s fire form. Neither were any as small as her usual state. It was difficult to make out the color of their fur or skin at the distance, magic somewhat obscuring them.

Two had taken the lead, one looking more like a streaking comet, orange red fire covering it entirely, no wings on its back as it left a trail of smoldering flames in its wake. It seemed aggressive, direct. The second one had fur in the color of the sands, the winds carrying its form in wide arcs that were all but efficient, and still it easily kept up with the striking form of fire.

Ilea focused on them as the others tried to keep up. She soon locked eyes with the slitted red pupils of the flame bearing Mava, its fur rust colored below the blazing magic. She didn’t miss the manic grin and the large teeth, the creature about as large as she was, four tails moving behind and four legs adorning its torso. She smiled back and waved, her mantle erupting in white flame as she welcomed the enthusiastic greeting. Her precognition informed her of the incoming attack but she just couldn’t help but feel safe. She had learned to trust her gut around the elves and plenty of other creatures both in the wild and near Hallowfort. Creatures she couldn’t necessarily read, but she found magic itself said a lot more than twitching ears or hissing.

The impact shook her bones as the two flew back and tumbled in the air, finally hitting the dunes with heavy impacts. Ilea laughed as her wings moved them up again, sand strewn aside as the white flame stuck to both the ground and her adversary.

“*Nice to meet you,*” she established a connection to the creature as her fires mingled with his.

The being’s eyes burned, its head as large as hers, the teeth quite a lot larger than what Catelyn had in her snout. It closed its eyes as a whispering voice resounded, heat gathering before a bright explosion of fire emanated from its form.

[Fire Mage – lvl 384]

Ilea held on, a smile on her as the magic flowed over her ash, leaving her entirely uninjured. It seemed her own flames were burning away his with every passing moment. She grabbed on to one

of its paws and twirled in the air, sending it down into the sand with a heavy thud, a cloud forming on impact.

A giggle resounded in her mind, the wind fox floating in a circle around them, silver eyes taking her in. *“I was named Na Si, carried by winds. You wield the white flame, and ash at the same time. That is strange,”* the being spoke. Her voice sounded quiet in Ilea’s mind, the words spoken quickly, with pauses between. Perhaps an accent or inexperience.

A roar resounded from below, the flame bearing fox stepping up before it shot towards Ilea.

She teleported it into the distance, the ongoing momentum leading it straight back into the sand.

Another giggle.

“I was named Ilea, wielder of ash,” she answered the being, summoning some ash as her flames dissipated. *“It’s nice to meet you.”*

“Nice, yes,” Na Si spoke as she approached, carefully and never in a direct line. She was smaller than the other fox, three tails instead of his four.

[Wind Mage – lvl 448]

Na Si hesitated and teleported away when more of the Mava arrived, the fox hiding behind a nearby dune, her silver eyes looking towards Ilea with her ears perked up, tails moving in slow patterns behind her.

Number of tails doesn’t equal levels then? Or maybe the fewer they have the higher it is?

Two more foxes were now circling her. One had purple scales instead of fur, the ethereal wings of the same color on its back gave it a strange look. Six legs added to the differences, its black eyes taking her in. She thought it more an armored fox monster wielding arcane power than anything like the previous two creatures she had met.

[Arcane Mage – lvl 520]

Ilea quickly turned to the fourth one. It wasn’t the white fur that garnered her attention but the fire that moved over its form in more than familiar patterns. Its eyes were golden, four ears and seven tails adorning the four legged creature. It was small, though still larger than Catelyn.

[Fire Mage – lvl 639]

Her own fires flickered to life once again as she established a connection with the beings.

“Greetings.”

“Greetings,” the female fire mage spoke, her voice delicate. *“You bear the white flame of creation, human.”* She approached, floating in the air with her four ears twitching, golden eyes wide open and her sharp teeth showing slightly. *“It’s beautiful.”*

“And yet you bear ash to these lands,” a deeper voice spoke, coming from the arcane being.

“Is that a problem?” Ilea asked, genuinely interested. She remembered Audur called her an abomination but she still didn’t exactly know why. Nobody else seemed to have an issue with her combination of abilities.

The feeling she got from the creatures so far was curiosity above all, thought she was slightly on her guard. The fire spell used by the first one was more powerful than what his level would’ve suggested.

“Ancient rules you would not know, though even I don’t remember who made them up,” the fox sent and snickered, the sound coming out in a wheeze. He followed it up with a cough.

“I am Myr Iva, blessed by the flame,” the white furred fox sent, close enough now for Ilea to touch her, though she didn’t approach further. *“May our fires touch?”*

Ilea raised her brows. *“Does that imply anything?”*

The fox cocked her head to the side, by nearly ninety degrees. *“What do you mean?”*

“Culturally, like a marriage proposal or a declaration of war or something,” Ilea tried to explain.

“It implies touching flames,” Myr Iva sent before turning her head towards the arcane fox behind her. *“Do you know what she means?”* The question was sent to Ilea as well.

“She is human. You remember what I told you about their kind?” the other being sent.

“They are cautious, greedy, and live behind walls. They are born weak and are thus often afraid of monsters. They don’t trust others,” Myr Iva sent then turned back to Ilea. *“This one is not afraid.”*

“This one is not weak,” the arcane one said, its snout moving up into a grin of sorts, most of its face covered in the small purple scales. *“This one is not weak at all.”*

Ilea once again teleported away the howling comet that was about to strike her when she saw the other four foxes walk on the dunes below with Octavia among them. Their levels reached from two to four hundred, two of them earth mages, one wind, and one more fire.

“There is no implication, human. You need not consider such things among our kind,” the arcane fox said.

