

Chapter 454 A test?

Ilea had really thought the day to day life of adventurers was more exciting. Maybe she and the Shadow's Hand really were outliers as much as she was made to believe.

They were literally protecting Edgar, the man collecting herbs in the various caves they had explored.

The group knew their way around, checked for hidden monsters at every corner. It certainly was efficient, if the goal was to collect herbs and not fight a single creature for the whole duration of their delve.

Could just Monster Hunter me some creatures out of the depths... no Ilea, don't risk the lives of some honest and hard working herb collectors.

She's bored, Sophia thought. This is not the time to be bored... it's the time to be vigilant.

A muffled scream resounded from one of the tunnels.

Everyone turned towards the direction. Sophia checked in the opposite direction, in case of an ambush. Nothing was there.

"I'll go check it out," Ilea said and started walking.

"No... what, wait!" Sean called out as he dashed close to her, bow out and an arrow nocked.

"That didn't sound pleasant, I will go. Stay if you like," the healer said and vanished.

Sophia opened her eyes wide and looked for her, finding herself unable to locate the woman. *How far did she go?*

She looked around frantically.

"What do we do boss?" Colt asked, axe at the ready.

Sean was unsure, the ranger glancing towards Sophia.

"You want to go after her?" she asked and sighed. A thin layer of ice formed on top of her skin, below her duster and clothes.

She could feel the magic from her companions, skills activating.

"We vote, in favor?" Sean asked.

Edgar was the only one against but that didn't matter. He nodded and prepared, stone armor forming on his body as bits and pieces of rock joined from the ground below.

Sean motioned them towards the scream and sped up, forming a couple of gestures with his hands.

Quiet, leave space, potential trap, Sophia interpreted. There were many reasons the ranger was their leader. She agreed with the assessment and followed behind, leaving Edgar to protect her back.

They have worked together for so many years, no further words needed to be said.

The tunnel lead downwards, few mushrooms remaining that would provide light. The guild's warning was on her mind, and likely on those of her companions. They were risking their lives for a stranger. *Sean just can't help it.*

And yet she was still here, ready to help. *We will all die for this at one point or the other. Maybe today is the day.*

She felt her mana flow through her body, the air cooling around her.

A distant light source illuminated a small cavern. *Fire, a torch.*

Burnt flesh, she thought and sniffed the air. It was getting warmer, despite her ice.

Her eyes widened as their group came into the open space. Blood, limbs and guts littered the ground, most of it partially burnt. Bones looked out from various sections.

It took everything she had not to puke out her dinner. Sean couldn't handle it.

She saw movement behind a large bulge of scorched meat and focused on it, blades of ice forming on her arms as she crouched lightly.

"It's me," a voice resounded.

"Ilea?" Sophia asked.

"Yep... found a group of adventurers. Only one survived," she said and suddenly turned her head. "More coming, prepare to fight."

They were all prepared. "Colt, get the survivor and let's-"

A gurgling sound washed through the area.

Fuck

'ding' 'You have heard the call of a powerful beast. You are paralyzed for two seconds'

A creature shuffled into the light, various limbs scratching and moving over the ground.

[Rotten Abomination – lvl ??]

Sophia counted eight eyes in various places, just as many limbs of differing size, some ending in hands while other still in bone. She tried taking a step back but found herself unable to move.

Someone appeared in front of them. *Ilea?*

The healer looked back and grinned. "Do you think you can handle this one?"

Pieces of bone lashed out from the creature, intercepted by ashen tendrils that sprouted out of the healer's back.

The two seconds had passed, all four of them jumping or teleporting back to make distance between themselves and the creature.

"What are you-" Sean said as he looked at the woman.

“Get away from that monster!” Colt shouted.

Which one? Sophia thought as she watched, lances of ice forming around her as she calmed her mind.

Ilea wasn't there anymore. Instead there stood a being made entirely of ash, more than a dozen tendrils moving behind her back, like arms.

Elemental armor wasn't rare. Sophia had ice armor herself, currently active under her clothes. What made this sight different was the sheer casual air coming from the woman.

She gulped, unsure who she should attack with her magic. *She tricks and kills adventurers, eats them*, she heard a voice in her mind but ignored it. She would have killed them already, why wait?

“You don't want to? They're pretty slow and it would definitely be good experience for you,” Ilea said and looked back.

The creature lashed out, attacking with a storm of limbs and bone, blood and flesh splattering around as it moved.

It could have just as well tried to attack a solid block of steel.

The healer whistled. “Stop it.”

‘ding’ ‘You have heard the call of a powerful healer. You are paralyzed for two seconds’

“Ah, that's not what I wanted. Sorry,” Ilea said and lashed out with her limbs.

The Abomination was left without arms, squealing in rage as it recoiled in surprise.

“Kill it,” Sean said as soon as he could speak again.

“Sure?” Ilea asked.

