

Chapter 356 Man of Conviction

Ilea watched the man for a while. Stalked him as he made his way to the river, as he checked on a trap.

The squad was long gone, lazily strolling through the forest.

“Finally.” The man spoke and smiled, crouching down to grab a fish that had swum in his roughly constructed trap. He held it up and grinned as his stomach rumbled.

[Healer – lvl 104]

Interesting. Ilea thought and once more checked her surroundings. He really was alone.

The snow and frozen dirt crunched when she stepped out from the tree she was standing behind.

“Your hunting skills are better than your awareness.” She said and stopped.

He was immediately startled by the voice and nearly fell, turning around in an awkward movement as the fish flopped to the ground.

It landed right in a brown puddle, splashing some on the man’s robes and adding to the disheveled look.

“Whoa, you startled me there.” He said and chuckled, crouching down to get his fish. “Best wash that one again.” He added and smiled at her.

No distress? Ilea was impressed. A dark armored ashen healer with a big hammer appeared out of nowhere and the first thing he thought about was the sanitation of his fish.

“What brings you here, young healer? Or are you a part of the Stormbreach garrison?” He asked and stepped back into the water, holding the fish into the current with a strong grip.

“There’s a garrison?” She asked.

“Oh yes.” He said and lifted the fish again, shaking his hands to get rid of the water.

He shivered a little but barely seemed to be bothered. Being a healer had its perks.

“A monster is at the helm of the ancient and sacred town. Corrupting all who step within. I tell you, this is no place for someone such as you.” He said it gently and smiled. “Have you eaten?”

“You seem to know a great deal about Stormbreach.” Ilea said and lowered her ashen armor, her bone helmet vanishing after. “How are you going to gut and cook that?”

He chuckled and waved her off, droplets of water splashing to the ground. “Ah don’t you worry about me, dear. I’ve made fires with worse. Eating them raw is no issue either. We are healers, you and me. I’m sure you know.”

“We are.” Ilea said and smiled. “They taste much nicer when you cook them though.”

He pointed at her. “That is true. Well, you seem more versed in surviving the wilderness. I can offer the fish and you the fire? I’m sure you have had a long day too.”

A long day? Ilea wasn't sure. She had eaten quite a bit already. Had killed dozens of people, had made a possible deal with Riverwatch and perhaps shared too much information with their leader. Now she was here, in the cold forest around Stormbreach, talking to a lone healer. "Long day, yes."

He laughed and walked away from the river. "There's... a small cave nearby. The patrols don't know about it yet." He said. "I suggest you move east, away from here."

"Why do you stay, if it's so dangerous? I have a higher level than you after all." Ilea said, following the man as they moved through the forest.

"I am an elder of the Sanctuary Healing order. And I won't leave Stormbreach behind until it is freed again." He said with conviction.

They reached the cave. A small opening near a ledge where the man squeezed himself inside.

Ilea blinked in and looked around in her sphere. A surprisingly spacious area and a small tunnel leading farther down. *Is he going to turn into a monster now?*

He smiled in the darkness and grabbed a bunch of wood from a nearby pile. "I haven't eaten in weeks. I hope the smoke doesn't attract too many nuisances."

"Freed from what? Stormbreach I mean. I haven't heard of the Sanctuary Healing order either. Are you based here?" Ilea asked, helping him pile the wood.

"Thank you." He said. "Freed from the monster that came and claimed the city. Few had remained after the... terrible crimes, committed by the elven invaders. Most had fled, leaving us with little power to resist. The Sanctuary Healing order has been a staple of Stormbreach for centuries and we will not leave now. A trial, to be overcome with faith."

She listened, summoning her fire sphere and setting the wood aflame.

"A storage item. You must be very wealthy." The man said and stretched out his hands to warm them. "Which order do you serve?"

"I'm a Medic Sentinel, part of the Medic Sentinel Corps. We're more focused on helping adventurers than staying in a city." She replied, sitting down near a cave wall. "Do you need help with the fish?"

He shook his head. "Don't worry." He got a sharp stone and slit it open, getting out most of the guts. "I haven't heard of your order but you must be a high ranking member. Dangerous work. To be out there and help adventurers."

"Rewarding too. And necessary. Our goal is to help cull the monsters, instead of letting them attack our walls." She explained.

He lifted an eyebrow. "I commend your spirit. Why then, is a member of your order here?"

"To take care of the monsters that have taken over this area. I heard demons prowl the area and I've seen one of them, walking with a human, lizardman and orc." She said.

He clapped his hands together and smiled brightly, the flames dancing in his eyes. "A savior, sent to lift this curse. You must be a blessing from the Lady herself."

"The lady?" She asked.

