

Chapter 486 Excursion

Ilea reached Dawntree in under an hour of flight. *Quite the difference between my first time traveling here*, she thought and landed a few kilometers away. The distant shape was distinct, carved into the side of the mountain.

She moved her ash armor to her back and switched into a comfortable set of clothes with leather armor on top.

People would ask questions either way but she didn't feel like hiding in the shadows right now. She was here to test her abilities against Taleen Machines. The normal versions would be perfect to level her new class and nobody would miss them.

She remembered adventurers were usually too afraid to approach Taleen dungeons. Considering the traps and machines inside, she didn't fault them for that opinion.

Ilea reached the main road soon after. There were no travelers in sight but what she did see was a squad of armored people sitting around a campfire.

One of them was the lookout, his eyes looking straight at her but it seemed he was unsure if she was there.

Eyes of Ash, she thought with a smile, watching the man squint against the sunlight.

A few minutes later he did spot her and informed the others.

Ilea had already assessed them when they were prepared and ready for the unknown woman approaching them.

Guards or low level soldiers, judging by their gear and the apprehensive look on their faces. Only two of the five were even wearing helmets.

"Who goes there!?" one of them shouted.

Ilea wasn't sure he was the leader, two of the others looking at him with slight annoyance. Their armor didn't give her more information about the hierarchy either.

"Adventurer!" she shouted back and summoned the Emerald Adventurer badge she had gotten.

"Dawntree is off limits," one of them said as he watched her approach.

Ilea stopped a dozen meters away and held up the badge, the thing shimmering in a dull green.

"That's emerald... she's above two hundred?" one of them asked in a whisper, looking at another.

She couldn't identify them yet but it was clear they weren't.

"Dawntree is the only city in the west which still has a guild. Are you telling me I traveled for two weeks just to turn back?" Ilea said.

They seemed unsure.

She stepped closer, knowing now that only one of them was above even level one hundred. Quite a pitiful roadblock. If that was what it was. Maybe they were preying on travelers.

“What happened in Dawntree to make it off limits? Did the Elves finally take it?” she asked with a smile. *They would be an interesting foe to test with too.*

“The nobles of Dawntree are no more. Ziva has led us to freed-” one of them said, interrupted by an elbow to his side. He looked young, excited.

The man who had hit him obviously didn’t trust her. “You’re a healer.”

“I am,” Ilea said.

The other men seemed to understand the relevance.

Ah, I see. “I’m unaffiliated with the orders. Most of all the Corinth, if you’re worried about that.”

“How are we to believe you?” the apparent leader said. A man in his fifties, calm and collected even now.

Ilea thought about it. She could show her Shadow badge, or maybe show off her healing. Something far simpler came to her mind. “Would a Corinth healer dress like this?” she asked, motioning to her general self.

A generally approving murmur spread through the group.

“A spy might,” one of them suggested.

“You haven’t met them. They would rather kill themselves than dress like adventurers,” the leader said and nodded. “You may pass,” he nodded.

Ilea grinned as she walked past them. “That smells nice. May I have a bowl?”

“Food is scarce, buy your own, adventurer,” one of them said.

Ilea nodded and summoned an empty bowl. “How about one silver?” she said and summoned the piece.

The leader opened his eyes wide. “Of course. Help yourself,” he said.

Ilea did. A simple stew with potatoes and meat. Well cooked and seasoned. One of them should probably think about getting a cook class instead. *Looking at them... maybe one of them actually Was a cook before.*

“Thank you,” she said, infusing her voice with Monster Hunter as she tasted the stew.

She smiled at the frozen men, apprehension turning to fear in their eyes. “Very tasty,” she added and continued onward to Dawntree.

“We should warn the city!” one of them whispered loudly after the effect had worn off.

“Are you crazy, leave her be,” another one said.

“A traveling healer... she’s alone too. Do you think that’s her? From the songs?” one of them suggested.

A fist hit his head. “You idiot, Lilith has black wings. Plus she’s at least two meters tall. This one looked pretty normal.”

“We leave her be. She didn’t seem out for trouble,” the leader said and turned towards the food.

“Now eat. It’s going to be a long day.”

Ilea saluted his wisdom. Either way, she would have only scared them a little. Maybe some Displacement. They were just doing their jobs and she had met far worse guards.

The gates of the city were closed, people moving far above on the wall.

“Who goes there!?” a female voice called out.

They always have to scream like that when somebody arrives?

“Adventurer!” she shouted and lifted her badge.

“Open the gate!” the woman shouted.

Ilea was welcomed by an armored team of ten soldiers, each above one hundred with a few going as high as one fifty.

“What do you seek in Dawntree?”

She showed him the badge again. “The guild still operates? Or did you burn it down too?”

One of them took a step forward, lifting a spear to her chest. “Careful now. Healers aren’t welcome here.”

“You’re the one who needs to be careful,” Ilea said and walked towards him, the blade of his spear pushing into her leather armor.

“The guild still operates,” the leader said. “Leave her be.”