“Wait,” Sophia called out. *Give her what she wants. Otherwise we are dead.* She glanced over to Sean and signaled him one thing. *Danger.*

“Well go on, I think it's regenerating,” Ilea said, a series of bone spikes smashing into her armor without visible damage.

Sophia released her ice spears, the blades digging into the creature's flesh. Rocks and arrows followed until it stopped moving.

‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Rotten Abomination – lvl 312] – For defeating an enemy on hundred and eighty levels above your own, bonus experience is granted’

She ignored the messages ringing within her mind. The fight wasn't done. Everyone was aware of it, waiting in silence.

Did we do the right thing? Why did she choose us? What are we? Something to play with? Something to eat? Is it a test?

A plethora of questions ran through her mind as she prepared her most powerful spells. Escape would be difficult. The woman could teleport, had medium range and in a closed space like this, she had an advantage. And the worst of all, she stood between them and the exit.

“Oh, four levels for that? Hmm,” the healer said and stepped closer.

What does she want?

“Oh my god, relax guys. It’s still me,” Ilea said and walked to the side, grabbing an unconscious adventurer that she lifted onto a small bed of ash.

“What do you want?” Sean asked.

Ilea couldn’t believe it. One monstrous abomination dead and a lightly paralyzing ability and boom, you are the villain apparently.

She rolled her eyes. “What do you mean what do I want?”

Sean signed something to Sophia.

“Stop that signing shit. I’m not a monster. You can talk to me with words... seriously. What is it with you people?” she asked.

“How would you feel...,” Sophia said but stopped herself.

“What?” Ilea said.

“If it turned out your healer friend is a fucking monster,” she added. “You just stood there while it attacked!”

“I need to get resistances, I told you!” Ilea replied.

Colt started chuckling before he laughed out loud.

Nobody else seemed to think it funny.

At least I have him, Ilea thought and crossed her arms.

“You weren’t lying...,” Sean said.

“What?” she asked.

“About your level,” the man added.

The others glanced at him.

“Ah, that,” Ilea said and smiled, scratching the back of her head.

“Three hundred and forty, was it?” Sophia asked. Her ice armor and a few other spells were still active, the air around her cool. Her expression had turned from surprise to apprehension.

She’s ready to fight. Wow, they really think I would kill them?

“Yep. Also don’t worry. You shared food with me, that makes you more than safe. Even if you directly attacked me. Feel free to try by the way,” Ilea said and winked towards the woman. “My ice resistance is maxed out for now though, so I’d prefer something else.”

“We don’t know if you’re telling the truth,” Edgar said.

“Oh, of course you don’t. I just felt like taking it slow tonight. Maybe meet some adventurers. Work in a team that isn’t made up of complete monsters for once,” Ilea said.

“A whim?” Sean asked, relaxing his posture.

“You trust her?” Edgar asked, his stone armor still active.

“What’s the point? She intervened to protect us. She healed you before. I think it’s less of a risk to trust her than to attack her,” the man explained.

“I appreciate it,” Ilea said. “If it makes you feel better, Edgar, you are free to try and fight me. I would welcome it honestly. My earth magic resistance could use some more levels and I would be interested in whatever else you can dish out.”

“She’s bluffing,” Edgar said.

No she’s not you fucking idiot, Sophia thought.

“What do you want from us then? You got your adventure. Will you let us go?” she asked the healer.

Ilea looked at her, none of the ash still present, back to her mundane look. *It’s really easy to underestimate a healer like her. Even with the high level. I should remedy that.*

“You call that an adventure? That thing was the only creature we even fought... and let’s be honest, you guys didn’t exactly do a lot. And still, you got several levels out of it. Almost too easy,” Ilea murmured.

“So you want us to continue, explore this dungeon? With you?” Sophia asked. She didn’t like how excited Colt looked when she spelled out the idea. Sean might choose to follow Ilea’s wishes to protect them. It would be up to her to make a decision.

“You already gained several levels. More are sure to follow. And I would be there to protect and heal you, should things go south. I won’t force you of course, you can leave right now if you like. Just take this guy with you, if you do,” the healer said, pointing to the unconscious man floating on her ash.

“What’s in it for you?” Sophia asked.

Ilea shrugged. “A test run. To see how effective I can help people level up. And to have some conversation while I train. A change of pace so to speak.”

“We only got so many levels because we didn’t know you would protect us,” Sophia said. “It won’t be that easy, otherwise every high level noble would have an army at their disposal.”

“They do. How do you think healing orders have so much influence,” Edgar said. He glared daggers at Ilea. “You are part of one, aren’t you?”

Not the time to challenge her, Sophia thought with a sigh.

“Hmm... not a healing order... a healing organization. And I suppose being the founder makes me part of it. I think a test run is even more important then. My students aren't exactly trained adventurers like you lads. You can kill the creatures while I take their attacks. Simple enough. Maybe I'll make it a little more interesting from time to time but I will try to keep you safe,” she said.

“Try... I won't trust you. I vote against going with her,” Edgar said.

“Where is your organization based?” Sean asked.