"The Lady of Benevolence, protector of Stormbreach and our sacred patron." He explained as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. "The demons, humans and others are under the control of

a wicked beast. Too powerful for any that have come before but perhaps not you. Have you fought demons before? Those coming from the mountains I mean, not the ones risen from the dead.”

“I have.” Ilea replied. “And you would need a mind mage to make them as docile as the one I’ve seen today.”

“Perhaps. I can... be of service. Lead you to the city, tell you of passages unknown to the monsters and I can heal. Not that it is needed with you. Medic Sentinel, was it?” He didn’t even ask about the meaning, likely assuming it was simply a name.

The man moved some of the sticks to the side, placing the fish on top of two interlocking branches. “Or are you waiting for the team you support?”

Ilea shook her head. “No, I’m alone.”

He didn’t seem disappointed, nodding once more. “My name is Collin Rey, one of the Sanctuary healing order’s elders. Perhaps the last that remains.”

“I’m Ilea.” She said. “Thought about just going in and killing whatever monster is controlling the people around here but it seems like a bad idea. If the demons go wild, they will spread out and cause chaos.”

The man coughed from the smoke, waving his robed arms around to move some air up towards the opening in the stone. “The west is once more a wasteland, the little civilization the independent cities have brought is gone, returned to the monsters both beast and man. There is little chaos a few more demons could introduce.”

“People killed by them turn into demons too.” Ilea said, not sure if he knew at all.

“Of similar level.” The healer retorted. “Stormbreach is not a city of adventurers or soldiers. The demons born from its citizens will be killed and eaten by whatever beast they come across. Few humans remain in these parts, I doubt they will become a problem. Not as much as those monsters summoned in Ravenhall.”

“I still think I should take care of them first.” She said.

“True. Especially because of those that walk with them. Many would die, unprepared for the sudden betrayal. Yet those that cause a disturbance will be met with hunters coming from the city. You won’t be left with free reign.”

“I need to know what’s going on, who or what is in charge. Can you bring me into the city?” She asked.

The fire flickered, flames licking over the fish before the healer moved the branches a little, stopping it from getting burnt. “I could.” He said. “In these circumstances I could show you the way. Yet you must know, these pathways are sacred, meant for those of the order and not outsiders such as you.”

“I’m a Sentinel. My only goal is to cull the monsters here. I don’t care about your hidden pathways or your secrets. Not if there aren’t any slaves or torture chambers down there.” Ilea said.

He looked at her for a while and then nodded lightly. “I believe you speak the truth. There are no torture chambers nor are there slaves. Yet we hold secrets that are not meant for others. I merely doubt there is a chance without the help of someone such as you.”

“There are demons too, down in the tunnels. Infected members of our order as well as those we tried to protect. I simply ask of you to bring them to rest as gently as you can.”

“I will do my best.” She glanced at the fish and the fire. “You should eat, I don’t want to wait around for much longer. You don’t have to share, I’ve eaten already.” Without salt or a sauce, she really wasn’t interested.

He nodded and carefully got the fish out, using a stick to hold it close as he blew on it. “The fire.” He said, a glance to the flames slowly consuming the sticks.

Ilea wordlessly formed a blanket of ash that slowly descended over the flames, smothering it and returning the cave to darkness.

“Ash creation... you are truly unique.” The elder said and gobbled up the fish in silence, his hunger certainly not made up.

When he was done, the man grabbed one of the remaining sticks and held it up to her. “It isn’t a torch but it will burn for a little while.”

“I can see in the dark.” She replied.

“And I can’t.” He chuckled. “We will be faster if I can lead the way. Perhaps discovered more easily but I found that demons care little about light or dark.”

“Fair enough. Are there torches down there somewhere? Otherwise I suggest taking more.” She didn’t have any in her necklace sadly. A magical torch or flashlight would be a good investment for the future.

“There should be some remaining. The underground of Stormbreach is vast.” He said and watched the flames summoned from Ilea’s artifact light his wooden stick.

“I lead, you tell me where to go.” Ilea said and walked to the small opening in the wall. Her helmet appeared once more and her ashen armor on top.

The man nodded in silence and followed, their ashen and leather boots tapping on the stone was the only noise other than the crackling of burning wood.

“You are more warrior than healer. Medic Sentinel.” Collin commented after a while.

No branching pathways had shown themselves yet but an open cave was coming up, a collapsed bridge of stone trying to reach the other side. Remains of the bridge lay on the floor a couple meters down. A remaining chunk on the other side was just in range of Ilea’s sphere, hanging on the ledge of a high wall.

“We are. Having a healer that can fight is a powerful asset for any team.” She said. “The bridge is collapsed.”

