

Chapter 748 Competition

Ilea watched both the fight and Roland, the man constantly getting up when Lily got close to her opponent.

The girl faced an experienced barrier and fire mage, the man using similar combinations as Claire did, though with an admittedly less destructive outcome. He lacked the same methodical approach and planning but tried to make up for it with legwork and teleportation. It didn't quite work out.

Ilea watched the girl get trapped inside a dome, fire erupting inside. She felt magic surge next to her, everyone around scrambling to get away but she just put a hand on the Berserker's shoulder. "*She's fine. I've seen her take worse,*" she said straight into his mind.

The man gripped his axe and ground his teeth. He stood up but found his arm held back by Ilea.

She just let him attack her, slapping away his strikes with one hand while holding him back with the other. "*Look, she's already back out, and he just used up a bunch of mana,*" she sent, looking between the man and his daughter.

Roland kept striking her but his eyes wavered, finally focusing back on the girl with slightly burnt skin, once again rushing after the teleporting mage.

"What is..." he murmured, finally snapping out of it.

"It's fine, sorry everyone," Ilea said to the guards that had gathered around them and the people looking between the fight and the calming Berserker. She helped him sit down again, his entire body tense and sweat covered. He was heaving for air.

Ilea considered healing him but she could tell he was fine. His lungs weren't the issue, nor was there anything else wrong that she could see. Her grip on his shoulder softened. "*We can leave at any time.*"

She kept looking at him for nearly half a minute, the battle changing to a desperate hunt between an injured Lily and her continuously more exhausted prey. Roland kept watching.

His aura flared from time to time but he didn't lose it anymore. Not entirely at least. Ilea relaxed when he sat down and kept watching, the tension leaving his body until he nearly slumped.

The fight played out, Lily finally catching her opponent after an ill chosen teleport destination. The exhausted mage could do little to defend against the wolves that now bit into his arms and legs, Lily ending the fight by holding her knife to his throat.

"There you have it," Ilea said as the announcer praised the Savage Wolf.

Roland watched in silence as Lily raised her knife and bowed to the cheering crowd.

Ilea wondered if the girl actually had a chance to win the pre two hundreds. "Can I introduce you to a friend? He might be able to help you out."

Roland looked at her before he turned back towards Lily. He wiped at his eyes and took in a deep breath, nodding ever so slightly.

“And we can figure out a place for you to stay in the area. Looks like you could use a break,” Ilea said and touched his shoulder. She teleported them towards the terrace and left Roland to get Trian.

“*Hey, do you have a moment?*” she sent to the man.

He sat with Catelyn, a glass of wine in his hand.

“*Of course,*” Trian said and excused himself, teleporting over.

Ilea quickly explained the circumstances and the limited knowledge she had on Roland and his background.

“*And you thought I could help?*” he said and raised a brow.

Ilea raised her hands. “*Well... yes. You have this... calm about you. Like if I was dealing with something, I wouldn't mind talking to you.*”

“*Sure. I mean. Now that you mention it, a lot of Sentinels do come and talk to me about their worries,*” he said and scratched his short beard. “*My father used to do that with me. Listen, in a way where I never felt judged. I think it left an impression.*”

“*Sounds like a wonderful father,*” she said.

He nodded lightly. “*He had his good sides. Yes. I will talk to your friend.*”

“*Should I bring you out?*” Ilea asked.

“*That would help,*” Trian said, all three of them vanishing a moment later.

“Roland, this is Trian, headmaster of the Medic Sentinels and a good friend of mine,” Ilea said.

The man barely looked at Trian.

“It's good to meet you. When's the last time you visited a bathhouse?” Trian said and walked up to him, lightly punching his shoulder. “Come on, I'll show you around.”

Ilea smiled as she watched the two men leave together. *He would be a wonderful cult leader. Wait... fuck. No. A very shit cult leader. Absolutely unusable. Administrator yes, cult leader, no.*

She shook her head and went back into the arena, just in time to see the elevators rise up for the next fight. She grinned when sunlight reflected off blue roses.

Lily made herself comfortable in her seat, a plate with various grilled meats and corn on her lap as her pack kept the interested onlookers at bay. She didn't mind the cheers when she fought but people knowing who she was made her feel strange. Not as bad as she previously assumed. Compared to the suspicious looks she usually got from guards, adventurers, and townspeople, here she got smiles, encouraging nods, and what she thought was admiration.

As if fighting and winning down in the arena was different than fighting and winning in the wild. *Maybe it is. Because of the rules? They might feel safe here, even though that is just an illusion. Well the guards are stronger here but I could still kill someone before anyone could react.*

She came to the conclusion that the crowd around her was used to cities, and they had a lot of trust in the people that were supposed to protect them. Her thoughts were interrupted when the elevator brought up the next contestants. The fight she had wanted to see. Her earnings were already substantial, but spending over a silver coin to see someone else fight felt wrong to her. Wrong in a strangely good way. Another thought to analyze at a later time.

