

Chapter 816 Request

Ilea appeared in a dimly lit cavern, on a plateau overlooking a deeper section of the dungeon.

‘ding’ ‘You have entered the Veilmark dungeon’

Trian wore his armor, glancing at them for a moment before he turned back towards the somewhat distant sounds of battle. He held up one finger.

“*Sorry for the intrusion,*” Ilea sent. “*How are they doing?*” She stepped forward, her mantle forming if only to shroud her a little in the dim surroundings. Jagged rocks jutted out from the ceiling and floor, the faculty of the Medic Sentinels activating their magic in the potentially dangerous environment, seeking some form of cover as not to interfere with the training of their students.

Ilea watched from a distance, seeing a group of battle healers face a four legged ice magic wielding creature with three heads. It vaguely resembled an oversized cat with next to no fur, four eyes on each head. Various injuries showed on its body, the spells it used obviously outclassing what the Sentinels could throw back but the five healers had surrounded the monster, slowly working to injure it further.

“*Good. It won’t be long,*” he answered, keeping his eyes forward.

Ilea leaned against one of the jagged rocks, stepping back when she heard an unsettling crack. She watched the Sentinels back off one last time before two of them rushed forward, one covered in rock armor, the other in ash, their kicks breaking the hind legs of the monster, eliciting a loud screech and a wild ice magic breath attack.

The others moved in and finished the beast with precise and calculated strikes, the creature left unmoving half a minute later.

One of the healers collapsed, Trian raising his hand when she was about to vanish.

“*Don’t. They’re fine,*” he said.

Ilea hesitated. “*Are you sure?*” She watched as one of them appeared next to the downed Sentinel, their palms towards their injured teammate before the latter shot up with a gasp.

They checked their surroundings before punching their own chests as a sign of celebration.

Trian turned around and gave her a glance. “*They’ll find their own way back. With their trophy.*”

He looked at the group of gathered people. “So what is this about?”

Kyrian stepped forward and summoned the root. “This.”

“I see. You talked about it already?” Trian asked.

“Briefly,” Ilea said.

“What’s that?” Sidney asked, stepping closer as the group gathered, no longer about to intrude on a Sentinel training exercise.

“The Bluemoon Root. An Elixir based on the one Ilea used to become an arcane healer,” Kyrian explained.

Lyza whistled and grinned. “Can I see?”

“Here you go,” Kyrian said and threw it her way. “We can grow it now. Takes some time and effort but with the resources and nature mages we have, supply won’t be an issue.”

“The risks,” Trian said.

“It would elicit a drastic change,” Orthan said. “Do we know how strong the effects are?”

“The Meadow deems it safe. As safe as an Elixir could get,” Kyrian said. “But we haven’t tested it yet.”

“I’m sure plenty of the new students would fight each other to be the first,” Orthan said.

“That doesn’t mean we should use it,” Trian said, giving him a pointed look.

“I understand,” Orthan spoke. He considered. “I understand, Trian. I know what nobility does with this kind of resource. We all do. But if something like the Meadow considers the risk minimal, we should definitely offer the choice. The group we just saw bested a creature eighty levels above their own, at least. Just because it seems more glorious to die against a monster doesn’t mean it’s any more meaningful than dying to the effects of an untested Elixir.”

“I don’t necessarily agree,” Ilea said.

“For new Medics, either would be a choice they make,” Orthan said.

“Arcane healing,” Lyza said. “The mental effects could boost resistance training massively, let alone any other benefits it may have. You’re not exactly around to test often, Ilea.”

“You didn’t ask,” she said.

“You have more important things to do,” Lyza spoke, twirling the root in her hand. “I think the choice is obvious. We offer it, informing about the risks. And we give them the best possible chance of survival. If the Meadow and Lilith can’t protect them from dying, then we’ll know it’s unusable.”

“I won’t have a Sentinel die to something stupid like that,” Ilea said.

Lyza glance at her. “Then make sure they don’t, or would you deny them the same choice you had once taken?”

