

Chapter 745 Introductions

Ilea smiled back, though her face still covered with her mantle. The moniker given to Lily didn't just fit based on the fight she had just seen, her look made an impression too. The blood and singed parts of her clothes meshed well with the wild black hair bound together on her back. The main two factors however were her red eyes and pronounced canines. *Almost looks like a vampire*, Ilea thought. Not quite like the one she had seen in the Descent but more the idea she had from pop culture back on Earth.

"When's your next fight?" she asked.

Lily shrugged. She was still smaller than Ilea but the girl had shot up in height compared to the last time they had seen each other back in Salia. She was thin, her muscles defined. A testament perhaps to the lifestyle she had lived since the Elven attacks. "I just qualified. I'm not sure when the next one is."

Ilea glanced up to the terrace. "*When is her next fight?*" she asked Verena. The Elder was somewhat involved with the tournaments.

"*Three hours from now*," Verena replied. "*I won't tell you her opponent or switch things around.*"

"*I didn't ask you to cheat for me, Verena*," Ilea said and squinted.

"*You wouldn't be the first*," the elder said. "*I'm taking notes.*"

"*I hope you're not going on a murder spree after this thing is over*," Ilea said.

"*Me? No. I'm past that age. However economic troubles and sudden loss of reputation can be quite devastating*," she answered.

"*Alright*," Ilea said, raising her brows.

"*People shouldn't attempt to break rules. There are consequences, noble or not*," Verena said.

Ilea cut the connection. *Guess there are reasons why she was the only elder around for a while.*

"*Three hours. Got anything planned? I can show you around*," Ilea said.

Lily looked a little guarded. "I don't want your help, Lilith."

"*I'm not trying to help you, Lily. I just saw you fight. I'm asking you to spend a few hours with me, to catch up. For old time's sake.*" she sent.

The girl considered for a moment, still looking a little suspicious.

"*Heard of the Golden Goose?*" Ilea asked.

"*That famous restaurant for rich people?*" Lily asked.

"*Yeah. I know the owner*," Ilea said.

"*If it's just food...*" Lily answered.

Got her. Just like you would lure a savage wolf, Ilea thought with a grin. "Ever flown before?"

The girl shook her head, more conscious now of the hundreds of people watching all around. She gulped.

“Let’s get out of here,” Ilea said and spread her wings, casually moving her arm around the girl’s back. She ignored the growls coming from the shadows, almost inclined to growl back. *How protective*, she thought and moved her ash.

They ascended, quickly above the arena itself where Ilea hovered for a moment. She didn’t miss the accelerating heartbeat and wide eyes of the girl, nor the grip she suddenly had on Ilea’s arm. Soon they were flying above the near mountain peaks, the arena and city below almost looking like the drawing on a map.

“*I remember when I got my wings,*” Ilea said. “*Maybe my favorite piece of magic that my Classes provided. Wanted them since I saw a fire mage perform in Riverwatch. Do you want to see some of the valleys?*”

“Yes!” the girl replied.

“*I’ll go fast. Try not to pass out,*” Ilea sent.

Lily held fast, she looked up at the woman, her breath caught in her chest. Ilea was no longer covered in ash armor, her black hair moving in the wind. She wore black pants and a simple white shirt. *She looks just the same.* It somehow reassured her, despite having talked to her already. Knowing that even with all the power the woman had accrued, she still just wore these normal clothes, no crown, no glittering jewels, no fancy high quality armor.

She could feel the magic vibrate, Ilea’s black wings pulsing with power. The next moment they shot off. It took all of her strength to fight against the forces she felt, her jaws shut and her eyes tearing up. She saw green, white, and gray moving past at incredible speeds. Her vision started blurring when warm magic flowed into her. Healing. Something about it was different. It soothed not just her body, but her mind too. The motion slowed and she could breathe again. Lily couldn’t help but start laughing.

Ilea did the same, her wings moving as she brought them down into the unknown forest. She landed with a heavy impact and set the girl down.

Lily walked over to a nearby fallen trunk, shaking legs until she sat down and took a deep breath. This forest smelled different to the ones near Karth. High reaching needle trees resistant to the cold compared to the leaf covered variants that were more familiar to her. She could make out tracks of beasts she had never seen before. This was mostly untouched land.

“You seem more comfortable here. Compared to the arena,” Ilea said. The woman leaned against a tree, the wood slightly groaning.

How heavy is she? Lily gulped. “I... yes. I try to avoid... people.”

“I get that. Wings help. I think you’d love the North,” Ilea said, looking at her with an amused expression. “Maybe once you’re past two hundred.”

“The... paintings. With the storms... was that?” Lily asked.

The woman raised her brows. “Paintings? What do you mean?”

“The gallery in Morhill... about you. From the young painter,” Lily said.

Ilea looked thoughtful. “Oh.” She smiled. “I’ll have to see that myself. So you spent a lot of time in the wild then?”

Lily nodded. She didn’t feel comfortable talking about herself to others but Ilea wasn’t exactly a stranger. She didn’t really know her either but at the very least she owed her.

The woman looked at her for a while. “Hey, want to see something cool that only the most important people in the Plains have seen so far?”