A heavily armored lizardman came up from the elevator, a rare sight in the Plains but if seen, usually part of an adventuring team. Lily heard they were always around when there was a fighting competition of any kind. This one looked different from the few she had seen before. He looked larger for one, and entirely calm. She remembered Lizardmen walking through Salia, suspicious and tense, obviously in an unfamiliar environment. He raised a clawed and partially armored hand, cheers resounding with the gesture.

“Malkorn!!” a man next to her shouted, entirely overwhelmed by excitement.

She was more interested in the other contestant. Edwin, who she had met a few days prior on the road to Morhill. He wore what looked like expensive armor, no scratch on it, and well fitting. The strange thing was the design. His shoulders looked like roses, the waist area looking like an upside down flower, and spikes went around his neck. *What is he doing?*

Lily didn't understand why he would choose something that looked quite as... loud. *Maybe Jyraiui chose it. I suppose for an arena fight with spectators it doesn't matter. But if he wants to hide with that in a forest... that won't work.*

“And now we have two fighters that have moved through the rounds with little to oppose them. Malkorn of Lys, and his opponent, Edwin... though it seems he has chosen to change into something... blue,” the announcer said. “The blue Rose will now meet the Claws of the Empire! Begin!”

Edwin immediately rushed forward, his blades drawn. He closed the distance then jumped back, raising his weapons in a defensive stance.

Lily's eyes went wide when she tried to follow Malkorn's movements, the lizardman nearly vanishing before his claws clashed with Edwin's swords. The man was sent a few meters back from the impact but landed with practiced ease. He deflected a few more strikes but the overwhelming power was clear. Edwin was outmatched.

And I thought he was strong already.

The lizardman now emitted a red aura. He didn't let up, pushing Edwin back until the man teleported. Malkorn followed, his next strike shattering one of the swords.

Lily stayed seated as the crowd around her erupted in cheers. She watched as a flurry of strikes ripped through the blue armor, chunks of it flung to the side. Edwin barely managed to deflect more blows as he moved backward. She could tell he made the right decisions and remained focused but Malkorn was both better and far stronger. Another strike shattered the second sword, the Lizardman grabbing Edwin's arm before he smashed him down into the ground, claws at his neck and one massive leg pushing down on the man's stomach.

Sentinels and Shadows appeared near the two fighters. “A demonstration of skill and prowess! Malkorn moves on to the next round, the blue Rose not quite able to withstand the Claws of the Empire!”

Malkorn helped the slightly injured Edwin up, the two exchanging a few words that Lily couldn't make out. The lizardman slapped Edwin's shoulder before the two parted, Edwin returning to the elevator while Malkorn basked in the cheers of the onlookers.

He didn't stand a chance. Lily suddenly didn't feel quite as confident in her abilities anymore. Sure, she had seen the beings in the North, had seen how fast Lilith flew, but she hadn't seen them fight. *What else can they do? It didn't seem like Malkorn was showing everything either.*

She considered and decided to invest a little more of her winnings into seeing high level fights. She could learn a lot from seeing their magic and fighting styles. The fighters were too far away to identify of course but just knowing what people were capable of would remind her to be careful. *And I might see ways to escape from or counter powerful individuals.*

She teleported through the masses and walked down the stairs and back into the entrance hall for the fighters. Her next fight wasn't for another half hour but she wanted to know a few things.

Lily found Edwin and Jyrai. The warrior was sitting on a bench, bending pieces of armor away and ripping out bloodied shrapnel that had ended up inside of his body. He spat out blood while the fire mage watched with his arms crossed.

“It's unlucky. I hear he's one of the strongest participants,” Jyrai said but Edwin didn't seem particularly receptive to the silver lining.

“He demolished me. If I had better swords...” Edwin said.

“You would've still lost,” Lily said as she joined them. “He was faster, stronger, better... in every way.”

Edwin grinned and took off his shoulder piece, the flower on it cut apart. It looked better this way. “Just because you're confident doesn't mean you're right.”

“How am I wrong? You're the one who sounds arrogant,” Lily retorted.

“I'm not questioning my chances to win, Lily. Malkorn is above level three hundred. He's part of the Immortal Guard. If he wanted to, I'm reasonably sure he could've killed me in a few strikes. The thing is, he didn't. He was arrogant, played around, gave me a chance to show what I could do. And all I did was have my blades destroyed,” Edwin said.

“That's not true. You deflected nearly fifty attacks before he got through,” Jyrai said.

“It's still humiliating. But you're right... it kind of was just a matter of time. An Elder of the Hand is participating, and a high level Sentinel. Plus there's that water mage calling himself Destroyer. Running into any of those would've likely been the end. But maybe I could've done more...”

Jyrai puffed. “First time I think I'm seeing you disappointed.”

“Shut it, fire man,” Edwin said. “We're staying in the city for now. I want to see the gates, and then we can look for some jobs. High time we worked on our skills and classes.”

“I've been doing that since I met you,” Jyrai said.

Edwin smiled. "Hardly. I'll get you to two hundred in no time, then we can travel to more dangerous areas."

