

Chapter 453 Adventuring

“So, what brings a lone healer up to the Caverns of Rot?” Sean asked as he filled a bowl with broth, handing it to her with a spoon.

The man was wearing light armor, mostly leather, steel plate protecting some of his vitals. He had short brown hair and a short beard, neither particularly kept in check. She assumed he cut it himself. The ranger wasn't particularly handsome but he seemed kind enough, his demeanor professional and experienced above all.

Ilea thought he was likely in his early thirties, perhaps a little younger. She assumed the bow and quiver resting near one of the boulders was his.

“I'm looking to pick up some general skills, mostly. Resistances and whatever else I can learn,” she said with a smile, thanking the man as she received the food.

Sean glanced at her and nodded. “For your next evolution I presume? Or just to become more durable?” he said and chuckled.

“I approve,” the warrior said in a deep tone, his name as of yet unknown. He was twice as beefy as the rest of them, his long blond beard braided. Coupled with his unkempt blond hair, the man looked more like a viking than most. Not that the two handed battle axe was any indication already.

“For evolutions, yes. It's reasonably simple to get resistances as a healer. No permanent damage,” she said and started eating. A hearty stew with carrots and some other vegetables, potatoes, and meat. Rabbit, judging by the bones that she saw near the fireplace.

“Except for the pain,” Sean said. “I have entertained the thought of getting a healer class but at this point it's just too risky. With all the work I already invested.”

“Are you part of an order?” Edgar asked, an unreadable expression on his face.

“No,” Ilea said simply.

“Are you lying?” the man asked in the same tone.

“No,” she said again and smiled, chewing on some meat.

“I like her,” the viking man said. “My name is Colt. Are you up for fucking?”

Edgar threw a spoon at the man. They stared at each other for a moment before both started laughing.

“Nice to meet you Colt. I prefer someone with a little less meat in their head,” Ilea said and casually continued eating. She heard a chuckle from atop a nearby boulder.

“Can you fight at least?” Colt asked as he filled his bowl.

“I dabble,” Ilea replied.

“Colt, leave her alone. Just because she's a higher level doesn't mean you should just challenge her,” Sean said.

“Don't worry about it,” Ilea said. “If any of you have interesting magic I could get a resistance to, I'd love to have some bouts,” she said and winked at the warrior.

"I use earth magic," Edgar said.

Ilea shook her head. "Earth and Ice I already have."

"Oh?" Colt said.

Ilea looked at him but didn't say anything else.

"Just between the two of us, what level are you at?" the man asked as he leaned a little forward, whispering the words.

She smirked and leaned closer as well. "Three forty," she whispered sheepishly and slurped up the rest of her soup.

Sean chuckled and Edgar smiled.

"Really?" Colt asked with wide eyes.

"No you damn idiot," the ice mage said from atop the boulder.

Good ears the lot of them, Ilea thought. *Instincts, maybe not as much. Cooking, pretty nice.*

"What? Because you don't think it's possible? You fight, you get stronger, you kill, you get stronger. It's simple. You get injured, you die. You're a healer, you survive," Colt explained as if it was the most logical thing in the world.

Edgar laughed and the others joined in.

Ilea chuckled, mostly because of his deadpan delivery. She couldn't agree more.

"You should think about getting some healing skills then," she said to the man.

He nodded. "Yes. Can you teach me?"

"I'm not sure if I can. I didn't exactly learn it in a formal way. Try to ask some healers in town later. I'm sure some are willing to give you a few pointers," she suggested.

"You overestimate the generosity of the orders. They would rather let you die than have more people capable of healing," Edgar said.

Ilea chuckled. "Well, you could also try one of the guards. They should have a couple healers too."

"That would be a more sensible option, yes," Sean said. "They don't have unlimited personnel either."

"Just pay them," Edgar suggested.

"I will simply grab one of them. Healers are weak," Colt said with a wide grin.

"Well protected too, most of the time," Ilea said and nodded.

"Not now," he said and pointed his spoon at her.

Ilea smiled back. "I assure you. I am."

"She's right, Colt. I will personally freeze your dick off if you touch her," Sophia said as she jumped down from the boulder.

Ilea wondered if the woman didn't have a teleportation spell or if she simply chose not to use it.

She had medium length brown hair, bound into a single braid and vanishing under the padded robe she was wearing. It didn't look like the fancy robes Ilea had seen on some high level mages, instead made out of treated hide and in a light brown color. Visible repairs and patched up parts showed that the woman either really liked the duster or simply didn't have enough gold to buy an upgrade.

Sophia looked pleasant enough, easy to smile it seemed and certainly easy to joke. Her dark brown eyes moved between the party and their surroundings with trained ease, catching everything that would be out of the ordinary. A short blade sheathed on her hip made it clear that she wasn't relying solely on her magic.

"You never allow any fun," the warrior said but his smile remained.

"I'm not the boss. You are free to try," Sophia said as the air around her grew cooler.

