

## Chapter 792 Ripples

“When is all this going to be announced to the public?” Walter asked, looking towards Trian and Claire.

“Some of it is happening as we speak. Aki is moving the Guardians into every city of the Accords, and deals are being prepared to offer machines to various allies. It won’t be as simple as teleportation gates, with how dangerous the machines actually are, but they should be allowed for various services like monster subjugation,” Trian explained.

“Like mercenaries?” Lucia asked.

“It really just depends on what the various countries and cities are comfortable with. They are controlled by a member of the Accords, which means most wouldn’t replace their guard with them, but they could fulfill a lot of tasks. For very little gold,” Trian said.

Lucia looked at Walter. “We could use a few of them here too. The undead are just too stupid for most tasks. And granpa bones’ skeletons only dig.”

“You should be able to order Guardians from any city of the Accords soon enough,” Trian said.

“I can’t imagine the chaos that will cause,” Walter murmured. “You’re replacing so many professions with one fell swoop.”

“The same was true with the gates,” Trian said. “More people will be able to pursue complex tasks instead, the study of magic, art, performances.”

“Cooking,” Ilea added.

“Yes, but you’ll have unrest, with machines replacing entire businesses,” Walter said. “And poverty, with thousands unable to work.”

“The Accords will provide basic housing and food to everyone that lives in their cities,” Trian said. “It’s necessary, and those who are no longer able to support themselves will have to either push their governments to provide the same, or move to one of our cities.”

“And you can provide... all that?” Walter asked.

“Easily,” Trian said. “Eregar’s Haven is an incredible source of food, nature mages providing more than enough already for nearly twice our current population. Parts of the Descent will be added to it, maintained by more mages and the Meadow itself. With the teleportation network, most of the required logistics fall away too. We already have prices of common foods dropping massively all throughout the Plains. And housing... well, Morhill is still growing, as is the underground of Ravenhall. The Meadow has been expanding on Hallowfort since its arrival, but most importantly, we now have access to dozens of Taleen cities, including Iz itself. Wealth or a sought after profession, maybe a position in the guard, studying magic, or being a Sentinel, will all provide more luxuries, but basic needs we can cover.”

He drank from his mug and took in a deep breath. “Yeah, even with thousands arriving in Ravenhall every day... they might have to wait for a few days or weeks, maybe in a dwarven city or in Hallowfort, but they’ll get a place to stay. Earth mages and architects will be more than busy in the coming months, I imagine.

“Of course we’re hoping the economic pressure will push other countries to provide similar things. Most should have benefited greatly from the gates, and if they employ Guardians for a few menial tasks, it will open up a lot of resources they could spend on their people. Not that all of them will of course, but the pressure remains. And we’ll happily take everyone in,” he said.

“It seems... very generous,” Walter murmured.

“We have the technology,” Ilea said. “Why wouldn’t we provide those things?”

Walter laughed. “There are plenty of reasons.”

“Oh, I know,” Ilea said.

“Walter, I don’t think you quite understand the scope of the Guardian army,” Trian said. “There are millions of machines. And thanks to the gate network, they can travel between cities in mere seconds. Housing and food provisions were merely added as a basic necessity. We’re discussing the removal of taxation for most individuals that live in our cities, free education in magics, free martial training. The gates alone have connected the Plains and the few settlements outside... it’s only been months and we’re struggling to invest the gold flowing into our cities. I have the feeling our resources were already comparable to the Empire of Lys, now we eclipse the entirety of human civilization.”

The barkeeper leaned back a little before he chuckled.

“You didn’t mention the production facilities,” Ilea said as she continued eating.

Claire rubbed her temples before she topped up her drink with liquor. “There is so much to do.”

“It’ll be fine. Aki and the Meadow are on the job,” Ilea said. “We can celebrate a little. Take a few days off.”

“No. How could I miss these pivotal days,” Claire said. “This evening is more than enough, after that it’s back to Hallowfort. There are treaties to be written, meetings to be attended... plans to be made.” She leaned down to rest her head on her hands and grinned.

“She’s lost,” Ilea said.

“I kind of get it,” Train said. “The world is changing. And let’s be honest, you’re at the center of it all.”

“Eh, I just survived some heat and put a dagger where it could do some good,” Ilea said.

“You also got a tree back from another realm,” Kyrian said as he raised his mug. “And me from those islands.”

“That too,” she said. “But stop it, I already have a fucking cult following.”

“And you managed to befriend not only the Cerithil Hunters, but the Taleen in turn. You’re basically a god!” Trian said before he laughed.

“Stop,” Ilea said.

“But yes, you’re mostly useful because of your incredible resilience,” he said. “Immortal god of toughness maybe? Invincible Lilith?”

“How about just Ilea,” she said.

“To a changing world then,” Celene said and raised her glass.

“*To Lilith,*” Weavy said.

“To the Accords, and everyone in it,” Ilea said, raising her mug before she downed the contents.

Lucia smiled before she tapped Walter’s arm. “Dear, it’s time. Get your lute.”

He smiled and stood up. “I wrote a few new ones. Might just be the occasion to show them off.”

