

## Chapter 678 Reputation

Ilea looked at the third device while Bralin looked over the mounted Armaments of Lilith.

"I like this one," Pierce said, talking into a mouth piece. A deep vibrating voice resounded from the piece she held in her hand. "None shall remain."

"*You could come. Dwarven city here. Let me know,*" Ilea sent to Feyrair, assuming she could get him inside with Bralin's help. She saw his mark but didn't receive an answer, assuming he had found something suitable to train with, not wanting to waste his daily message in case he ran into trouble.

She raised a receiver to her mouth and spoke through it. "I am your father," said a deep whispering voice with a downright mechanical quality to it. "Think I like the one you have more," Ilea said to Pierce. "I'll take it," she added, repeating the phrase with a giggle.

"Do you want to be a father?" Pierce asked with some confusion.

"It's a reference from a place far far away," Ilea said and showed the piece to the dwarf.

"Sure, throw it over, I'll install the sending piece," Bralin said. "We usually go for this part here," he added, tapping the armament below its left arm where a human's rib cage would be. "Generally hard to reach, let alone penetrate."

"You want to put it inside the steel?" Ilea asked.

"Of course. It's living armor. It will simply regenerate around the piece. Just have to make sure it's not covered entirely," he said.

"Wouldn't that create a weakness of its own?" Ilea asked.

"Normally, no. This isn't just a piece of scrap metal, it's a hardened alloy with an enchanted core that receives and creates the voice from your mouth piece. Only works with a direct connection of the same mana. I'd say that in this case it'd actually be a weakness, seeing how well made your set is. Does that matter to you? I could also fix it to your shoulder or neck, but any random area spell or direct hit would likely rip it off," Bralin explained, lifting the armament's arm with some difficulty. "Can't believe you have enough mana to power this thing," he muttered. "What are the openings on the back for?"

"You'll see," Ilea mused, handing over the piece. "Under the arm is fine."

"You'll sound like some kind of undead lich," Pierce said. "Were you inspired perhaps?"

"Hmm, well, being an ethereal wisp does sound appealing," Ilea answered. "But being in an armor like this is better. Bralin, do you have something that could emulate sight?"

"There are various tools that have perceptive qualities but nothing like what I believe you're looking for. I'm unsure why your set here didn't create anything to look through for your eyes, but there must've been a reason," he said.

*Well yes, I don't exactly need them,* Ilea thought, wondering if her own mana, her subconscious, or the armor itself had weighted protection for her eyes higher than her ability to see.

“Easiest solution is to drill a hole and stick a tube in there,” Bralin said, grabbing a nearby tube to see if its length would be enough. “But your sight would still be very limited. It’s just too thick to allow for a reasonable peripheral vision. If you don’t just want to remove the helmet altogether, which is not something I’d suggest. With living armor... there’s a chance that it will adapt to your wishes if you continue to use it. Depending on how long you’ve actually fought in it.”

“I haven’t used it much,” Ilea admitted, touching the massive titan.

“A shame, really, but not uncommon with the best machines,” he mused, smiling to himself before he looked back at the armaments. “I’ll have to drill the hole first which might take some time. You three can get drinks on the house while you wait. There’s a bar one floor up.”

“Great,” Pierce said and vanished.

Verena walked off while inspecting some of the ongoing work, glancing back to Ilea.

“Give me a second,” she said, a small ashen drill forming as she walked past Bralin. Ilea grabbed the heavy steel arm and held it aloft. “About here?” she asked. The drill now touched the side of her armor.

“Yes,” Bralin said, hesitating as he raised an eyebrow at the drill.

Ilea made the thing spin and slowly pushed it into the steel. *That is pretty durable*, she thought, her hardened ash slowly going deeper.

“I’ll be upstairs too,” Verena said with a wave.

“Sure,” Ilea answered, pausing to remake the tip of the drill.

Bralin chuckled next to her. “With bloody ash.” He looked at her and back to the hole now large enough to fit the tool.

“Any other upgrades you’d suggest?” Ilea asked.

The dwarf considered but ultimately shook his head. “Nothing I can think of to make this more deadly than it already is. Most of the power comes from you, and the speech module is already creating a small weakness. I’ll tell you what... I will talk with the boss, and try to get a deal. If you win a single match in the Dome... which you will, if you fight, you’ll get replacements for that module until you don’t need it anymore.”

“I thought match fixing was the most important rule,” Ilea mused in a dry tone. She went into her armor with the mouth piece and talked. “I find your lack of faith, disturbing,” she said, turning her massive steel head towards the dwarf.

“I trust in steel, not faith,” he answered. “And your steel will make us a lot of gold.”

“I get half of the winnings,” Ilea said in her deep and vibrating voice, her intimidation gaining at least a few bonus points with the voice module.

“I suppose that’s fair. But only if you’re announced as a sponsored fighter by this forge. Otherwise we might run into trouble anyway if you want part of the winnings not bet by yourself,” he explained.

*I’ll bet plenty myself*, Ilea thought with a grin. *Maybe not everything or I might cause the whole town to come after me.*

“How much can I reasonably bet before I’m hunted instead of paid?” she asked.

