

Chapter 472 Expectations

Ilea enjoyed the company of the Langstons for the remainder of the evening.

Dale joined her on a short walk through the city afterwards.

“You have a lovely family, Dale,” Ilea said after a minute of comfortable silence.

“Thank you. They definitely liked you,” he said. “Maybe I should have introduced you earlier.”

“Might have been awkward,” Ilea said. “Now we at least had some things to talk about.”

“How you saved the whole city?” Dale mused and laughed.

“For example.”

“Ilea, you have dozens of stories worth talking about,” Dale said and nodded to a guard patrol walking past.

The city was on high alert, most of the guards and hunters still working.

A few of them glanced at Ilea but the others either didn’t care or didn’t make the connection.

“Not quite as relatable,” she said.

“I suppose. I hope you didn’t leave too much of an impression on the two,” he said. “I’d prefer if they had a peaceful life.”

“I wouldn’t call my life the opposite. It’s dangerous, yes, but I enjoy it.”

“Safe might be the better word,” the man said with a smile.

Ilea nodded. “Hmm. It can feel suffocating too and boring. To some.”

Dale stopped and looked up. The sky was dark, clouds moving far above. It would rain soon.

“I won’t stop them if that is truly what they want. It just worries me. With everything out there. They’re just kids,” he said.

Ilea smiled. “Now you know how I feel about you.”

The captain snorted. “Just because I’m not at level three hundred.”

“Would help,” she said.

Dale showed her the back of his hand. “I’ve got this. Summons a powerful beast. I got it from a traveling witch.”

Ilea nodded. “Hmm, that sounds suspicious. Are you sure it’s not a curse?”

“I’m not sure. But I have a good feeling about this one,” Dale said and continued walking.

They checked on a few groups of mages and guards, cleaning up through the night or stabilizing buildings that might have otherwise collapsed.

The damage to the city was quite low, considering the expected result of that siege.

Ilea said her goodbyes to Dale an hour later, letting the man return to his deserved rest.

She herself patrolled the walls in her black armor, keeping an eye out for soldiers and beasts alike. None of the guards complained.

Soft rain started to fall shortly after, washing away the remaining blood from the battlefield. The event would live on in the memories of the people living here, in history books and government reports. To the monsters lurking in the dark, it meant nothing.

They would continue to prowl the night, looking for prey. A few did show up, scouring the fields in the search of injured beings or a half eaten carcass. They all gave up after a while.

Ilea watched after a group of four legged hound like creatures, slowly walking back into the thicket.

The guards around her gulped but she didn't know if it was because of the monsters out there or the one standing amongst them.

Those who had seen her fight approached her quite different than the citizens who had merely heard about it. The guards respected or feared her. For many of the people who had called out to her that day, she assumed it was still hard to believe.

A normal looking healer. Sure, her level was high but to a level thirty farmer, what did that mean? They didn't understand the difference between a level one hundred adventurer and a Shadow. Not truly.

The name carried weight, fear. They didn't know about the dangers involved in reaching level three hundred, the unlimited potential every human carried within them in this strange magic touched world.

"Tea?" a man asked, joining them on top of the wall. He was clad in armor, part of the hunters. In his hands he carried a tray with a few mugs and a pot, steam rising lazily as raindrops trailed down the dark ceramic form.

He noticed Ilea then but other than his eyes opening a little further, he showed no visible reaction.

"Gladly, thanks," she said and stepped over, pouring herself a cup.

"I'll take some too," one of the others said.

They stood in silence for a little while, looking into the night together as they sipped on their tea. A combination of herbs with a note of citrus. It would help a little with staying vigilant and awake.

"Do you think they'll come back?" one of the guards asked.

Ilea looked over, still clad in her armor. She took a sip of tea, the ash parting at her mouth to allow for the motion. "I hope they don't."

"They didn't seem to be an issue for you. No offense meant," the woman to her left said.

Ilea sighed.

She turned and continued to patrol the walls, making sure the city was safe well into the night.

Ilea left when the first signs of dawn seeped into the horizon, only a few gray clouds hanging above.

A short stop at the Vultures let her mark Walter after a short discussion. He had a way to comprehend parts of the spell, content to have a way to call for her. Weavy hadn't returned yet and word of the battle would likely reach them in the coming days.

Hours passed as Ilea rushed back to meet her appointment in the arena. Thoughts of the soldiers she had killed were on her mind. There had been better ways to deal with the situation, and worse. She

accepted her decisions but allowed herself to think of them. Perhaps to honor them, or to make a part of her calm down, a part that still clung to the idea that murder was a heinous crime, no matter the circumstances.

That part did not know war, the split second decisions that would cost the lives of hundreds of thinking, living beings. It did not comprehend the power she now wielded, the weapon she had become.

