

Ilea hoped there would be no argument or fighting between the foxes as to whom would be allowed to invite her as a guest.

It turned out her worry was unfounded as the foxes decided in unison that she would be the guest of each and every one of them present. Even Hak Ro was included, though he couldn't add his voice due to his continued lack of consciousness. A terrible weakness, she observed. Simply removing the air of a level three eighty being was enough to take him out. She found herself questioning his training, but then she knew not everyone spent ages just gathering different resistances and training them.

*"They like you. Immensely,"* Octavia sent. *"It's a good start."*

*"Do you know them all?"* Ilea asked.

*"A few of them, not all. They move between Skal or go on journeys of their own from time to time,"* she sent. *"Two I had considered friends left on such journeys."*

*"They take after myself,"* Ilea sent. *"After us, I suppose, with you going to Kohr."*

*"Perhaps. Though I wish they would teach caution to their young, but it is not their way,"* she said.

*"Like the one that kept attacking me?"* Ilea said.

*"Yes. If you were not the way you are, that would have been his end,"* she said.

*"And the end of our negotiations. Or would they not have cared?"*

*"Oh no. They would have. I was afraid you would kill him,"* Octavia said.

*"Why didn't you say something?"* Ilea asked.

*"I used my magic to determine the danger, and I found Hak Ro was safe."*

*"Convenient,"* Ilea said. *Similar to my perception spike and general danger sense, but more versatile I suppose, and not passive.* She assumed Octavia had plenty of passive benefits too, otherwise she would've likely not survived her journeys, not without any obvious hiding abilities, healing, high regeneration, and fighting prowess, though she supposed she hadn't seen her fight. It was possible Ilea underestimated the woman. She was a three mark after all.

They flew towards the tower, layers and large windows visible now. There were balconies and platforms jutting out at each level, stairs and bridges connecting various bits that seemed to be near free floating otherwise. When she had questioned the stability of the structure based on the slightly tilted angle, now she was asking herself how it remained standing in the first place.

She heard whistles when the foxes ahead of her turned right. Hak Ro was woken from his slumber with a slap of a fellow Mava's tail. They fanned out in the air as Ilea and Octavia slowed. "What's happening?"

*"A hunt. Something is coming,"* Octavia answered.

Ilea watched as the foxes flew out and away, magic forming around them in elemental spheres, runes on their bodies, or in various projectiles. Myr Iva took a central position though it was

difficult for Ilea to notice their coordination at all. Her attention shifted to the dunes where she now noticed three distinct forms moving below the sands. She smiled, thinking of the creature she had hunted back with her team in the Isanna desert.

The monsters that finally emerged looked quite different. Thirty to forty meters in length and nearly three meters wide. Chitin plating and no legs, their heads reminding her of a snake though they only possessed a single eye. Dark gray in color, the creatures broke out of the sands as bright spots gathered where their eyes were. Light magic, focused on the flying foxes ahead.

*“Do you know those monsters?”* Ilea asked.

*“Sun crawlers. These must be hungry to attack a group of Mava. They are usually around level five hundred,”* Octavia answered.

*I see. No need to interfere then,* Ilea thought as she tried to remember anything about the creatures from the various lessons and monster manuals she had read through. Nothing came up, though she knew these lands were rarely traveled by humans, let alone people that would be interested in documenting these creatures, and sharing the knowledge.

Various spells flashed up between the Mava, arcane energy surging from Ren Va as shields appeared before three of the creatures, enhanced by white and orange red flame. Beams of light were released from the monsters at the same time, striking the shields where the energy was blocked.

*They're absorbing it,* Ilea realized, watching from a distance as small dots of light formed behind the intact barriers. Three foxes chanted in strange sounds, whispers in the winds when jagged rocks broke out in front of one of the snakes, breaking its momentum before raising it up. Between the rocks erupted fire, a screech resounding over the dunes as the monster was burned alive.

Ilea watched as a set of runes appeared before Ren Va, a large floating circle that erupted in white and red fire a moment later, winds flowing around it in what seemed like a coalescing maelstrom. The light spheres disappeared and appeared in front of the sphere. Several disconnected chants in a language Ilea did not understand overlapped with the next three sounds, creating a chorus before the prepared spell was loosed. The spheres spread out into a set of three lines, all of them bearing every element used in the ritual. They hovered in the air where Ren Va floated with his arcane wings. She could see his tails move before the lines shot off.

A flash only, dull fiery impacts in the sands several hundred meters away.

Ilea grinned as she watched the two approaching snakes fall apart, glowing bits of chitin and seared flesh below crashing to the sand as their massive bodies slowed to a halt. The three lines had left behind three burning streaks in the dune behind the creatures, each spanning dozens of meters in length.

The last snake remained propped up by the still growing rocks, unable to get away as it burned from the fires below. Light magic shot out into the skies, the creature unable to aim as another spell was prepared by the Mava.