Lily looked at her. *Was there a catch? But she’s so upfront with her intentions. And with her power, why would she fuck with me?* She nodded.

Ilea grinned. “I’ll introduce you to a very good friend of mine. It helps me train a lot, maybe it could help you too. Wait... maybe you won’t be able to hear it. How’s your Mental Resistance?”

“I trained with a frog species we found in a cave,” she said with obvious pride, then looked down with some shame.

Ilea leaned forward and looked at her.

She could feel her cheeks heating up. *Mind frogs. Why would I mention that to a normal person.*

“What was their level? Always good to have monsters around to train Mental Resistance. I’ll pay you for the location. The Sentinels should work on theirs,” Ilea said.

What.

Lily looked up. “Are you serious?”

“Of course. We do have Weavy and Hereven but they don’t seem particularly interested in training a bunch of battle healers. Monsters are always best. They just attack, attack, attack,” she said.

“Especially helpful if they’re weak enough not to make your brain explode instantly.”

Lily opened her mouth and closed it. She spoke in a whisper. “There are monsters that can do that?”

“Well. I don’t know. I usually kill them first,” Ilea said, two dozen ashen limbs spreading out from her back in an instant, sharp edges at their tips as they remained entirely motionless.

Lily gulped, watching the ash dissolve a moment later.

“But that’s good. Maybe you can hear it then,” Ilea said and pushed off the tree. “Have you met a four mark before?”

“A f... twice...” Lily said. She didn’t see a reason to keep that knowledge to herself. Both experiences had been terrifying.

“Really? What kind?” Ilea asked.

“I saw... at night... I woke up and there was mist all around. I didn’t move and hid... a few minutes later I saw a cloaked being float through the mist. It had no legs, only darkness in its gray hood.

Dawn Shade it said when I identified it. I just waited until it was gone but I don't think I could've moved anyway," she said.

"Interesting. Where was that?" Ilea asked. There was a strange hunger in her voice.

She wants to... no... maybe? She wants to hunt it? "Somewhere south of Stormbreach but I don't know where exactly. I'm sorry."

"That's fine. Plenty of four marks around. Could be an achievement to get my mist magic resistance to the third tier," she said.

Third tier resistances? Plenty of four marks? Lily gulped and focused on the initial question. "The second one was a high level Wyvern we found in the southern mountains. There was a blizzard out so we went into a cave. When I woke up, Roland was gone. He sometimes does that, I think he dreams and his auras activate, so he gets up and needs to kill something. I followed the monsters he had killed. The cavern went deeper than most, reaching into other systems. I found him engaged with a large Wyvern like creature, you know, the winged drakes... when we killed the thing and I got him out of his state, we heard a roar from deeper down and hid. It didn't take long for a green scaled wyvern to fly through the cavern, almost like it jumped from pillar to pillar. It had no eyes and four wings instead of two. I couldn't identify it but... I could tell... you know, sometimes it's obvious." She realized she had been rambling, unsure how Ilea would react. When was the last time she had said so much? Did she endanger herself and Ro... no. She had to think of herself. Sharing things about the monsters she had seen wasn't an issue, except when people thought she was bragging. Ilea would understand.

"That sounds like an interesting fight... but I'll leave that one to you," she said with a grin.

Lily shook her head. "Fighting a four mark?"

Ilea shrugged. "Why not? You'll get there. In time. And trust me, fleeing from a four mark is usually much easier than killing one." She paused and seemed to consider something, then just smiled. "So you won't be too overwhelmed then. Owl and Meadow are the two below Hallowfort, a settlement of Dark Ones, awakened monsters, in the far north. I would assume a teleportation gate will be available but... if you can, try to get there yourself. It's a nice journey."

Lily watched the woman raise her arm. She felt a pulse of magic but nothing happened. She squinted her eyes and moved her head to the side. Something was not right. As if the air shimmered just a little.

"Step through, if you dare," Ilea said.

If I dare? "I'm not a child, Ilea." Lily said and crossed her arms, staying where she was.

The woman rolled her eyes. "This is a long range spatial fissure that leads to the north. I'm using hundreds... now thousands of points of mana to keep it open. I'll take you back. Promise."

A promise from Lilith. And an offer to step through a spatial fissure. What could go wrong? Lily would've refused if it had been anybody else. Even with Ilea she would've refused, if not for what had happened in the past few days. She had to make her own decisions. Seeing a place only the most important humans had stepped foot in? Meeting four mark beings? Friends of Lilith? Yes. That was something she was interested in. And so she walked through the phenomenon, without pause.

Lily came into an expansive cavern and immediately felt the mana density. As if she had entered a dangerous dungeon, though she heard no noise in her mind. Steps behind her indicated Ilea having come through as well.

There were high reaching stone pillars, strange buildings, and a steel cube set into stone, as if dropped onto one of its edges. She saw glowing metal, a floating creature made of a black material, and a suit of armor much like the ones she had seen in Morhill. Lily had already unsheathed her dagger. She turned away from the two figures when she realized they hadn't even noticed the newcomers. Instead she looked towards the strange black grass that started to grow about twenty meters ahead, between the pillars. Glowing wisps of light floated around. *Some type of firefly*, she noted and blinked when she watched one of them teleport. Another vanished entirely, and a third split into three of its kind.