Ilea smiled. *“Sounds good. Sure, we can have our fires meet, though I’m not sure what that will do.”*

The fox’s eyes opened even wider, her fires intensifying as she inched closer through the air, her tails moving in erratic patterns. Fires flickered and combined, seamlessly flowing into and through each other. Ilea felt the heat but she wasn’t injured. It felt strange, as if a part of her felt a deep connection to the fox. She moved closer too, carefully lifting the fox up before she hugged her to her armored chest. Myr Iva felt soft and warm, much like Catelyn, but so much more approachable. She felt the tails brush against her face and shoulders, felt the creatures beating hearts. Then she let go, her face a little flushed as they both floated back a little, the flames parting once again.

“I..”

The fox giggled and floated around her. *“You are fun! And strong... how did you get the fires? Were you born with them like me?”*

Ilea didn’t miss the amused glance from Octavia, and the curious looks of the other foxes. *“No. I had to learn fire magic first. I think I got it thanks to the Fae that I met.”*

“Fae? What is that?” Myr Iva asked, her head turning sideways again. This time the other way.

Ilea smiled. It looked cute. A level six hundred wielder of the flame of creation, looking like a cute fluffy fox. The juxtaposition was... familiar, to say the least.

“Some friends of mine call them Spirits of Old, maybe you’re familiar with that term?” Ilea suggested. She knew the Dark Ones had usually used that name.

Myr Iva's eyes went wide. She looked to the arcane fox. *"Did you hear! Ren Va, she is blessed by the spirits!"*

"And marked. I have not missed the sign," Ren Va spoke, glancing at Ilea. *"One marked as friend. A rare honor to be sure."*

He knows and saw the mark? Some kind of soul perception then? Or is it something else?

"A friend. But it says Immortal!" Myr Iva said, looking where she perceived Ilea's title.

Ilea considered changing her title to that of Friend, but she planned to fight more than a few high level beings in the coming week, which meant she wanted to keep the increase to her resilience.

She reached up her hand and teleported the approaching fire mage into her hand, holding its neck as the heat burned against her mantle, the white flame gone once again. She didn't want to accidentally hurt the fox. *"You should stop, with whatever you're doing."*

The comet fox tried to push aside her arms with its paws, then it opened its maw and spewed fire straight into her face. Some of the other foxes snickered with high pitched sounds.

From hissing to this, Ilea thought. The fact that none of the foxes seemed concerned about her holding the Mava by the neck or its continued fire breath washing over her face made the situation rather curious. When most of her first interactions with elves had felt tense and aggressive, this felt downright comical. Even her bouts with Fey felt more aggressive. Not even the fox she held bothered her much. It was certainly annoying, but he reminded her of an incessant little kid constantly pestering her with questions. This one she could at least throw into the ground.

She glanced to Ren Va with raised brows. *"What am I supposed to do with this one?"*

He turned his head to the side slightly. *"Hak Ro is young. He does not sleep and seeks to battle the strong. You have garnered his attention."*

"What now?" Ilea asked.

"Now he is your problem," the being replied in a sagely manner, amusement quite clear in his voice.

She sighed and moved the fox closer to her face, ignoring his renewed efforts to burn her face. *"You're not strong enough. Bother me when you reach the seven hundreds."*

The fox stopped and looked at her, its teeth exposed. Then it closed its maw, ears drooping. *"Please?"*

"No."

It burned her again.

Ash formed around the creature, slowly smothering him as she kept a look on his vitals. She stopped when he ceased his spell, glad he hadn't trained his oxygen repository skill or something similar. The unconscious fox she teleported down to the four beings near Octavia.

"Oc Ta Via tells that you are an ally, and that you come with a request," Ren Va spoke.

Ilea didn't know how their hierarchy worked but he seemed one of the older ones. Seeing how everyone behaved, she decided not to get to the point immediately. What Octavia had told her about the Mava had already been confirmed in this short meeting. *"Eventually. It's annoying that I have*

to meet you under those circumstances. I've been interested in coming here since I was told of your existence."

"Few humans know of us," Ren Va spoke.

Nobody had reacted to the unconscious fox. One of the others had lifted him by the neck, with his mouth. Then Ilea supposed they didn't have thumbs. It was either that, magic, or their tails.

"An elf told me," Ilea said.

A few of the foxes perked up their ears.

"A Cerithil Hunter from the Still Valley. He knew quite a lot about the world," she said.

"You wield the fires, talk to elves, and now you're here. I'm curious about the request... but first, would you like to come to our home?" Ren Va asked. "I would invite you as my guest."

"No! She is my guest!" Myr Iva said.

"I want to invited her too!" Na Si said, her voice barely reaching their minds. She was still hiding behind her little dune. By now she had burrowed herself a little in the sand.

Ilea felt a fluctuation in the space around her, then saw a small being within her dominion.

Violence

The voice reached her mind.

"You're late," she said.

Hunting

Moon

"You were hunting one of the moons?" Ilea asked.

Hunting

Moon

"I don't understand," she said but didn't expect a further explanation.

The Mava nearby summoned their magics, different reactions from each of them. Some with wide eyes, some with narrow ones, some ears going up, others drooping down.

Violence?

"Later. I need to talk to the Mava. If you want to hang around, you're welcome to join, but for violence, I can call you later," she said.

Later

It

Is

"Before you leave. We might have an Ascended coming to this realm to take another sun, any clue if you guys could help with that issue? We need to find hidden facilities, if they even exist," she said.

Hunting

Sun?

“Are you implying that you’re consuming the moons?” Ilea asked.

It shook its head.

Violence.

“Yes. Of course,” she answered.

I

Ask

The Fae touched its chest before a spell manifested.

Mana

Ilea helped it along before it vanished. She looked around at the scattered Mava. *“Yes. I’d love to visit your home.”*