“I had no choice,” Ilea said.

“But the risks were considerably higher,” Kyrian said. “Lyza is right. We shouldn’t withhold this opportunity. Not with all the risks they’re taking as is.”

Ilea opened her mouth but Trian raised his hand towards her.

“With you, the Meadow, and our Sentinels, we have the best medical support anyone could wish for. Elixirs are dangerous, but deaths are rare. If we can train arcane healers... we could help tens of thousands of people with ailments inside their minds, and the training itself... I can only tolerate the way it is because it is their own choice. Let us give them a choice.”

Ilea didn’t like it, though she understood that she was being selfish. Even if the death rate was the same thirty percent as the Bluemoon Grass had been, she knew many would want to take the risk. It

was true that their dungeon explorations brought with them high risks as well, risks they not only tolerated but encouraged.

Ilea knew the risks were likely much lower than what the Sentinels went through on a daily basis but it just didn't feel right to her. Eating a root and dying just sucked. Dying to a monster sucked as well, but the outcome wouldn't exactly surprise anyone.

"If it's someone we chose to join the Sentinel Corps, they'll make it out alive," Sidney said.

"Confidence doesn't make a fact," Ilea said.

"We should all be in agreement," Trian said, looking at her. "And we should know that low level Sentinels could die because we offer this choice."

"I say we give it to them," Orthan said.

"Agreed," Sidney said. "And nobody will die."

"The benefits far outweigh the potential risks," Lyza spoke. "I agree."

Kyrian gave Ilea a glance and shrugged. "If I had the choice six years ago, I would've taken it, even with a higher risk. I know many would agree."

"Healing the mind would be a major boon to any Sentinel. I don't want to see them in danger, but taking risks is a major part of any Sentinel's life. It will be a choice that may forge their will," Trian said. "If Ilea and Aki agree, so will I."

"I don't like it. But I know I'm being emotional. Out of everyone I'm the last that should complain about taking unnecessary risks. So if everyone else agrees, I'm fine with it," Ilea said. She opened a gate to Iz and put her head through. "*Aki, can we get an Executioner down here?*"

A silver machine joined them a few seconds later. It glanced at the root, Kyrian explaining the circumstances.

Green eyes glowed in the dim cavern south of Ravenhall. "I will not deny our Sentinels an opportunity for growth. Inform them about the risks, and let them take it."

And so we start again. Let's just hope the nature mages and the Meadow are not wrong.

"I'll let you know when we have our first volunteers," Kyrian said.

She nodded. "I'll be there."

"Ilea, a word," Aki said.

"One second. Who wants to go back?" she asked the others.

After a quick confirmation and check in with Claire, Ilea teleported the entire group into the Head Administrator's office.

The Executioner hardly had space in the room, crouching down to not scrape against the ceiling. Claire gave Ilea a look then waved everyone out.

"*What is it?*" Ilea sent to the machine.

"*A job. If you're interested. Agents of the Dark Protector have contacted us. Both as a warning and to seek assistance. The corruption found in the Descent has made its way out into the North, Feynor forces and worse apparently infected. Several settlements have already been lost,*" Aki explained.

Ilea rolled her eyes. *“Of course they would take the corruption and fuck it up somehow. They don’t want your machines there?”*

“My machines are scouting already. The Meadow has yet to see any corrupted creatures in its domain and will protect it, but we don’t know how far it spread already. My main objective will be the prevention of a large scale infestation, though agents to counter the corruption have been studied since Hallowfort has come into contact with it, more resources allocated to this task as of now,” Aki spoke. *“We know the forces of the Dark Protector are scrambling to contain the infection themselves. This request is specifically for a force capable of destroying large numbers of corrupted, some perhaps at a high level. My machines could take on this task, but your insight and reputation may give us more knowledge on the situation.”*

“I can check it out, sure. Think they would tell me more than you?” Ilea sent.