This one was done in mere seconds, a lance of arcane, stone, and wind hovering above the snake's head before it shot down, piercing its skull and killing it instantly. The massive head of the creature slumped down, hanging from the burning rock formation, no more light magic spells coming from its one now glassy eye.

*Efficient, though I guess the monsters weren't too impressive. "It's like siege magic used by human armies," she said out loud.*

*"Far more powerful. The versatility is unmatched, and the Mava can cast their unified spells while moving and fighting on their own. These monsters were not a threat," Octavia explained.*

Ilea remembered the large siege weapons used by the Empire, mages pouring their mana into runes to create high power effects. Similar to the cannons of the Pit but less efficient. Having that capability as a mobile formation could surely amplify the power of the otherwise individual mages. She didn't think they would be particularly effective against a small and fast moving target like herself, but against large four marks, they may be more efficient than her. As long as the monsters didn't get in a good hit.

*"What are they doing now?"* Ilea sent to the woman as she watched the Mava fly towards the snake, more spells forming despite their death.

*"You kill to gain experience. You possess storage items, and the ability to return to your cities and restaurants. The Mava do not share in those luxuries. They have survived out here, on what little the land provides. Many may not require food or drink no longer, but their young do."*

*"They're going to harvest everything?"*

*"Not everything. There is only so much they can carry, and as far as I remember, the meat of the Sun Crawler is not particularly desired. However they do enjoy their festivities, and they use every opportunity to celebrate."*

*"Killing these is such an opportunity?"* Ilea asked.

Octavia glanced at her. *"You came here wielding the white flame, a Spirit of Old came to visit you in the process. I believe having you as a guest is that very opportunity. You think too little of yourself, but perhaps that is not a bad thing at all. We know what can happen to beings that wield the power of gods."*

*"A feast does sound like a wonderful way to welcome us. They certainly know how to treat guests,"* Ilea mused as she joined the Mava, a few of them already cutting into the snake, removing chitin plating while others gutted the dead creature. The fires still burned, the smell of smoked meat rising in the vicinity. Ilea assumed there were a few tons worth of flesh being cooked, Mava expertly maneuvering through the flames, cutting into the dead creature. She noted two of the lower leveled foxes following Na Si as she used her wind magic to cut into specific sections of the snake, likely teaching them how to efficiently harvest the monsters.

Ren Va hovered above everything, his tails twitching from time to time as he watched the surrounding desert.

*"Nice display of magic,"* she sent to him as her wings moved.

*"Thank you, Immortal. I know many humans work in groups as well,"* he said.

*"Groups, yes, but they don't fuse their magic together like you do. At least most of them don't. And I personally fight alone most of the time."*

*"Great harmony is required for unified magic. I am not surprised at your words. I believe the life span of your species is to blame, or what do you think?"* Ren Va asked.

*"That's one way to look at it. I suppose those who get powerful enough to not worry about growing old anytime soon are generally focused on their own growth and power,"* Ilea answered, though she

didn't know everyone. Perhaps there were adventuring teams out there that had similar capabilities as the Mava, more likely military units that have worked together for extended periods of time. Though the lack of Shadow teams she knew who could accomplish such a feat likely suggested there were no humans out there capable of what she had just seen.

*"Distrustful and cautious," Ren Va spoke. "I understand."* He seemed amused.

Ilea watched the foxes finish their work, bright spells cutting through the massive amounts of flesh with incredible precision. Entire slabs were stored by Na Si. Less than ten minutes passed before the middle section of the snake was reduced to stripped bone.

*"Do you have a lot of storage items?"* Ilea asked. *"Or skills that allow for the same."*

*"No, young human. These treasures are rare and passed on through the generations. Few Mava are interested in the crafting and enchanting of equipment, though I am aware your kind enjoys covering themselves with various metal armor, using weapons forged in fire."*

*"Right. For most people it's beneficial,"* Ilea said.

*"You do not count yourself among them?"* the Mava asked, glancing her way.

*"My armor constantly broke. Though I did use some for a long time. By now my magic is just better. I do have a few tools though, including storage items and this necklace,"* Ilea said, moving the ash around her neck to reveal the Azarinth Star. She summoned a barrier in front of her to let the fox examine the magic.

His eyes opened wider as he sniffed the air and moved a little closer. *"Healing. That is quite an artifact you have there. I wonder who could have made something like that."*

*"Me too actually,"* Ilea said, moving the necklace between her fingers before she let go. *"Oh and I use this one occasionally,"* she summoned Silent Memory into her hand, the red gem glowing slightly as she twirled it around.

*"A divine object, I can feel it,"* Ren Va spoke. *"The runes look like something I have heard of before. A story told by Ohn Ika. Perhaps he would be interested in seeing it."*

Ilea stored the hammer and smiled. *"Is he your Elder? Or however you call your leader?"*

*"Elder? No. We do not care much for such things, Ilea. He is quite old, and a wielder of powerful magic, though he is best known for his knowledge, and his stories,"* Ren Va said.