Ilea could see the magic form within her sphere and smirked. She noted that Edgar had kept his gaze on her. *Not one to trust a healer, hmm?*

"Table it for later, you two. Everyone ate and Edgar's leg is fine again. Let's leave before night is upon us," Sean said and grabbed his bow and quiver, shouldering his pack as well.

Ah, I forgot about that. Not that a lone healer wouldn't already be suspicious enough.

None of them actually mentioned it but she could tell that Edgar continued to glance her way from time to time.

"You are quite brave," Sophia said as she joined her, carrying her pack now too. "Even with your level. I wouldn't travel alone. Not even if I was at two hundred."

"I enjoy traveling into the unknown," Ilea said. "Makes it easier to be desired in a group due to my abilities... and if I get hurt, I just have to escape somehow."

The woman nodded. "Your second class is more combat oriented then?"

"Magic actually, but yes," Ilea said and formed an ashen lance that looked considerably less deadly than her usual creations, made in the same time it would take her to create twenty full power ones.

"Hmm, Ash, isn't it? I would say it doesn't look particularly impressive but you are a creator... that changes things." Sophia said.

"Yes. It's quite useful. Especially to create a diversion and escape," Ilea said with a smile. It wasn't technically a lie.

"I can imagine that. Ice is a little less useful when it comes to that. Quite deadly on the other hand," Sophia said and winked.

Does she think I will try to make an escape?

They shared some stories as they trekked up the mountain, reaching the supposed dungeon entrance a little under an hour later. The suns had mostly set by now, leaving them in near complete darkness.

Ilea didn't comment on it, assuming that either Sean or one of the others had a way to see well in the dark, maybe even all of them.

A number of torches placed atop a two meter stone wall flickered in the cool wind, illuminating the guard patrolling on top.

"Adventurer team coming up," Sean spoke loudly, making sure the guard heard him.

"Level?" the question came back.

"Ruby," Sean said and approached the wooden gate set into the stone.

"Ruby," the guard muttered before he turned away. "Open the gates."

Ilea looked on as the gate was opened, not by an enchantment or mechanism but by the sheer strength of a single guard, a level one hundred and five warrior.

He grunted and watched them, his eyes shifting between them, opening wide when they found Ilea.

"Lilith...", he whispered as soon as they had passed.

Ilea didn't look back but she was surprised someone out here in Kroll would make the connection. An assumption really. She wasn't showing her ash after all, she was simply a high level healer. A rarity in its own right anyway.

Various structures had been built behind and connected to the walls, a dirt road leading to the dungeon entrance at the end of the makeshift village. It looked like the same mages who put up the wall had worked on everything else, as if the whole base had been poured from the same mold.

Lanterns and oil lamps placed on the buildings provided illumination, aided by the dimmed lights from behind the windows. The sounds and smells of an inn indicated the most popular spot in the vicinity, one adventurer passed out to the side of the entrance and another currently puking out his dinner.

"Lovely place," Ilea said and smiled.

"Right," Sophia murmured.

"Hah, just wait until you see the dungeon," Colt said. "Beautiful creatures."

"Quite deadly," Sean said and extended with a short explanation on what would wait for them inside. Blood magic ravens one should avoid, around level one fifty usually. The herbs they were after could be found deeper inside, where Mistwings, a type of mist magic butterfly sometimes showed up.

"Level one hundred? Nothing worse down there?" Ilea asked, not quite able to hide her disappointment.

"There are creatures lurking in the dark. Those who tempted fate have lost their lives," Sean said.

"How insidious. Any real information? They're just monsters," Ilea said.

"A few have reported abominations out of nightmares. The teams who actually went deeper and survived have not shared their findings with the public. The local guild only cared enough to warn people not to go into the dark sections," Sophia explained.

"Two hundred and higher is what I heard," Edgar said.

"With the people that vanished, I can believe it," Sophia commented.

"Can we stop by the inn?" Colt asked and looked at the ranger.

"After our delve, it's always the same, Colt," Sean said, obviously not for the first time. And not for the last, according to the grin on Colt's face.

"Sophia, can you arrange the usual two rooms?" he said.

The woman nodded and walked off, entering the inn.

"For later tonight, whenever we return," Sean explained as he looked at Ilea. "Depending on your contribution, it will be on us."

I probably own the inn, she thought and nodded. "That's generous, Sean. Thank you."

They already went to the entrance of the dungen, the ranger paying a fee for each of them to enter.

One would think they'd want there to be fewer monsters and more powerful people. Doesn't seem like it, Ilea thought as she looked at the guard.

Sophia joined them a few minutes later.

"I trust you know how to work in a team?" Sean asked.

Ilea nodded. "You fight, I heal."

"Simple enough," Sean said and chuckled. "I like you so I won't ask about your specific abilities. Don't make me regret that, okay?"

