

Ford could hear the troll approach through the dark tunnel. He could hear its pained breaths.

His face was strained in an expression of anguish and concentration. *One step at a time*, he told himself, pushing further as he felt warm blood dampen his arm.

Hadley had been hit directly, the woman much smaller than himself. They had everything planned out but none of their team had noticed the sleeping troll in a dark corner of the cavern.

One mistake had cost them a successful mission. The last five ventures had nearly been too easy. A few brushes with death but nothing major to speak of.

A single strike had taken out Hadley. The other two ran off, chased by the furious monster.

He didn't fault them. Neither were strong enough to carry the injured woman nor were they in any position to fight the creature. A distraction was the best chance they could have given him.

The second troll had lashed out in a state of confusion, half asleep and injured by the blade Hadley had stuck into its eye at the last moment.

Ford had moved as quickly as he could, scorching the frenzied beast with everything he had before grabbing the woman and getting the fuck out of there.

He knew that the creatures had a good sense of smell. The blood dripping to the ground could easily be tracked. He tried to cover it, backtracked to set a wrong trail. But he was simply too slow.

The girl was weighing him down.

Lilith will save us, he told himself. She had saved everyone who had been about to die. But she was human too, despite her abilities. She could make a mistake, could have lost them because of the separation.

One second too late and the troll would rip them apart. He wasn't even sure if Hadley was fine.

Check, he told himself. The troll would find them, sooner or later.

He laid the woman down carefully. *Breathing, good*. He took his pack and grabbed a few bandages, replacing the hastily applied one, already soaked through with blood.

His hands were shaking but he ignored it, ignored the exhaustion and the sounds of the approaching troll. *Extend, clean the wound, apply pressure, three, four times around, secure*. The steps were practiced, trained a thousands times over.

This time the wound hadn't been inflicted by Lilith or one of their own but by a wild monster out to kill them.

Ford steadied his breathing and moved the unconscious woman into a lateral position to make sure she wouldn't choke on her own vomit or blood. Her head and back should have been uninjured but he couldn't be entirely sure.

He dragged the woman to a dark corner in the cavern. The only sounds he heard were his own breathing and the dragging noise of her leather armor against the cold rock.

Ford stopped his movements when he heard the steps. He held his breath and carefully put down the woman.

Faint light from crystals growing on the walls illuminated parts of the area and with it the furry creature stepping towards him, bloodshot red eyes staring straight at his own eyes.

[Cave Troll – lvl ??]

It didn't carry a weapon but its broad arms would be enough to kill them ten times over. The creature was at least three meters in height and two meters broad. It moved with a hunched back to even fit into the cave.

Any wound Hadley had managed to inflict was gone and with it the knife that had been stuck in its head. Maybe it had been foolish to approach even one of them but they had to grow, had to achieve more. And they had been ready.

Just not for two.

Both Orthan and Sidney had talked often about the importance of numbers and cooperation. Any sapient group of beings could hunt down monsters of a higher level than themselves. There were risks involved but it was possible.

Four against one was a risk. Four against two was suicide.

The troll took a step forward. One of its eyes seemed lazy, glassy.

It is injured... still recovering? he asked himself.

She'll come.

She will save us.

He saw the demon who had invaded their home flash before his eyes. He remembered how helpless he had felt when his father died in his arms.

The troll came.

"No," he said, lifting his arms towards the creature.

His hands were steady.

Mana flowed and formed into flames. Flames that could only destroy, could not heal.

Ford would not rely on the specter of ash anymore.

She had brought him here, had trained him, had sheltered him.

She had given him the opportunity to chose life. The ability to protect others from the loss that haunted him at night.

If he didn't fight now, if he didn't protect Hadley, why was he even here?

Fire blazed and expanded, a trail of heat lashing out to the right as his eyes and hands followed the dodging creature, its size entirely too large to avoid the spell.

It pushed through, arms shielding its head and chest against the spell. Its fur caught fire as it cried out in anger.

Ford stepped to the side, ducking under a wild swing before he set off a fireball from a close distance.

The spell exploded and sent him staggering back, stunning the massive creature for a split second.

He ground his teeth, focusing as he steadied himself.

Don't you dare touch her, he thought and immediately attacked again.

The troll was focused on him, rushing at him with a frenzied push.

He had no way to step out of the way, hands in front of him to take some of the force as he jumped to the side.

Ford was hit by the monster's shoulder, his ribs and a bone in his right leg snapping before he slammed against the hard ground.

He coughed up blood, turning off his pain as he rolled to the side.

The sounds and the wet feeling in his chest didn't indicate that any of that was smart. The fists slamming onto the ground behind him suggested otherwise.

Only turn off your pain in emergencies.