“Ravenhall,” Ilea said.

The man smiled. “You are that healer then... the one from the song. How did it go? *Lilith, the guardian of ash, lover of food and the heealer of Ravenhall*. Didn't think we would meet her here.”

Ilea shook her head before she chuckled. “Really? You just made that up, didn't you?”

“No, no. I heard a part of it too,” Colt said. “Just forgot the name. Makes sense now. I will vote for going with you... under one condition.”

There he goes. She won't fuck you.

“One night,” he said.

“No.” Ilea replied.

“One fight then,” he compromised.

“Deal, right after the others decided,” Ilea said.

“We have a rare opportunity here,” Sean said and glanced towards Sophia. “I will take the risk. It's up to you.”

When is it fucking not? Ah what the hell.

“I don't dislike the idea of some easy levels and achievements for my next evolution. I want to be safe however,” Sophia said and channeled mana into her spell, stepping closer to the woman.

“You think you can protect us? Then let me hit you. Point blank. No tricks,” she said.

Ilea was a little confused at the suggestion. “You saw me fight that Abomination... no offense Sophia but I doubt your magic can match a level three hundred creature.”

Maybe it can, maybe not. I would have struggled against that creature at level one twenty.

“I don't know what they can do. I know what I can do,” Sophia said, matter of fact.

Ilea shrugged. “Sure, go on.”

The work you need to invest to help people out. Everyone here is so mistrusting, she thought, shaking her head.

“I won’t apologize for what happens,” Sophia said as she stopped a meter away.

Colt was watching with anticipation in his eyes and a large grin on his face. Sean’s expression was unreadable. Edgar looked at her with distrust still.

Which healer hurt you?

“Come on, girl. I’ve seen worse,” Ilea said.

Sophia was sure the healer wasn’t faking her confidence. She had seen Ilea take hits from the Abomination but she had met a few illusionists and mind mages in her years. She wanted confirmation.

Her spell had charged up to the maximum. She doubted even a Shadow could shrug it off from this distance. *Frost surge.*

The magic unleashed in an explosive blast of ice, everything in front of Sophia instantly frozen as a chunk of mana ripped out of her.

She breathed out, thin crystals of ice shattering on her hand as she moved it back. The cold white mist settled and vanished. Behind it, she could see Ilea. Completely and utterly undamaged and unimpressed.

“You should work on your skills... oh well, at this stage you probably don’t have any third tier abilities either. Better get you to two hundred soon,” she said and shook her head.

“What... did you dodge it?” Sophia asked.

“No. She just stood there. Made it look like you’re an apprentice mage,” Sean said in a tired voice.

“Oh,” she heard herself utter, her hand falling to her side utterly defeated.

“My ice resistance is at the second tier, level twenty. Which means if your spell isn’t higher than that, its efficiency will be reduced by eighty percent. Or more, depending on your skill level,” Ilea explained.

“How did you level it that high?” Sophia couldn’t help but ask. Her curiosity won out as soon as her most powerful spell didn’t as much as scratch her. The Abomination was close in level and it certainly seemed to care.

“With continuous exposure. And a lot of healing,” Ilea replied. “Want to have that bout now, Colt?”

“But... how... how am I supposed to fight something like you?” Sophia said.

“You don’t,” Sean commented.

“Two classes. A variety in attacks or just so much power you overwhelm my defenses. Honestly though... if I fought someone with high defense against my attacks and healing at their disposal... maybe we would reach a stalemate at some point. I’m an outlier however... I doubt many people

even have base level resistances against the most common magic schools. A terrible deficiency, I believe,” the healer explained.

“Easy to say as a healer,” Edgar said.

Ilea gave him an icy look. “Pain is still a thing, Mr. Untrusting.”

He actually took a step back.

“It takes dedication and a high level of danger and pain. As well as regeneration or healing. It would certainly be more common with us adventurers if there were more healers around. The orders don’t supply any for such purposes. Even within the guards and militaries of the towns and kingdoms I have been to, I haven’t heard of the training regimes necessary to achieve a broad availability of resistances,” Sean said.

“Nobles do it,” Colt said and readied his axe and spells.

“Shouldn’t we bring up the survivor first? And go somewhere where it’s safer?” Sean asked.

Ilea nodded. “Where you collected the herbs. Doesn’t seem like they particularly like light. Or maybe it’s the mushrooms that grow higher up.”

“Also yes, nobles do it but it won’t help much if they just stay within their walls and estates, only using their abilities to kill each other instead of all the monsters out there, preventing normal folks from moving out and expanding,” Edgar said, shaking his head.

The healer nodded and made her way towards the tunnel they had come from.

“Good thing that my organization will provide healers for adventuring teams and shadows then,” she said.

For the first time, Edgar seemed interested.

“You and what nation? The orders won’t like it and with them all the nobles, kings and emperors they have influence over,” he said.

The woman just shrugged. “Guess I will find out if it works out or not.”

She’s talking about offending some of the most powerful people out there. Who the hell is she?