Bralin laughed, now back in his own machine. “That’s a hard to answer question. I suggest you have your friends bet in your stead. When would you be up for a fight? And what would you like to be called?”

“I’m up now,” she said. “And let’s go with Lilith. Have to spread the name,” she said, as if it was inevitable.

“Lilith, that works,” he said. “Care to have a drink too?”

“I thought you weren’t attracted to humans,” Ilea answered, vibrating impacts resounding with each of her steps.

“I’m attracted to steel,” he said, just watching her for a moment. “Who made that thing anyway?”

“A friend. Who knows, maybe I can introduce them to you at some point in the future,” she said. “What’s the look for anyway?”

He shook his head and followed. “If you could move a little more naturally, I’d take you for some legendary flame butcher, or soul warden.”

“War machines of olden times?” Ilea asked, still sounding like some kind of A list villain somehow worse written than what most indie productions manage.

“Indeed. There are those that come close in this day and age, but there has been peace for centuries,” he said.

“You make it sound like that’s a bad thing,” Ilea answered, entering through an oversized gate and into the most spacious bar she’d ever seen. It looked more like a storage hall really, but the wood, warm light, and stools added a nice atmosphere. Stools both dwarven sized and well, war machine sized.

Bralin laughed. “Ah well. It’s not, but it’s less interesting, wouldn’t you say?”

Ilea sat down on a reinforced steel bar stool, the heavy pole under the seat groaning under her weight. She decided to tone down on the increased heat generation.

The barkeeper was in a war machine too, various tools and additions to his suit that belonged to the bar itself. He whistled when he saw her, his clean shaven and scarred face currently uncovered. A metal face shield hung from the top of his helmet, put aside for now. “Haven’t seen a beaut like aht n ages,” he murmured. “An not a dent on er.”

“It heals,” the deep void of the titan replied.

“I wan no trouble, mishar,” he said. “What can I geh ya?”

Ilea ordered a few of their ales, hoping a hidden dwarven city based around war machines, arena fight, and digging an ever deepening hole to the very core of the world would have some capable brewers.

She transferred out of her armor and sat down on its shoulder, enjoying the looks of the few patrons and the barkeeper.

Her ale expectations weren’t just met but blown entirely to the moon. Each tasted incredible in their own way, the diversity surprising already but the fact that she loved all of them was the real shocker.

“You’re getting a lot of attention,” Pierce mused. “Ever been with a dwarf?”

Ilea smirked. “No. And I don’t plan to pick up someone that is drinking in a pub at...,” she glanced around, finding a mechanical clock on one of the walls. “Eight in the morning.”

“What does that say about us then,” Pierce mused.

“We’re excluded,” Ilea said. “Or do you still adhere to a normal sleep schedule?”

Verena chuckled. She had a wide grin on her face, swirling a whiskey glass around. “This is the best vacation I’ve had in a while. Thanks... Lilith.”

“The Pit has a lot to offer,” Bralin said as he relaxed on a massive bench, leaning his armored back against the wall.

“Speaking of which,” Ilea answered. “The massive hole, can we just go down there and kill a bunch of monsters?”

He shrugged lightly, taking a sip from his pint. “You can. But I suggest signing up with the guild first. If you happen to finish any jobs or find treasures, it’s a much simpler process to get paid. Granted, you’d make more if you had a lot of connections and sold everything yourself but you don’t strike me as someone who’d be interested in that.”

“Yeah, the guild sounds better. We can go there after,” Ilea said.

“I can take you there. It’s not far from the Dome registration,” Bralin said and downed his drink. “I’ll check with the boss and be back in ten, twenty minutes. Sound good?”

Ilea smiled. “It is... acceptable,” she said, speaking through her receiver. She sipped on her ale. “God I like this shit.”

Bralin laughed and walked off. “Drinks on the house, Grahn.”

The barkeep nodded. “Figured.”

Ilea summoned the locator when nobody looked her way and made it vanish again. “Hmm.”

“Where is it?” Pierce whispered.

Ilea formed words with ash, moving them onto the counter. *In the town*, they said.

“Hmm, still want to go down into the pit?” the Elder asked.

“Of course, I need to kill a bunch of powerful monsters, and where better to find them than in some ancient dwarven pit dug out for millennia?” Ilea said.

“You will doom this town,” Pierce said. “And I’ll be there to watch it happen,” she added, a lute in her hands before she played an exciting tune.

“You play the lute?” Ilea asked.

“Gods, not again,” Verena murmured and downed her drink, refilling with the bottle she had already gotten.

“Well, for all those lacking levels, I have to have at least something to show,” Pierce said. “Ah my fifties were quite... exciting. Just well, not in terms of dangerous monsters.”

Verena downed another drink.

“You’re immune anyway, what’s the point,” Ilea asked.

“If you think whiskey is just there to get drunk, you shouldn’t be allowed to drink it,” Verena said.

“Fair enough,” Ilea replied, enjoying her ale.

They didn’t have to wait long for Bralin to return, a few war machines following him into the bar. They were obviously wearing higher quality armor than him, but Ilea found none even close to his real level.