“Sir,” the man in front of her said and removed his weapon.

“Apologies for the treatment, adventurer. We’ve had a recent change in leadership. The guild should not be impacted by this, nor should the availability of jobs. I must however know if you are associated with a healing order. Few high level independent healers roam these parts,” he said.

“I’m not affiliated with a healing order,” she said.

“I see. Then you are free to enter the city. You are aware of the rules?” he asked.

“I am,” Ilea lied, not about to listen to the local list of laws.

“Very well. Do have a fruitful stay,” he said and nodded to her, stepping aside.

No toll either. They must be eager to get more muscle.

She glanced at the guard who had confronted her before stepping through the thin hallway inside of the wall, coming out on the other side to the familiar sight of the mountainous town sprawling downwards.

I wonder if it was humans who built this, she thought and nodded to a nearby soldier.

“Where’s the adventurer guild?” she asked.

The woman pointed her in a direction, adding a few explanations.

It seemed like a busy day, plenty of people rushing through the streets. The sounds of workmanship reached her throughout the whole walk. Some buildings lay half destroyed, walls caved in and roofs burnt while others looked untouched entirely.

The palaces and mansions she assumed had been owned by the nobles of the city had been hit the worst. Towers and whole sections entirely destroyed.

She appreciated her Eyes of Ash, allowing her to take in the view with an entirely different level of detail. Even from a distance.

Ilea did note that she got weird looks from time to time but her high level seemed to dissuade any aggression towards her.

The guild looked untouched, obvious adventurers guarding the large building against whoever might cause trouble.

Ilea had her badge ready and flashed it to one of them, the man nodding her past.

Stone and wood had been used in the construction of the guild, the two story building spanning a good thirty meters in all directions. The roof was tiled and angled downwards on each side, the style reminding her of something one would see in a European mountain village.

It looked quite contrary to the surrounding houses, more built for efficient use of space and obviously trying to save on materials.

No wonder they can pay adventurers for protection, she thought and nodded to the man in armor, entering the building.

A large hall with a few counters welcomed her, lit by both magical and oil lamps. The busiest employee inside was the barkeeper, the large man filling up mugs for the various groups of people occupying the stools and tables spread throughout.

She got a few glances but most people dismissed her, unable to identify her from the distance and unimpressed by her gear.

Ilea quickly glanced over the noticeboard, the thing packed with fliers. Most were related to rebuilding, repairs, and security details. Both for obviously wealthy employers or shops.

She hadn't encountered obvious unrest or crime on her way here but it seemed people were scared. *Or it was much worse in the past weeks*, she thought and decided to ask one of the two clerks instead of reading through the whole thing.

Only three people were waiting, their requests quickly dealt with.

More people checked her out when she put the emerald badge onto the counter, whispers of healer spreading through the hall.

"I haven't seen you in Dawntree. Are you new?" the clerk asked. A young woman with long black hair going down her back, wearing light armor.

Prepared for battle it seems, Ilea thought as she identified the woman.

[Mage – lvl 120]

"I just arrived, yes. Before you ask, no, I'm not affiliated with a healing order," she said.

The woman smiled. "I imagine you're getting that a lot. The Corinth Order wasn't exactly happy about the new change in government."

"Was the guild?" Ilea asked.

"Happy about the change? The Adventurer guild provides its services no matter the local government," the woman said and left it at that.

"Mhm..., I'm looking for a job," Ilea said.

“Plenty available,” the woman said and smiled, motioning a hand to the notice board.

“Anything related to the Taleen dungeon previously in the Forkspear territory?” she asked.

“That location isn’t public knowledge,” the woman said in a whisper, leaning in slightly.

“It should be now. I would assume the nobles aren’t around anymore,” Ilea said.

The woman glanced at the occupants and back to her. “Information retains its value.”

Ilea rolled her eyes and summoned a piece of silver.

“A storage item and such a high level. You are an interesting individual,” the woman said and took the coin.

“I hear a missing Forkspear daughter has returned, joining the rebellion and even fighting her own family. What was her name again?” the woman said, looking at Ilea with innocent eyes.

“Look, I don’t really care. Any jobs related to the dungeon or not? Anything Taleen related,” Ilea asked.

The clerk sighed. “Very well. There are a few jobs. Mostly about finding missing people from the expedition that went down there a few years past. And missing people who took those jobs before and didn’t come back.”

“I believe I remember a few jobs requesting materials and any writings or artifacts from the Taleen, let me see,” she said and started looking through a filing cabinet below the counter.

More and more folders were put up on the counter. “Ah yes... this one was interesting too. A living Taleen Guardian. If they are alive at all. Though... I do think the noble... yes, she’s dead.” she proceeded to stamp the file and place it into another cabinet.

“Don’t they already pay to put up the job?” Ilea asked.

“And parts of the reward money too, depending on how trustworthy they are. Yes, this rebellion was quite profitable for the guild, though the economic damage it did to the city itself will far outweigh the small infusion of gold,” she explained.