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Syrithis sat motionless, taking deliberate breaths as Heron read through the official announcements sent out by the Accords. Rarely was she as glad for her mask as today. She could tell even Alyris was impacted by the news.

“... the Sentinel of Akelion, a member of the Meadow Accords and ally to the Medic Sentinel Corps has taken control of the remaining Guardians and their facilities. Any Guardian activity within the territory of the Accords and its allies is thus to be tolerated. Any attacks on such machines will be seen as an attack on the Accords. Potential additions to trade agreements and provided services will include...”

Syrithis balled her fist as a ringing came to her ears, the sound drowning out Heron’s words as her vision blurred ever so slightly. She took in another deep breath, feeling her heartbeat speed up. For once she didn’t care that the Generals and nobles of Lys saw more of her than the cold guise of an Immortal Guard.

*Did they do it. Father... I... the Hunters. The Taleen are no longer in control of their machines. The Cerithil Hunters have fulfilled their purpose.* She tried to wipe at her face but the mask blocked her hand, the tears rolling down into her armor. She took in a deep breath and shuddered slightly. Her vision cleared a little. She saw Alyris looking her way, the silver eyes of the Empress grounding her. Her hair was open today. She wanted to go over to her, wanted to kiss her, wanted to shout and laugh.

*Later, she reminded herself, steeling her mind as she smiled to herself. Were you there in the end? Isalthar? Or was it Lilith herself who fought the machines, who defeated the previous controller?*

“... currently yet to be public information includes the addition of the dwarves of Io to the Meadow Accords. They shall benefit from the same rights as other members of the accords as stated in article 18b of the general work treaty, article 28 of the open trade agreement, article...”

*Dwarves of Io. Io.* Syrithis tried to remember if she had heard the name before. She opened her eyes wide when the name clicked. A goddess of the Taleen. Her father had taught her about more than just the machines they had faced. A minor goddess, she remembered. One that stood for shelter. Shelter and survival.

“*Alyris. The Dwarves of Io, I believe they are the remnants of the Taleen,*” she sent to the Empress.

The woman looked at her, no reaction showing on her face. Alyris knew what Syrithis knew. They were perhaps the only two people in the room to understand the true extent of this news. The

potential addition of the Taleen to the Accords was an unknown so far, little being known about the dwarves, let alone in recent history. They had to learn more. The Guardians however.

“How dangerous are the Taleen machines truly?” General Anderson asked. “I have not faced them in my travels, though I have read of them.”

“They are quite formidable,” General Karrick spoke. “Many are in the two hundreds, some reaching level three hundred. Though I have only visited two ruins that contained them.”

*Children*, Syrithis thought.

Alyris stood up, the gathered nobility quieting. She closed her eyes for a moment before she looked around the room. “We have to assume that this... Sentinel of Akelion, is capable of destroying the entirety of our Empire. Perhaps the entirety of the Plains.”

Others were standing up now, mutters and whispers offered in response.

Alyris slammed the table with a ring, a pulse of magic rushing out. “I declare a state of emergency until we have gathered every scrap of information that will provide a clearer picture. Activate every spy and spare no expense to find out... what the fuck, all of this entails. This meeting will not end until we have addressed every possible agreement, treaty, and outcome. Gather your allies and call in every favor. This might very well threaten the existence of our very Empire. Now focus, and get to work.”

Syrithis smiled and watched the hall explode into motion. The meetings during the siege of Virilya had been calm, the Empress rarely speaking up as the Generals decided on resource allocation. Never had she heard Alyris talk in this manner. And the message was clear.

“*Syrithis*,” Alyris sent through the established connection.

She stood up and stored the ceremonial robe around her armor. “*I will find her.*”

“*Be careful*,” the Empress sent.

Syrithis felt blood rushing to her cheeks, raising her head a little higher. “*I will. For you. For our Empire.*”

She turned to find Felicia Redleaf among the nobility, teleporting next to the woman before she bowed lightly. “*Major Redleaf. I wish to speak to Lady Lilith.*”

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Helena pushed her magic to the very limit, drinking another potion as she flew through the western forests. The night was clear, the moons shining down with pale light onto the lands of Elos. She wasn't far off now, the distant outline of Karth visible through the lines of trees. Again, she checked her surroundings, finally slowing down when she heard the roaring river in the distance.

The third crossroads. She hovered in the shadow of a tree and looked out onto the quiet road, grass and flowers already growing where fewer boots were traveling as of late.

She raised a hand to her mouth and called out, the imitation of the hornwood owl only one of many calls the Sweets had to perfect in their training. Helena felt a shift in the shadows and looked down. *She's good. Even I couldn't spot her.*

"Mistress," Eyan spoke, her hair dyed brown and put up in a braid. "How long have you traveled?"

"Three hours," Helena answered. It was a risk, but using the Accords teleportation gates was more dangerous, considering the possibilities. She had read the words, had understood the implications. But she had to see it herself. For once she would not sit behind her desk and direct her spies. They had been losing ground, but the supposed addition of the Taleen machinery was not something they had ever considered a possibility.

The Accords were moving too fast, their power growing too quickly. Soon there would be nothing to stand in their way.