She just smiled. *If I were a man eating demon, you would be such an easy target, Sean. It's almost comical.*

It seemed that healers really did get a lot of benefits when it came to suspicion. Dale hadn't really questioned her back in Riverwatch either. Just a random unaffiliated healer showing up in the wild. Anybody else's interrogation would have been a little more extensive. And possibly violent.

Cruising through as a healer, she thought and smirked as they entered the dungeon.

'ding' 'You have entered Caverns of Rot'

Nice, now let's hope this place has a little more than a bunch of birds and butterflies.

Sophia positioned herself behind Ilea, if that was really her name. She agreed with Sean. The benefits of a healer outweighed anything she could do to them.

Alone, she would be overwhelmed. If she wasn't much higher in level than two hundred. Sophia had considered it but the notion was so ridiculous she dismissed it. Not because a healer of that level wasn't a possibility, simply because someone like that wouldn't join a random group of adventurers they came across in the Kroll mountains.

They would be an influential figure, a general, the head of a healing order or perhaps a high ranking mercenary or adventurer. None of that fit with Ilea.

Might be she's just looking for a change of pace from whatever she did before. Or she's telling the truth and just joins various adventuring groups on a whim. The risks involved are high, especially for a healer... on the other hand, it sounds quite exciting. And you're not bogged down by the same faces all the time.

Sophia preferred the trust she had in her team to such an uncertainty. At first she had assumed Ilea to be an outlaw, her group waiting somewhere after she had poisoned, slowed or trapped them somehow.

There had however not been any unknown faces in town. She had inquired with the inn keeper and the guard, asking about Ilea and potential troublemakers.

One of them had whispered the name Lilith but hadn't elaborated on it. The inn keeper had told her about the mysterious healer from Ravenhall. A member of the Shadow's Hand it seemed, one apparently wielding ash.

Sophia could see how she might be part of the Shadows, with her level so high. That would still not necessarily be a problem. Quite the opposite. They had a good reputation. As long as you didn't cross or betray them, they usually stayed true to their word.

And still. The woman was so unthreatening and casual. Sophia just couldn't see her being anything but what she said she was.

"Stay low," Sean said as they entered the trenches, coming out into the vast open cavern, littered by bones and a few burnt down trees.

The system of dug out and reinforced pathways was extensive. Moonlight shined in from a few cracks in the distant ceiling.

"Why the trenches?" Ilea asked, looking around.

"To avoid the flock of ravens. A few we can handle, especially with Sophia's ice. Blood attracts more however... we'd be picked clean in seconds," Sean explained in a whispering tone, looking out for the creatures.

Maybe not, with a healer, Sophia thought as she gauged Ilea's reaction. She didn't seem to care at all. A few glanced into the dark and a slight smirk Sophia nearly missed. *What did you see?*

She tried to follow her gaze but couldn't find anything. She likes being in danger... that much is obvious. Maybe that's why she chooses lower leveled teams. Her type usually doesn't make it very long. Might just be her healing prevented an untimely death.

They made it through the labyrinth without catching the attention of a raven, a few of them occasionally flying by.

"What kind of magic do they use?" Ilea asked as soon as they had passed the main cavern.

Sophia carefully surveilled the dimly lit cave. By now she knew nearly every nook and cranny. It still never hurt to make sure nothing was lurking for them.

"The Rupture beaks?" Sean asked. "I never stopped to ask."

Colt grunted. "Saw someone getting ripped apart by them. Seen it before... blood magic," he said.

The man was an undisciplined chattermouth with a distinct absence of any kind of manners. As soon as they were in immediate danger, he got quiet and focused. He too was scanning the area with a casual grip on his axe.

"Interesting," Ilea said absentmindedly, scratching her chin as she glanced back the way they came.

"We won't battle them," Sophia said.

Ilea looked her way and tilted her head a little.

Sophia felt her breath get stuck in her throat as she took a small step back. *What?*

The moment passed as Ilea walked by. "Shame."

She tried not to let her reaction show. *Goosebumps, really? Who the fuck is she?*

Not to trust one's instincts was a sure death down in a dungeon. She just didn't exactly know what to do with this information. *Is it even new? She's a higher level... maybe that's enough? No... you have faced Shadows before and some that were close enough. Only two made you feel anything close to that. And they were using magic. There was nothing there just now. Her presence alone? Maybe it's a healer thing.*

"So, should we find some butterflies? I will heal you if you get injured," Ilea said to Colt as she joined him.

The dull blue light from a common mushroom illuminated the way ahead, interspersed by lanterns, some still holding burning oil.

She signaled Sean with a hand gesture.

The man winked and joined her.

"She's dangerous," Sophia whispered when she thought they were far enough away.

"I know. I believe she's trustworthy. Your call," he said.

Maim and escape, kill with all we have, trust her and go on. Or talk to her about it.

She was sure the last option was the worst. The first two were risky but so was the third.

"I trust your judgement. Let's continue. Just be prepared," she whispered.