He stood up, finding his leg to be unreliable. It still worked. *Left heavy then*, he thought and formed another fireball.

Ford waited until the last moment, sidestepping a punch before his spell slammed into the monster's head.

He wouldn't be able to keep this up for much longer. A step brought him closer to the monster, his left hand forming another fireball and his right grabbing the dagger from his belt.

Throat, heart, spine, he heard the words in his mind. High regeneration demanded that weak points had to be taken out.

The spine was unreachable and he didn't know if he could even penetrate to the monster's heart, let alone find his way past its spine.

His spell exploded right when the creature's arms closed around him.

It moved back its head, crushing his sides at the same time.

Ford's sight went blurry, using meditation now that he wasn't moving anymore. *Wait.*

He ignored his health and focused entirely on the monster's throat.

His hand rushed up and the dagger slammed in. It slipped off a little but he still penetrated.

A fireball exploded near his waist, pushing back the already loose arms of the monster. His own resistance to the magic was higher.

Both of them slammed to the ground.

Ford ignored the cold feeling in his gut, the smell of blood in his nose and the wet and heavy feel of his gear.

The troll grasped at the dagger in its throat, gurgling in pain as it struggled to breath.

Serves you right, he thought and tried to form another spell. The flame came to life but snuffed out a moment later.

His vision went dark as he heard the dagger clatter to the ground.

It didn't matter anymore.

He had fought and he had lost.

No

Ford used all his remaining strength to push himself up. His eyes and his magic didn't work anymore but he still had his hands.

He wouldn't let her die.

Never

Never again

Blood flowed to the ground below him as his vision cleared.

That is a lot.

It felt warm, comfortable.

He had expected death to feel cold and miserable.

Maybe it only felt like that to the people left behind.

The bleeding stopped, likely because he simply had no more blood to lose.

His breathing stabilized.

He had to find the knife, had to get to its heart, maybe a tendon.

He turned his head right to find the knife and instead found two legs covered in ash.

She's here, he thought and immediately relaxed, falling down to the ground. *It was her magic, the warmth, the comfort.*

His heart felt cold instead. He had failed again. He had not been able to protect her. He was too weak.

He heard a whistling sound before something wet hit the ground.

The troll's head, its features warped, surprised and angry.

"Well done," Ilea said before she vanished.

Ford forced himself to get up, some of his wounds not yet healed entirely. He activated his pain perception again, wincing at the overflow of sensation. A groan escaped his lips but he pushed onward, walking towards Hadley. Lilith was standing over her.

"She's fine," she said and turned.

"I failed," Ford said and straightened himself.

"You fought. And you lost," the woman said, ash receding to reveal her face. "There is no shame in that."

"I'm weak. I'm not like you. I never will be," he heard himself say.

"You are a Sentinel. And your mission isn't over. Wallow in self pity once you have returned to safety," Lilith said and vanished.

What did I do? he thought and slapped his cheeks. *She's right. I'm still here. She saved me. I did all I could. And I will continue to do so.*

The embarrassment made his cheeks heat up but right now was not the time to think about that. He stepped towards Hadley and once again lifted her up over his shoulders.

Bad idea.

He took the time to apply a few supportive bandages to his own injuries. Half his pack was emptied to save on weight. Only a little food, water, and medical supplies remained.

Ford grit his teeth and carried the still unconscious girl out of the cave, his eyes and ears peeled for monsters.

There was time to regret his decisions later, to analyze his failure in a hundred different ways. Right now the life of his teammate was more important. The mission he was given. To survive.

He quickly checked the messages he had heard appearing within his mind.

'ding' 'Your group has defeated [Cave Troll – lvl 182] – For defeating an enemy one hundred or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted'

Ford stopped for a moment, his eyes widening as he read through the next part.

'ding' 'Requirements met for class change: Guardian Medic. This Class will replace either [Child of Fire] or [Fire Mage] with all associated skills and stats -

Has endured the harrowing training of the Medic Sentinels without breaking. Has gained ample understanding of the human body and its functions. Has mastered various first aid techniques. Has gained a basic understanding of various forms of healing magic. Has gained understanding of various combat abilities. Has the First Aid, Fear Resistance and Veteran skills. Has risked their own life to save another.

The Guardian Medic combines the combat and defense oriented teachings of the Medic Sentinel Corps with a focus on healing magic. This healer will keep their allies alive and protected, no matter what. Healers may be desirable in a team of adventurers but a Guardian Medic trained in Ravenhall can keep up with the best of them, able to provide support and protection during combat without losing to fear or pressure. If someone finds themselves in the worst possible situation, they should pray that one of their allies is a Guardian Medic.

His mind was calm, his breathing even. Trian had told them to wait if class change opportunities presented themselves but Ford knew that he had found his.