She rubbed her eyes.

"If you want to test your Arcane Magic Resistance, just walk towards the grass," Ilea said. "The Meadow said it's fine."

The Meadow said?

Lily looked around. She saw figures moving near the distant cube but Ilea was motioning towards the grass. She gulped and took a step forward. Then another. She could feel it, the pressure. Her breathing picked up. It was beyond most things she had felt. Walking around a pillar, she froze up, her eyes fixated on a tree made of crystal. Light reflected strangely off the form. Her pack came out but they didn't growl. They whimpered.

She too took a step back, feeling a hand steady her back.

"Pretty impressive for your level," Ilea said. "Though I don't really know. Maybe once the Sentinels are here more often. I'm sure they'll make a challenge out of it."

Lily tried to calm herself. She used her healing but it didn't really help. The mana was everywhere, and it wasn't natural. It came from the tree, the grass, the fireflies, the small creeks flowing through.

"Can it try to talk to you? It might freak you out. But I'm here to heal your mind in case you can't take it," Ilea said.

Lily stared at the tree. A part of her wanted to run away. She saw Roland, standing there, without a reaction, in the sad little cellar they had chosen to stay in. Lily nodded. "Yes."

"*A brave little soul,*" a voice resounded in her mind.

She could feel the pressure. It hurt a little, but it had been expected. "*Hello,*" she sent back.

"*Fearless, I see. I do hope you have regeneration to back that up. Ilea wouldn't have survived without. Call me Meadow,*" the being said.

"*I'm Lily. And I won't tell you about my abilities,*" she said.

"*Then you're already far more intelligent than the brute that brought you here,*" the creature said.

Ilea raised her middle finger.

"*And far more polite too,*" the Meadow said. "*I understand you're old friends?*"

"*Ilea saved my life. We haven't met in a long time,*" Lily said.

"*She has a tendency to do that. Don't worry too much about the time difference. I doubt her small brain has the capacity for development,*" the being said.

"*Don't talk about her in that way. She's nice,*" Lily said.

The being remained quiet for a moment. *“I’m just joking, Lily. Ilea too perhaps saved my life, in a way. She brought me to this realm after all, where I can meet beings such as yourself. If you have questions or require training. I’m happy to help.”*

Lily looked at the tree, though she understood the being encompassed the entire area. *“I will find my own way. But it was... impressive... to meet you.”*

“Indeed. Shall we meet again,” the being spoke.

“You left an impression,” Ilea said. *“Apparently you’re far past me in both wisdom and intelligence, but I suppose with its opinion of me that’s not exactly an incredible milestone.”*

Lily looked at Ilea and followed her out of the black grass, her breathing calming down as the mana lessened quickly. She didn’t really understand what kind of relationship Ilea had with the Meadow creature. What they said suggested different things. Lily felt a little strange. Out of place perhaps. Not because there were powerful beings around her, she mostly slept in the wild after all. What bothered her was her obvious lack of social skills. *Should I wave? Or say goodbye? But now it’s too late, isn’t it?* Every step made the decision more difficult. Her worries were discarded when Ilea introduced her to the next pair of beings.

“Goliath, Bralin, meet the Savage Wolf,” she said and pointed between them to indicate who was who.

Lily felt herself turn a little red again at the mention of the strange name the announcer had given her. *Without asking. How dare he.* She wondered if she could hunt him down, maybe rob him or set his house on fire. *No. I should still keep a low profile. A lot of people know me now, and they know I’m connected to Lilith in some manner.*

“Nice to meet you,” she said to the floating form of black metal, glowing near golden eyes taking in her form with interest.

[Master Smith – lvl 214]

[Earth Mage – lvl 200]

The other person was the one wearing a suit of armor, though this one didn’t seem very impressive. There were dents and scratches.

The smith bowed while floating in the air. *“Greetings, young human wrought in shadow, friend of Lilith. I am Goliath.”*

“Nice to meet you, Savage Wolf? Is that some kind of joke name? Though you do look rather savage,” the other one said.

She glared at him.

“A wild one, I see,” the being said and chuckled. *“Your student?”*

“Not exactly. She’s self taught,” Ilea said. *“And I think she wants to remain that way.”*

Ilea looked at her. *“I saw you’re still using the knife I gave you. Goliath is kind of the most famous and capable smith around. If you want an upgrade. If you have time for a dagger, Goliath?”*

“For the ashen guardian. Always,” the being said. *“Even if the truth remains, a dagger being one of the least interesting shapes to make. Young hunter, is that your choice?”*

Lily looked at the three beings and instinctively grabbed her weapon. *“I don’t want it.”*

Ilea smiled. "Almost thought as much."

"If I can come back... at some point. To pay for it," she said.

"A curious human. To refuse a gift, though your decision I respect. However gold is of no interest to me beyond the metal itself. Should you wish for a creation, you may bring me something of interest, and a design that is more intriguing than that of a mere dagger," the being spoke.