“So yer Lilith,” one of them said.

Ilea downed the last pint in a single go and vanished into her armor, the machine powering up as her mana and head spread through it. She found herself a little taller than the others. “I am,” the deep voice said.

“The V-830. A good choice. Though a mount would’ve been better if you plan to fight with it,” the lead dwarf said, glancing at Bralin.

“She knows about the weakness,” he replied. “Hence the replacement deal.”

“And what if she loses?” another dwarf said.

“He’s got a feeling. That’s why he’s shouldering half the risk,” the first dwarf said.

Ilea caught a grin on Bralin’s face. *Smart move*, she thought, hoping now that she wouldn’t disappoint all of them with a subpar performance. “Four days, that’s when I will go into the Dome.”

“Doesn’t matter when,” the head dwarf said and nodded. “Bralin, ye know I trust you. The machine is good, I’m just concerned about the pilot.”

Ilea appeared outside of it. “Hmm?” she mused, her voice freezing everyone without a second tier Veteran, which was, most of the patrons. Bralin and the barkeep could still move, as could a few others, but not the group in front of her. She spread her wings and slammed her fist into the thick steel plate without issue, lifting the heavy machine up for it to meet her eyes. “The machine isn’t what you should fear.”

She let him fall and vanished, her armaments heating up again. “Let’s check out the Guild,” she said, stopping in front of the group, all of them stepping aside to let her pass. *Hah. I did the thing*, she thought with a wide grin. *I’m a cowboy now. Or something.*

Bralin followed and burst out laughing when they came out onto the road. “Wonderful performance. Ah what a good day this is, what a good day.”

“Just wait until you see me get splattered by one of those cannons,” Ilea mused.

“If you manage to get into the higher ranks of the Dome... you know what, I’ll pull a few strings and make it happen. As absolutely stupid as it is,” their guide said.

“You’re still underestimating her,” Pierce said. “She’s like some kind of indestructible manifestation of my failings. Maybe she’s not real at all,” she added and touched the armaments, dodging the heavy arm that came for her.

“Do not resist me,” Ilea’s voice boomed as she took a step towards the woman.

“Please, ladies,” Bralin said, getting a glare from Pierce and a blank featureless face from Ilea.

“Know what, I don’t care.”

“Good choice,” Verena said.

Ilea gave up quickly, the Elder simply too much to handle with her speed. Instead she just displaced her into her massive steel hands. “Now you are mine.”

Pierce opened her eyes wide and grinned when her body started to get crushed. She moaned, in an entirely exaggerated manner.

If anybody nearby hadn't stared yet, they were staring now.

Ilea threw her at a nearby building, the Elder slapping against it like a piece of raw meat, her victorious laughter echoing through the street.

“You know I could've just snapped off your head?” Ilea asked a few streets farther down in the bowl like city.

“Ah, I wish,” Pierce mused.

“You cannot defeat her,” Verena said. “Believe me, I've tried.”

“Who are you people anyway?” Bralin said.

“Do you know the Shadow's Hand?” Verena asked.

“The mercenary order, from the southern plains. Yes, but it's rare to see members up in the stormlands. It's been decades since I last met one of you,” he said.

“It's a surprise that you've met any at all,” Pierce said.

“We're Elders in that Order. And Lilith here, well she's a little more than that,” Verena said.

“Heavier for sure,” Pierce said.

Ilea stopped walking. “No you didn't.”

Pierce glanced back, crossed her arms and sighed. “Okay. I take it back. I'm sorry.”

Verena stared at the woman with wide eyes before she looked at Ilea. “A living deity,” she whispered. “That's what she is.”

“I wouldn't question it,” Bralin said. “As long as she can fight as well as her level suggests.”

The two Elders looked at each other.

Ilea huffed into her receiver, towering over the others with a smug air of superiority. “Ah by the way, I don't plan to kill anyone in the Dome.”

“That works. Unconscious is a win too, or getting them to submit,” Bralin said. “It's just much easier to kill someone.”

“I will, find a way,” the titan said, balling its metal fist.

“Those poor fools,” Pierce mused. “I'll be cheering them on.”

“Why would you not cheer for me?” Ilea asked.

Pierce glanced at her. “Isn't that obvious? To see their hope turn to ashes, as you demolish their machines and break their bones.”

“Four days. I can help you train if you like,” Bralin said. “To make sure you don't look like a wobbling child piloting an advanced set of living armor.”

“I’ll figure that out in the pit,” Ilea said.

“You’re aware of the risks. Sure. Real experience is always better. Good luck,” he said and laughed.

Bralin led them into a large stone building, stairs leading up to it. Several massive gates were built into its rectangular side, all of them open. The war machine density was much higher here, dozens of the large armors sitting or walking around.

“Do we have to do a test or something to join?” Ilea asked, getting a few looks but nobody here seemed stupid enough to ridicule her.

Bralin huffed. “No. Just need to register. We don’t hand hold our adventurers like you lot.”

Ilea thought of the Sentinels and laughed. “Sure,” she said and walked up to one of the counters.