Nobody would take this from him. It was the first step to the power he needed. The power to protect.

'ding' 'Are you sure you want to replace [Fire Mage] with [Guardian Medic]? All associated skills and stats will be lost'

'ding' '[Guardian Medic] replaces [Fire Mage]'

'The [Fireball] skill was removed'

'The [Flame] skill was removed'

...

'The [Mage Body] skill was removed'

'New Class: Guardian Medic'

Vitality +20

Strength +5

Intelligence +10

All healing magic skills are improved by 200%

Body Enhancement magic is improved by 50%

Resilience is increased by 50%

Skills gained in Guardian Medic:

Active: Focused Heal – lvl 1

Your mana surges as you channel regenerative power into yourself or one ally.

Category: Healing

Active: Healing Aura – lvl 1

All mana regeneration is channeled instead into a one meter spherical aura that heals yourself and all allies within.

Category: Healing Aura – Body Enhancement

Active: Guardian Spirit – lvl 1

You stand against all. Increases your resilience by 50% [75%] and your Strength by 20% [30%].

Category: Aura – Body Enhancement

Passive: Medic Resolve – lvl 1

Your mind and body are trained and experienced. You will not flinch, stagger or fear as easily.

Your focus will not waver when in danger.

Passive: Sentinel Warrior – lvl 1

You are familiar with various weapons and fighting techniques. Damage inflicted with your preferred weapon type and your own body is increased by 50% [75%].

Category: Body Enhancement

Ford immediately felt the weight increase on his back, the few points he had invested into Strength from his Fire Mage class vanishing in an instant.

Guardian Spirit activated and the weight decreased once more. It used a substantial amount of mana but he needed it right now. Wisps of power in gray and white color occasionally showed on his arms and body as he looked down on himself.

The self pity and pain from before was gone. The mission was a success. If he managed to get back alive that was.

His focused heal spread through him. A pitiful display compared to Lilith's torrent of life. But this one was his. His alone.

The rest of their team soon found the survivors thanks to the occasional laugh Ford failed to suppress.

Lilith had saved them too.

Upon his inquiry, Ford realized that he might have really saved Hadley's life after all. And his own in turn.

The rest of their trip was difficult but with a healed Hadley and the confidence his new class brought to both him and his mates, the dangerous way out felt trivial.

Some might argue that he had gotten weaker, giving up the trained skills and levels of his Fire Mage class but Ford had never felt so strong.

The work, pain, and sweat had paid off. He was the first of his team but the others would soon follow. He would make her proud. If only he hadn't lost hope. A pitiful display, one that he would never forget.

Lilith picked them up a few kilometers outside of the dungeon, half frozen rain and strong wind the only challenges remaining.

"Guardian Medic," Ilea said with a smile, reading through the class and skill descriptions. "Those are as good as some Azarinth Healer skills."

"It's a powerful class. It's rare to have that many requirements for a level one class," Trian said. "I wanted to scold the kid but his decision was right. I'm sure we will have a few of them by the end of the month."

"I hope so," Ilea said. "Speaking of rarity, the others are just as good if not better."

"Mhm," Trian said and opened a bottle of champagne.

"I don't like champagne," Ilea said offhandedly.

"It's to celebrate. A gesture. It's not about the taste," Trian said and filled two glasses.

"How can you say something so blasphemous? Are the others informed yet?" she asked.

"I will do that tomorrow morning. The students will want to hear the news too. I'm not sure if we should share all the requirements quite yet. Some might force stupid risks to achieve them," he said.

Ilea nodded, swirling around the liquid in her thin glass. "I'll leave that decision to you."

She took a sip and frowned, leaning on the wall behind her.

"The boy... Ford," she said in a subdued tone. "I was too late. The two would have died if he hadn't risked his life."

Trian smiled and touched her arm. "It isn't the first time. And it won't be the last. Soon they will go on missions without you standing over them."

“I don’t mind you and Claire doing that but...,” she said and stopped.

Trian sighed. “Ilea. You know what kind of monsters are out there. You know war and the fragility of our power. It’s been your competent work that has kept them alive so far. Your efforts and theirs. If you shelter them too much, they will become dependent. We have achieved more in a month than most nobles have in years, decades even.”

He took a sip and swallowed, savoring the taste. “Do you know why?”

“Because we tortured them and forced dangerous situations?” Ilea asked with raised eyebrows.

“We trained them, taught them. And we gave them the choice to leave. They want this. They’re eager. And now we’re starting to see the results of their hard work and ours. It’s only the beginning. Each of them has a sharp mind, a strong will, a choice. And the resources we give them.”

He looked at her. “Don’t assume yourself the only reason they have come this far. You just gave them a jump start. Now watch them grow.”