*"Sounds like an interesting Mava,"* she said.

He squinted his eyes slightly. *"So it is knowledge you seek?"*

*"What do you mean? I told you I want to meet your kind, and I have a possible request,"* Ilea said.

*"Forgive me. The humans we have met in the past always had motives and ambitions beyond what they shared with their words,"* Ren Va said.

*"Yeah. I know deception isn't quite as prevalent with most other species I've met. Might be a similar issue where we had to use other things than magic or brute force to prevail. I suppose we're not as blessed as Elves or Mava,"* she said. *"It's true, there is much I could learn from someone who has a lot of knowledge, but I would just as much enjoy a good story that doesn't benefit me in anything but entertainment."*

The Mava looked at her for a few seconds before he spoke. *“There is weight in your words. A burden?”*

Ilea smiled. *“I’m very powerful among humans. Which means I feel a certain responsibility.”*

*“I don’t understand. Power grants freedom, does it not?”* he asked.

*“That too, I suppose. But it also means that I could change things for the better. Or what I believe to be better. Not doing anything with the magic that I have at my disposal feels wrong,”* she said.

The fox cocked his head sideways. *“That is a strange way of thinking. Refreshing perhaps, though you seem to be shackled by... expectations? Pressure? Is it a spell, a cultural phenomenon, or simply a human trait?”*

*“Would you not help a fellow Mava if you found them injured and dying in the desert?”*

*“I would, but I don’t understand how that has anything to do with your feeling of responsibility... oh... I suppose you consider lacking conditions in an entire settlement something that you could change. That is interesting. Do you not believe other humans to be responsible for their own well being? They have been born, and they may choose to change their fate, do they not?”*

*“That’s a compelling argument. Though it’s also an easy excuse not to get off your ass,”* Ilea said and smiled.

*“Indeed. But even so, your wish to intrude in the fate of others may simply be a selfish consideration. I mean no offense, I do not know your heart,”* Ren Va spoke.

*“Right. It’s possible, but at the end of the day I do what feels right to me, and what makes me happy,”* Ilea said.

*“That, my friend, we can agree on,”* Ren Va spoke. *“Will you join the feast later?”*

*“I’m always up for a feast,”* Ilea said seriously.

*“It would be a pleasure to hear the story of such a powerful human. You must have fought incredible creatures to reach these heights,”* he said.

*“That depends on your definition of incredible,”* Ilea said.

*“You humble yourself. I respect this, especially from a human. What is the request you have of our Skal?”*

*“I’ll get to that in time, there’s no rush,”* Ilea said. She meant it too, realizing right after she had sent the words that there was in fact a rush. But it didn’t feel right. If she tried to convince the Mava she had just met to help with the search of Ascended facilities, she might as well go around hiring mercenaries to do the same. These beings could be more than just that. That, she knew.

*“Very well, let us return then. Na Si has finished her work.”* Ren Va floated up, all the foxes turning once more to fly towards the tower.

Ilea did the same, joined by Myr Iva a moment later.

*“He has taken a liking to you, human,”* she sent. *“As did I.”*

*“Are you going to cook and eat me?”* Ilea asked.

The fox looked at her with her golden eyes, an expression of shock on her face. *“That is not our intention!”*

*“I was being sarcastic.”*

*“Sarcastic?”*

*“I find it funny. Presenting ridiculous ideas instead of the obvious,”* she said.

The fox moved a little closer, eyes opening a little wider. *“For what purpose?”*

Ilea thought about the answer for a moment. *“Being serious all the time is exhausting,”*

*“That is amusing. I will kill and eat you!”* Myr Iva declared.

*Cute.*

*“You’re free to try,”* Ilea said with a grin.

The fox made some distance, her ears drooping. *“I was not being serious!”*

*“I know, I used it again,”* Ilea said and winked.

*“Oh. I have much to learn,”* Myr Iva sent and moved her tails in an intricate manner, the fur interlinking.

They flew for a few minutes without speaking a word, Ilea watching the approaching tower.

*“Does it have a name?”* she asked finally, realizing absentmindedly that Hak Ro had not attacked her again since their departure. One win.

*“The tower? I call it the Desert Tail,”* Myr Iva said. *“But there are many names. I do not care much for them.”*

*“The Desert Tail. It doesn’t move though,”* Ilea said.

*“That is true! Perhaps it is amusing to me. Sarcasm,”* Myr Iva said and moved her ears in an exciting manner.

*A lot to learn,* Ilea thought, wondering what was higher on her list of priorities, preventing the Architect from going through with his plans, or teaching yet another being the benefits of dry humor. She found it was about equal.

The suns were higher now, casting golden light upon the western desert, a long shadow emanating from the high reaching tower at the center of an empty sea.

*Sundial, seems like a good name too. Not sure how accurate it would be with how crooked it is,* she thought, smiling to herself as she saw the first beings moving along the platforms and layers of the confusing stone structure.