It demanded a satisfying conclusion to a complicated conflict, structured and with a redeeming end for both the hero and the villain.

There had however not been heroes or villains. Only people, all striving to defend what was theirs or to take what they deemed as such.

Maybe it had been a mistake to let Lord Harken live. The deaths were in a major part on him and his decisions. She didn't know if he would accept Alistair's demands, didn't know if he would adhere to the rules placed upon him in the coming years. Or if her decision would lead to thousands more deaths.

Ilea knew that questions and decisions like these were exactly the kinds she had tried to avoid in the first place. However, as long as a shred of morality and care remained in her, she thought it impossible to escape them entirely.

She had become a monster years ago. Had fought and killed to stay alive and to gain more power, most of all for the sheer joy of it. The line between a monster that destroyed and one that protected was thin but once more, she decided to strive for the latter.

The marks would help her be free, only to be called upon in emergencies. Hopefully without being involved in petty politics or manipulated as a piece on someone's board of conquest.

She was looking forward to breakfast, and the simple joy of having magic crash into her magically empowered body.

Nathan finally came to a stop, groaning as he checked around himself. Luke was moaning in pain somewhere to his right and Celeste was still rolling down the steep decline according to the shouts.

He rolled to the side once more, the pain in his thigh confirming that he hadn't gotten out of this unscathed.

"I need light," Lorelei said in her calm voice.

Of course, he thought before a small flame came to life above his open palm. It flickered when Celeste landed, the girl chuckling to herself before she winced.

She had managed to land on her feet and in a crouch but the height had taken its toll.

"Status?" Nathan asked as he walked over to Lorelei, his hand pressed to his thigh as he felt wet blood flowing from an open wound.

“He cut his cheek and hit his head,” Lorelei said.

Nathan moved his pack and crouched, wincing as the pain flowed through him. The temptation to deactivate the pain was there but he knew how dangerous that would be. He might just collapse due to blood loss or an infection without even realizing it.

Celeste stepped up, ripping a rag in two before she grabbed the bottle of alcohol Nathan held out to her.

He pointed to his own thigh and Luke, touching his own cheek.

The girl nodded and soaked the rags before handing one to Lorelai.

Nathan grit his teeth through the sharp pain of the liquid cleansing his wound. He let the girl apply a bandage with enough pressure to stop most of the bleeding.

He forced more mana into the flame to provide a better view, glancing at Lorelai who took care of Luke. The man would be fine in a few minutes, if the hit to his head hadn't been too much to handle.

Everyone was quiet, listening, watching. Lorelai worked.

No monster had shown up so far but it would only be a matter of time.

He checked the message he had received halfway down the slope.

‘ding’ ‘You have entered the Hidden Gulch dungeon’

The second one he had been to by now. He hadn't heard of the Hidden Gulch so far. The Vile Grotto, Raven's Cavern, and the Frozen Peak. Those were the ones other teams had been sent to.

The latter one he had seen too.

At first it had sounded entirely ridiculous. These were dungeons even the adventurers in Ravenhall generally avoided. The monsters remained there and rarely attacked travelers.

If they had been easy to reach and filled with weak creatures, the circumstances would have been different.

Lilith selected one team per night, woke them up and let them prepare for three minutes.

She then grabbed them and brought them to a dungeon somewhere in the mountains of Ravenhall.

That's at least what most of the students thought. Nathan assumed she could fly much faster than most other Shadows. Others swore they had heard of the dungeons before, knew they were close by.

Either way, it didn't matter. They were there. And they had to survive.

That was the main goal. Others were rare ingredients and metals, observing creatures, and fighting said creatures. The last task was to go back.

So far nobody had managed the last one alone.

Many had doubts but Nathan was certain Lilith watched over them. Why else would only one team go out per night. Why else would nobody have died so far?

He believed the stories however, knew that if she had to interfere, their experience would be vastly worse than if she didn't.

Neither did anybody want to fail the missions. Nor would they want to disappoint the healer.

Whispers from Riverwatch had reached the city of Shadows a few weeks ago, stories of Lilith fighting an entire army on her own.

He believed it.

Every Sentinel did.

They knew what she was capable of. And they were the ones who had been chosen.

“He’s fine, and so are you,” Lorelai said.

“Nothing in the vicinity,” Nathan said.

“Can’t hear anything either. Any info on this one?” Celeste asked.

“Nothing,” Nathan said.

Lorelai shook her head, prepping up Luke as he put a hand to his brow.

“I fucked up, sorry guys,” the farmer said.

“You can rest for a few minutes, I’ll check the vicinity,” Celeste said.

Lorelai nodded and watched the girl speed away.