“Great. And yes. Your reputation in the Plains is extensive but names and legends have even more meaning to the long lived beings of the North. I believe the Dark Protector would value your participation. The agents are waiting in Hallowfort. In the bar called Abyss,” he said.

“I know the place,” Ilea said and opened a gate to the domain of the Meadow. *“Cheers, Claire.”*

“Bye,” the woman said with a wave, her eyes fixated on the documents before her.

The Executioner came through with her, teleported away by the Meadow instantly.

“To the Abyss, if you would,” she sent to the tree and local mid range teleportation provider.

“Of course, my lady,” the Meadow replied, Ilea deactivating her space magic resistance in turn. She appeared inside of the dimly lit bar a moment later.

Various heads turned her way after she had appeared next to the counter. Black eyes glanced at her, some fiery red, others with no eyes at all but strange antennas instead, feeling the air, or space itself, she didn’t know.

“Nice to see you here. It’s been a while,” Haiden said, his cat ears twitching slightly as he glanced around the room.

Does he think I need protection? Ilea thought but didn’t mention his reaction. *“I’m afraid I won’t be staying for long. One mug of ale, please,”* she said and summoned a silver piece.

He smiled and filled a mug using the tap.

Ilea turned around, leaning against the bar which for once didn’t elicit a groaning sound of straining wood or metal. Dim blue magical lights illuminated the space, wooden benches, chairs, and tables distributed throughout the establishment. Dozens of dark ones were drinking, some eating, some playing cards or dice. Coins and various glittering objects sat on a few of the tables, hooded or armored figures sitting or standing. Watching.

Slow music came from a group of beings, all of them holding curved string instruments in their limbs. It sounded traditional to her, though the slow beat gave it a foreboding and dark atmosphere. Perhaps fitting for what the adventurers or locally scavengers would do once they left here. A den of experienced warriors, thieves, and killers.

And yet she knew the most terrifying creature present was her.

Everyone knew.

She took a drink from the ale.

“Anything else?” Haiden asked.

“Yes. There are agents of the Dark Protector here. I’m here to meet them,” she said.

He grinned slightly, his canines showing before he pointed to a table in a corner of the room.

Four hooded figures sat at it, tentacles coming out from two of their cloaks, dark red eyes taking in the other patrons. The third member of their group was larger, their muscles nearly bulging through the cloak, a large curved blade made of a dark blue metal strapped to their back. The last one had no legs, its eight near white eyes shining out from under its cloak, towards Ilea.

“Thank you,” she said and established a telepathic connection. *“How have you been anyway?”*

Haiden didn’t visibly react. *“It is far safer thanks to the Meadow. More patrons with the gates. Nothing much otherwise. I cannot complain.”*

“That’s good to hear,” Ilea sent as she walked over to the group of dark ones, the music continuing in the same ominous manner. *Not exactly jazz, but maybe the environment just begs for something a little more fitting. Dark caverns and all.*

She sometimes forgot that the northern surface was generally not traversed at all by its inhabitants. Not without using the crevices and cracks in the landscape.

She stopped in front of the table and took in the four figures. Three remained without a reaction, tentacles moving slightly from within two of their hoods. The fourth and largest one turned her way, raising two thick and pale arms to pull back its hood. Below was a bald head covered in the same near white skin, two slitted yellow eyes taking her in. It had no nose, instead two small holes, giving its face a rather flat form, the skull however just as thick as its muscles.

It smiled and started speaking in a deep voice. “Greetings! You must be a Sentinel who took the job. You’re certainly strong, though I don’t know what a Deviant is. Were you informed adequately, or has your team not arrived yet?”

[Earth Mage – lvl 272]

“I’m Lilith,” she said and smiled.

His eyes grew wide before he stood up, nearly throwing aside the chair before he clutched it and hastily apologized to the table nearby, bowing slightly with his massive form, his words warm and joyous before he turned back to Ilea. His arms spread wide. “Lilith! The savior of Hallowfort herself. Ah, today truly is a blessed day. Forgive my stupid inquisition. They call me Bromot, the burrower. Or Bromot the mighty,” he said and leaned in closer, continuing in a whisper. “I’m sure some call me Bromot the tiny, or Bromot the insignificant. But you surely know the issues with fame.” He didn’t sound arrogant, instead genuinely empathetic.