Above three hundred, Lily mused. How does that feel like I wonder? Two hundred is getting closer. She considered asking the two if she could join them after the tournaments were over but decided against it rather quickly. Levels were far easier to gain when fighting without others around. She knew that much, her own fast growth prove of it. She had gained a few resistances over the years and her healing wasn't half bad. The risks were both manageable and more than worth it.

"Stop smiling in such a smug fucking way, girl," Edwin said suddenly, his whole demeanor different from before.

Lily was so taken aback she didn't come up with a response.

"Your were smooth sailing so far but I've seen some of your potential opponents," Edwin said.

"You don't think I can win?" Lily asked.

Edwin grinned. "I don't think I could win. Especially against that Sentinel. Whatever Ilea is feeding those creatures, it's nothing normal. If even nobility can't produce child soldiers more effective than those monsters..."

"Free will," Jyraiui said.

"Yeah, yeah," Edwin answered. "I understand how it works. What I'm saying is that the Sentinel training facilities won't be something those healers will forget anytime soon."

"If they're there on their own volition, what's the problem?" Lily asked.

Edwin looked at her for a moment. He chuckled to himself and smiled. "My pride."

"You've become surprisingly honest," Jyraiui said.

"And if you keep pointing it out, I'll go back to being drunk. Now come on, let's see if that smith is willing to repair his horrific creation. I don't think I've ever used an armor of this quality," he said and stood up, shoving a pile of blue metal pieces into Jyraiui's hands. "And we can get you something too with the winnings. First though, my swords. Good luck in your fights Lily. Don't get too cocky."

"I wont. I've seen Malkorn fight," she said.

Edwin glanced at her as he walked past. "You didn't. Not really. I suggest you watch the latter fights in the main tournament. It should be a valuable lesson for someone so confident in her skills."

"I planned to do that, yes," she said.

"Good. Try to overcome the fear, and use some of your skills if you can, to see how it feels with those monsters nearby," the man said and waved her way. Jyraiui did the same, a smile on his face.

"Always happy to play a round of cards!" the fire mage said.

She didn't plan to answer that call.

“Contestant Lily and contestant Celeste, please prepare to enter the arena. Once again, killing your opponent will lead to an instant disqualification and ejection from the city. Good luck,” an announcer called out into the hall.

Celeste, Lily watched the others as she stood up, hearing a few whispers. Her eyes opened wide when she saw someone in bone and metal armor stood up, a horned helmet on their head. *The Sentinel*.

She made her way to the elevator, keeping an eye on the woman who would be her opponent.

Her helmet was designed to look a little like a mask, the bone chipped in various places, a large mark showing where it had been burnt. The horns made her look like Lilith. She wore two belts, one around her waist and one going around one of her shoulders. Both held over a dozen differently shaped sheaths. Dark metal chains wrapped around the woman’s armored arms.

The woman looked at her, black eyes the only part of her face that was revealed. “The wolf girl,” she said, amusement in her eyes.

“The Sentinel,” Lily said, smiling at her.

“You’ve caused quite a few rumors amongst my peers. Lilith coming down to hug you. I didn’t believe it but too many people confirmed,” the woman said.

“I didn’t ask her to do that,” Lily said.

“A proud one, I see. You know her well?” Celeste asked.

“What is it to you?” Lily said.

The Sentinel laughed. “A bet. Fifteen silver to be exact.”

Lily shook her head while grinning. “I met her a long time ago. She saved my life.” She saw no reason to lie.

“Fuck,” the woman said and sighed.

“What did you bet on?” Lily asked, curious to hear what kind of options had been available. The elevator started moving now, the two contestants in the round of sixteen taken to the battleground.

“I assumed you were her child,” Celeste said.

“What!” Lily shouted. She shook her head. “Are you kidding me?”

“Sorry,” the woman said and shrugged. “I mean she’s nice to people but it was apparently quite an emotional moment. And she didn’t fight you right after, which seemed strange.”

Lily looked away, her face a little red. “Is that what she usually does?”

“I mean she’s called the Queen of Torment by some. Though I prefer Black Death, it’s a more obscure one, that,” Celeste said. “You going to join us soon? I saw you fight early on. Not bad. You’d become very dangerous with one of our Classes.”

“I don’t need the help of a Healing Order,” Lily said.

“Organization. And you’re showing how little you know if you think it’s help. Getting my Sentinel Class was the hardest thing I ever did, and I once killed a bear with three kitchen knives in the heart of winter,” Celeste said.

They were at the top now, the cheers still sounding strange to Lily. Though she was more used to the attention by now.

She walked away from the Sentinel and turned her way. "That comparison depends heavily on what kind of bear you killed, and at what level you were."

"Prowl Bear, level twenty three," the Sentinel answered.

"They're hardly dangerous," Lily said. She had seen a few herself. They usually didn't get stronger than level fifty.

"It's how I got my first Class," her opponent said.

Level twenty three... without a Class? "How old were you?"

The woman waved at the crowd, looking up to the terrace. She glanced back at Lily. "No idea. Six, seven? Those wolves shadow magic?"

Lily unsheathed her dagger and crouched. "Does it matter?"

"To my resistances, yes. And how easily I'll let them bite me," Celeste said and grabbed two knives herself.