He nodded. “We have to get to the other side. Your healing abilities will be weaker however. Still, I see the reasoning. More people might want to join your order too. Perhaps not those that should be healers in the first place however.”

Ilea smiled. “We’re not a healing order. More a mercenary organization. Recruits get screened plenty and if anybody acts against the few rules we have, they’re out.”

“A healing mercenary organization. Very daring if I might say so. It will be interesting to see how the big orders react to your presence.” Collin said.

Ilea grabbed him and jumped, her wings forming in flight before she moved them once and got them to the other side. “The big orders. Who are they even? I was invited personally to join the Sentinels and liked the idea. Met members of the orders only rarely myself. Why would they care about mercenary healers?”

The man dusted off his robe, steadying the burning branch that nearly went out after the jump. “You are either deceiving me or you do not think much about big decisions in your life.” The man said and chuckled. “The Corinth Order, the Order of Truth and the Order of Balance are the most powerful healing orders in Elos. They are each the strongest in their respective territories but it would do you good to learn about each of them. As well as the many smaller orders they allow to exist.”

“They allow to exist.” Ilea repeated.

He nodded, their shadows moving on the walls. “The Corinth Order is likely the main problem, outright attacking healers not associating with an organization, sometimes even those that do. They are a plight upon human lands, I tell you. Even Stormbreach wasn’t completely safe.”

They found a room with forking pathways, the man choosing one immediately and leading her through. “The Order of Truth is mostly based in Baralia, Asila and some northern towns of Lys. They mostly leave other healers alone but it isn’t unheard of that they do in fact attack other orders, even healers working for the guard.” His voice turned sinister. “Some even say they have an order of assassins in their ranks.”

Ilea heard the demon before she saw it in her sphere. She held out hand to the man and sped up, appearing next to the creature before her ashen limbs formed and cut through its body.

Clean enough. She thought as the demon fell, blood leaking onto the stone ground, the heavy liquid slowly spreading.

‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Brawler – lvl 58]’

“It’s safe, come.” She said down the tunnel, watching as the light once more approached.

The stick was nearly burnt down already, the man holding on to the edge to be able to still use it at all.

Ilea checked the area through her sphere and found a used torch in one of the metal sockets connected to the walls. “Use this.” She said and held it out to him.

“Thank you.” Collin said and set it alight with the remaining fire of his wooden stick. He only glanced at the demon corpse and bowed, eyes closed. “May you find rest, sister.”

She waited for him, more diverging tunnels opening up in the room.

“The right one this time.” Collin said and waited for her to walk towards it, glancing back at the corpse one last time.

“You were talking about the big orders. The Order of Truth.” Ilea said.

“Ah yes. Excuse me.” He replied and focused forward again. “Little is truly known about them, their secrets well guarded, despite their range and influence. Donations can be made to receive healing, which is incredibly profitable. Especially in the kingdoms.”

“Why especially the kingdoms?” Ilea asked, stepping into a dark room. It looked less like an area carved into a cave and more like a man made cellar.

Collin stepped up next to her and looked around. “We are getting closer.” He said and looked at her. “The kingdoms... they don’t have healers in their guard or working for their cities. Don’t ask me why. I would assume a long history and various reasons led to the current state.”

“The last order is the Order of Balance. Most common in Nipha and Lys. They might even accept your organization because you don’t interfere with their ideas too much. Then again, their members are known to freely interpret and execute their... balance?” He pronounced the last word with a bit of confusion. “I have given up on understanding their motives, as long as they don’t interfere with Stormbreach.”

He looked around the room and walked to one of the walls.

Ilea saw several hidden runes on it through her sphere but would have no idea which one to activate.

Collin touched a specific one, mana flowing inside before a door like shape glowed nearby, opening up without triggering any of the traps.

“The Corinth Order was strongest in Dawntree, slowly infesting the cities of the west. In this horrible fate that befell us, I cannot say that their partial destruction wasn’t welcome.” He explained, motioning for her to walk through the open pathway.

Their conversation continued as he guided her through numerous tunnels, the occasional demon standing in their way and taken care of by the Shadow.

Ilea generally understood that healing, just like everything else, was a commodity. A service that several orders sold and wanted to keep to themselves as much as possible, for economic, spiritual or other reasons.

In turn of course, they monopolized a set of abilities that should be a core component to any fighting team of humans. The influential and powerful teams as well as big cities or the Shadow’s Hand got around that problem most of the time but poorer areas and groups simply had to do without.

While the adventurer guild was more lax and spread out, akin to a franchise, the healing orders were more strict and ingrained in their cities or areas of influence. With her Medic Sentinels, she would shake up some of the mafia like business that was currently surrounding the rare class of healers.

She couldn’t wait to make people angry. At least it wasn’t quite as one sided as she had initially thought.