Eyan gulped.

"Tell me," Helena said.

"H... hordes. Thousands... perfectly organized. They don't just patrol the city, but have entered the surrounding forests, working together with the local guards and adventurers to wipe out monster populations. Some of the dwarves are already here. It is likely that they are indeed the descendants of the Taleen. I have sources that suggest there are survivors from their height of power," the spy explained.

"The contracts?" Helena asked.

Eyan shook her head. "Lilith has met them. They arrived in Riverwatch and joined the Accords mere hours later. There was nothing we could do. Nobody even knew who they were."

"Betrayal?" Helena asked.

"Not enough information," the woman said.

"Your gut?"

"Those I saw were elated. To see the suns, to speak to the people of Riverwatch. They examined the gates, ate their food, shared their magic. They had been trapped or imprisoned, and the Accords have to do with their freedom. Perhaps directly linked to the takeover of the Guardians," Eyan explained.

*A debt of freedom. With time their loyalty will be unquestioned.* The had to act quickly, had to offer alternatives, deals. But what was the alternative? If they undermined the supposed loyalty of the Taleen, they could not offer anything to gain their trust in turn.

"Anything new on the Sentinel of Akelion?" Helena asked.

"Unreliable sources. He is supposedly the Guardian of Iz, the capital of the former Taleen power. I believe the name is not merely suggestion. It seems the Sentinels are at least familiar with this being," Eyan said.

*A direct link to their healing organization.* She shook her head ever so slightly, absentmindedly touching the tree next to her.

"I can no longer safely enter the city. Their spy master remains," Eyan said.

"Wayland," Helena murmured.

She nodded.

Helena assumed he was the sole reason their information wasn't current. *To think he's so close to Nipha. The sheer audacity.* Few people would both dare to and have the capability to obstruct the Golden Lily. Wayland, was one of those people. *And we wouldn't even be high on his list of targets.* She ground her teeth.

"Mistress, do you wish to see the machines?" Eyan asked.

"Yes. Extend your shroud, and show the way," Helena spoke.

She felt the magic move around her, the two assassins moving through the forest at a slow pace. Already she could spot several moving figures in the distance, some holding torches. Groups of Riverwatch scouts. Helena slowed, seeing the six legged machines moving alongside the armored humans, torchlight reflecting off the dull green metal.

Their eyes shined in the darkness, six arms ending in blades displaying their purpose as they moved with lithe precision. Mere Guardians, machines Helena had fought and destroyed in the past, though those were not the ones she feared. The reports from the battle of Riverwatch had been extensive, and the previously thought apex of the Taleen Praetorian was found to be eclipsed still.

The sound of rushing water grew distant as they walked through the forest. Eyan stopped, the two of them looking out from the underbrush. Torchlight shined from the walls of Riverwatch, six armed machines lining the defenses, green eyes visible in the darkness.

Helena looked up to see group of flying figures, dark wings contrasted against the moonlight. Following them, she saw a silver form, two armed and moving through the air as if running on the ground. It carried a metal box, larger than a wagon. The group was gone in seconds.

"They're going towards the grounds I wanted to show you," Eyan said.

"We follow them," Helena said, remaining in Eyan's shroud. "Keep your magic active," she said and grabbed the woman's arm, flying up and above the trees before she looked towards the winged human. She focused on the trace of magic, and followed.

Less than a minute, and the group made landfall, Helena landing close enough for them to see, the shroud coupled with her own hiding spells protecting them from detection.

A small area in the forest had been cleared of bushes and trees, machines standing guard. Dozens of Guardians.

**[Sentinel Guardian – lvl 200]**

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**[Battle Healer – lvl 258]**

**[Battle Healer – lvl 250]**

**[Battle Healer – lvl 254]**

**[Battle Healer – lvl 260]**

**[Sentinel Executioner – lvl ???]**

“You already prepared the place?” one of the healers asked in a hushed tone, looking at the silver machine.

“Of course,” the large being spoke.

It moved the metal box and put it down with a dull and heavy sound. Helena watched as its right hand flowed into a new shape, parts of the strange fingers inserted into what she assumed to be locks. Enchantments sizzled and deactivated before the Executioner removed the top and started taking out massive pieces of stone.

*What are they doing?*

“I’ve seen that material before,” Eyan whispered. “In a Taleen dungeon.”

“Where exactly?” Helena asked.

“Their teleportation gates,” the woman answered, her eyes on the machine.

“I can feel something,” one of the healers said, turning in their direction. “It’s feint, probably a monster.”

“Let’s check it out,” another said.

Helena had already left with Eyan in tow, hearing the last of the words as she flew through the forest in perfect silence. *There are gates in Riverwatch already. Which means they’re expanding another network. The ancient one of the Taleen.*

“Resume your mission,” Helena said after they had flown for a while.

“I will. Good fortune, mistress,” the assassin said before she vanished.

“And to you,” Helena whispered.

Helena stood between a set of trees. *Several three mark humans, war machines, the Meadow, Fae, and Liches. How is humanity to oppose such an overwhelming force?*

She closed her eyes and sighed. *Perhaps it is time I consult the Founders.*