Nathan was glad Celeste listened to the knight by now. Their first mission had been rather chaotic and dangerous, despite the few monsters they had encountered. Not creatures they could have fought.

They could outsmart them however and managed to escape whenever it was necessary. Hopefully this one would go better than the last.

The wound on his thigh was healing already, he could feel and see it. His health was recovering, making him sigh.

“You rest for a bit too,” the knight said and looked at him. “Keep the flame up.”

“I will,” Nathan said, glad the experienced woman was their squad leader. *This is insane. Entering an unknown dungeon with a few rookies, without preparation or necessary gear.*

He couldn’t help but smile. They would make her proud. They would make the Sentinels proud.

“What do you think?” Balduur asked as he stood proudly next to his creations.

“They certainly look fierce. How do they hold up?” she asked.

The man grinned, his booming laugh rolling through the massive forge.

A few heads turned but continued their own work a moment later, only visible to Ilea thanks to her sphere.

Balduur’s space was separated from the others.

Ilea assumed the building had been owned by Morhill's government or a wealthy noble before. Now it had been repurposed as one of the largest smithies she had ever seen.

The smiths necessary to operate it weren't there yet but the town was growing quickly.

"The Stonehammer steel you provided is quite durable. Remind me how you managed to get them to that state," the smith said.

"I fought monsters," Ilea said, thinking back on the knights in Tremor who had slowly demolished all the armors Goliath provided.

Balduur huffed. "Of course you did. Not in the mood for stories then. Well, it is no matter. The bones are quite durable too. Not quite as strong as the steel but it's very flexible and I'm sure Iana can make up for it with enchantments."

It had been a choice between versatility and durability. Ilea thought her Sentinels could use the former more. Plus the look would make them seem distinct. A name could carry power too.

People clad in black armor would be let into villages and towns without questions, guards assuming them to be Shadows.

Bone armor would make them something different. Something people would know.

"They're distinctly human," the smith added with a frown.

"You saw that?" Ilea asked and smiled.

"I watched Orthan work a few times. The consistent strength of the bone however... I hope you didn't decide to take up torture," the smith said.

Ilea shook her head. "They're mine, Balduur. Don't worry about it."

He laughed. "I knew it. You don't cease to surprise. I've heard of people using bone armor but without shaping skills or a supply of strong monster corpses, it's simply not feasible to supply an entire order with them."

"Organization," Ilea corrected.

He waved her off. "Whatever you want to call it. Some of the molds you brought were faulty. Maybe I should come and make them myself next time."

"You have more important work to do than that. Just tell Orthan which ones and we'll make sure the next batch is fine," Ilea said.

The man had high standards. That was why she had hired him for this job and why he had been interested in the first place. Supplying Lilith's organization with bone armor was not a job you refused.

"I asked Orthan before but how are they formed? I hope not in the same way we made yours," Balduur said.

"He didn't tell you?" she asked.

The man shook his head.

Pain Tolerance and healing were interesting abilities. With enough of each you could cover a man in molten steel without any danger to his health. As long as he could keep his breath for a few minutes.

"Then we will keep that one a mystery," Ilea said and smirked.

Balduur was an exceptional smith but he didn't like repetition and boring work. If she could keep him focused on this task with a few unanswered questions, that was exactly what she would do.

She stepped up to the armor and touched the single horn jutting from its forehead. It was rather sharp to the touch. *It won't remain like this.*

The shoulders on this set were smooth, much like her own. The whole thing made to fit close to the body of the wearer. Made to be light and quiet. Very little steel had been used on this one, only in places that protected the heart, head, and spine.

The armor was closed off entirely. Not as smoothly as her own, instead it was an assortment of pieces that could individually be removed. Balduur really outdid himself with the internal fastening mechanisms, located between and slightly on top of the pieces without sacrificing mobility or much of their defensive capabilities.

It looked deadly. But so did all of them.

Her Sentinels weren't ready for these pieces yet but she was sure they would like the small reward for their efforts.

They had grown from scared and desperate refugees, aspiring adventurers without means, or fallen nobles without a remaining family to support their claim, to capable fighters. Veterans that had already survived more than many high level adventurers had dared to face.

Many had already received options to change their classes but nothing exceptional had come up. And so they would wait. Wait and train.

She was proud of every single one of them. The way they faced death in the caverns, the way they stepped in front of their injured allies, to protect them with their own lives.

A few of them had surpassed even that, had fought and killed monsters way beyond their expected capabilities. Just like she had.

"I remember you being more fun," Balduur said with a grin.

"One of them nearly died last night," Ilea said after a while. "But he held on."

The man touched her shoulder. "And that is all that matters. A sword cannot be forged without striking it. Time and time again."

She nodded, knowing that it wasn't exactly true. In the case of swords at least.