Ilea smiled at him and sipped from her ale. “It’s nice to meet you, Bromot. I understand the issue is somewhat... currently happening, and surely escalating, given the nature of the concern. Should we move on?”

“Ah, but haste is the downfall of the powerful. Let me introduce those with me,” he said and pointed to the six eyed being Ilea couldn’t quite perceive. It wasn’t that it hid itself from her skills, the creature was simply not quite as present as the others. “Veisann. The one who will find our enemies.”

[Divination Mage – lvl 310]

The being blinked with three of its eyes in quick succession, whispering in a fleeting magic infused voice and in a language Ilea did not speak.

“It greets you,” Bromot helpfully supplied.

Greetings, Ilea sent to its mind with the appropriate thought associated.

The being bowed slightly, its eyes squinting slightly in what she assumed to be an amused manner, though she saw no mouth or other facial features.

“I am Devara, and this is Nitolsh,” the first of the tentacle faced beings spoke, their hoods remaining. “May we speak in private?”

She felt something familiar around it, but couldn’t quite tell what it was.

“*Is this private enough?*” Ilea sent.

His eyes widened slightly. “*Yes. We are to scout out the closest settlement overrun by infected. And you will destroy them. That is the adventuring contract which is offered. Bromot, I, and Nitolsh will provide protection to Veisann.*”

“*Reasonable. May I ask what you know about the infection or how it got to the Feynor?*” Ilea said.

Devara remained quiet for a few seconds. “*Those considerations are not part of the agreed contract.*”

“*Fair, so let’s go and destroy some corruption, before it spreads further,*” she sent. *Not even blaming the Feynor directly. Did they play with the biological weapon left behind by Vor Elenthir?*

Ilea didn’t much care for the why and how. The Accords would be interested, especially Hallowfort. And she could find out what she could, but mainly, she wanted to prevent another surge of corrupted creatures.

The group spoke amongst themselves in their language before Bromot looked her way. “We are ready to leave when you are. The journey to the border of the affected territory will take several days, except of course you have a faster way.”

“*Do I have a faster way?*” she sent to the Meadow, the link still established.

“*That depends on which territory is affected,*” the Meadow sent as a board of stone started forming next to Ilea, a map etched into it in mere seconds.

“Where are we going?” Ilea asked.

Bromot smiled, his eyes opening a little wider before he took a step towards her and pointed at a location on the floating map of stone.

“*There are Taleen dungeons present but according to Aki, it would hardly make a difference compared to your flight speed. As the revelation of the Taleen network and its continued use is not certainly information the Dark Protector currently has, I suggest you fly,*” the Meadow sent.

“*Can you aim me in the right direction once we’re out?*” she asked.

“*Certainly,*” the Meadow spoke.

“Perfect. We’ll fly. You are ready? We will vanish in five seconds,” she said.

The group stood up, glancing at each other and her as she waited.

Five seconds passed before they appeared floating above the northern landscape.

The group activated various spells, looking around for storms before Devara glared at her. "This is not safe! Why have you brought us into the open?"

"I know the direction. I'll protect you from the storms, don't worry," Ilea sent as she extended her Mantle to each of them, finding only Devara resisting. She squinted at him and smiled, realizing now what had felt familiar. "You are a space mage," she said.

"That is none of your concern, Lilith," he spoke.

"Accept the mantle," she said, summoning a small white flame onto her index finger.

Bromot gasped. "It's true!"

The divination mage whispered something, moving a little closer.

Devara's eyes widened as he looked at the flame, mesmerized for a moment before he looked at her. "Very well. I accept your protection."

Aki wasn't wrong about the legends. Some benefits at least. She charged her wings as she moved her ashen limbs around the group to get them closer. Let's see how bad things are.