Especially because nobles are trustworthy employers, meaning there was little gold to pocket in the first place, Ilea thought. She had an idea who the Forkspear daughter was but didn’t feel like investigating. For now.

At least now people won’t bother me or Claire about her anymore. Not that they’d have the resources to challenge the Head Administrator of Ravenhall.

“I’ll take everything that is still active,” Ilea said.

“These seven. Should I have them copied for you? Would be one copper each,” the woman said.

Ilea summoned her notebook and quickly wrote down some of the info, who it was for and what they wanted. “No, it’s fine.”

She would take out any corpses she found anyway, if only as a courtesy to the expedition she had worked with back on her first visit.

Is that him? she asked herself. Jeremy Creek, requests for both bodies and writing. “That the paladin and earth mage who teaches at the college?” she asked.

The woman checked the file and nodded. “Yes. The college sided with the rebellion so I would assume he’s still alive.”

“What if he isn’t?” she asked and continued taking notes.

“Then you won’t receive the part of the reward he didn’t already leave with us,” the clerk explained. “Though with your demeanor, level, and storage item, I doubt you’re here for gold.”

“Who knows?” Ilea asked and stored her notebook. “See you later,” she added and turned, leaving the guild with a few sets of eyes on her.

The walk down to the Root was uneventful, Ilea occasionally checking out mages repairing or adding to existing structures.

Compared to the usually quite boring stone mages she had met, the application it had with structures made her respect that school of magic much more. Where one needed to be efficient when battling monsters, in architecture they could take their time.

Maybe I should pick up ashen building. It’s probably much more durable than whatever most houses are build with anyway.

She reached the open field right in front of the tunnels leading into the mountain, turning around and briefly looking over the city.

It looked like the people were mostly content with whoever the new ruler was. *Ziva, was it?*

Now who are you? Ilea thought and looked straight at the man currently watching her. He stood about a hundred and fifty meters away, their eyes locking.

A hand moved through his black hair as he smiled. He winked and vanished.

Should I run now, or find and kill him? Ilea thought. She saw something appear in her sphere and turned her head towards the apparition.

A much more subdued change appeared behind her. Nothing she would miss after her bouts with Eve.

She turned there instead, ignoring the illusion of the man now standing behind her. “Who are you?” she asked.

His camouflage dissipated as he bowed. “Impressive. Most impressive. Apologies for the display, Lady Lilith. I could not resist, despite knowing of your prowess.”

He was clad in light armor, the pieces connecting seamlessly, some parts covered with fine fabric. Not a single part looked damaged or in fact used at all. Everything was colored in the darkest raven black. He smiled at her, showing perfectly white teeth.

[Mage – lvl 214]

“To answer your question,” he said and straightened. “My name is Levi Walken, a friend, I hope, and an associate to both the man called Sulivhaan and a certain head Administrator.”

“And how exactly does that involve me?” Ilea asked and turned towards the tunnels, starting to walk.

The man stepped to her side, keeping a respectful distance. “The rebellion was a success and already your influence here is growing. The funds and resources transferred from Ravenhall will

make the difference here between complete and utter anarchy and the beginning of a hope carried by the leaders of Dawntree.”

“I was informed that these resources came from both Ravenhall itself and a major benefactor by the name of Lilith. I was quite surprised when in fact it turned out that I had met her before, fought by her side even.”

Ilea stopped walking, looking at him with a questioning glance.

“Indeed. The fields of Ravenhall, opposing the horde of demons summoned to this realm by none other but our own. It is the only logical conclusion. Nobody else could have managed such under the nose of the Elders, were it not an Elder himself.”

Does he want me to tell him who did it? Ilea wasn't sure if every Shadow knew about Adam. She had assumed word would have traveled. At least in their own ranks.

“But I digress. It is no surprise as such that the one who orchestrated this marvelous maneuver of usurping one of the last remaining independent cities of the west to show herself, finally, at the very center of deceit. The one to end ceaseless corruption and abuse of power, using not her very own strength of magic but instead the will of the people!”

Ilea crossed her arms. “Can you pipe down a little?” she asked, seeing a few people who turned their way. “I don't know who the fuck you're talking about. I'm just here to settle an old score, and level some skills.”

He squinted his eyes, a spark going through his deep orange irises.

Levi rubbed his hands together and rejoiced. “Of course! Not a quest for geographic domination but a personal feud unanswered for centuries, nigh millennia! Planning that would drive the weak minded mad!”

Ilea was about to vanish when she saw another character appear on the scene.

“Another one,” she sighed and summoned herself a mug of ale.

“This the one?” a gravely voice asked from behind the black helmet.

“Indeed... you have found the one behind it all, the mastermind. This is no other than Lilith herself, the one wielding ash and death,” Levi said in a whisper, leaves appearing out of thin air before they flew past as if there were strong winds present.

“Oh my fuck. I really don't want to be part of this,” Ilea said and teleported deep into the tunnel, repeating the spells a few times until she passed the lightly guarded wall to the Root. Nobody even noticed her when she appeared behind an inn clad in ash armor.