

## Chapter 787 Votes

*"You didn't mention me,"* the Meadow sent.

"Right. And we have the Meadow," Ilea said.

"I consider the Hunters an incredibly valuable potential addition. If not as members of the Accords themselves, then as allies," Aki said.

"I agree with that assessment," Catelyn said. "They may not have a stable hierarchy or codes and laws we understand as of yet, but with the Meadow guarding over the Descent, I believe the risks are more than worth the potential benefits."

"I agree," Alistair said, eliciting a few raised brows.

"I suppose it would be interesting to have them in the Dome," Helwart said. "What do you think?" he asked, looking behind him at the gathered war machines.

A few chuckles resounded. "Aye," some spoke.

"Humanity has suffered at the hands of elves, most prominently from the Fire Wastes of Ash. But our situation has changed. Dramatically. We can respond to threats near instantly, and the military might of the Accords was considerable, now it may be comparable to the Domains themselves. If we can learn from the Hunters, we will know about a potential enemy we have previously been unable to even spy on," Claire said.

"So we vote," Catelyn said. "Those in favor of allowing the Cerithil Hunters to relocate to the Descent under the eyes of the Meadow, raise one arm."

There were a few who voted no, including Sulivhaan. Though each faction total still accepted the vote.

Ilea didn't consider it a huge thing. She understood the personal gripes some might have with elven kind but at least intellectually they should understand that the Hunters weren't quite the same as the ones who had attacked their cities. She hoped they would come to accept the Hunters with time, or at least not go as far as to undermine the Accords. Even then she thought the risks worth it.

*"I will keep an eye on the Hunters,"* the Meadow spoke. *"You will all find regular reports delivered to you."*

"What if they attack a member of the Accords?" Sulivhaan asked.

"The Accords will move to defend whoever is under attack, against any inside or outside aggressor," Aki spoke. "As is declared. We are considering potential ties, which is difficult based on their lacking hierarchy, our understanding of their lifestyle, and perhaps even their nature. That does not mean we won't respond in kind."

"Aye," Helwart said, crossing his arms.

"Now that the most problematic topic is dealt with for now, let's get to the last major news before we discuss general points and suggestions," Catelyn said.

"There's more?" Sulivhaan asked, tapping the table with a finger.

Catelyn looked to Aki.

“Indeed. With the defeat of the previous Guardian of Iz, it was revealed to me that the Taleen are still very much alive and well. They have been relocated to a city called Io and have remained there under the surveillance of Guardians for thousands of years. Me being the new controller of said Guardians leaves them free once more,” Aki explained. “They were kept *safe* from outside aggressors, though very much against their own will.”

Helwart stood up, the knee of his war machine ramming into the table, lifting the thing up before the Meadow pushed down with its magic. “You’re shitting me.” He took off his helmet and looked at the Executioner. “Tell me this is some sick joke.”

“The Taleen remained hidden away for thousands of years?” Elana asked.

“You should be the last one surprised at that,” Ilea said.

Elana raised her brows but didn’t comment.

“Deep underground, those dissenting taken out and the rest left with no choice but to remain in their city. There were quite a few rules but compared to how the Taleen used to treat their own prisoners, it was rather comfortable,” Aki said. “Lilith has already established contact and managed to create favorable conditions for a possible diplomatic exchange. Though this will take the whole of the Accords to consider. Few remain from the ancient power, but much of their knowledge remains. Underestimating their faction based on their current relative might is a mistake.”

“Why not be rid of them once and for all?” Helwart asked. “They’ve been a pain in everyone’s asses all throughout history.”

“*They’re a neutral faction. Not an aggressor,*” the Meadow spoke.

“Right, right,” the dwarf said. “I’m not suggesting mass murder. Just maybe a relocation. Not that that would help if they know how to build teleportation gates. How many are there anyway?”

“About four hundred thousand,” Aki said.

“Yeah. Now that’s a number,” Helwart murmured.

“Do they wish to reclaim their cities and machines?” Sulivhaan asked.

“They are aware of their position,” Aki said simply.

“So we’re giving them a chance to build up their power until they can take back what was theirs,” another dwarf said.

Doravin laughed. “Let them try.”

“The Accords forbid an act of war against a neutral faction not engaged in any activities that would endanger any of the members. Even then it would require every faction to agree,” Catelyn said. “Which doesn’t leave us with a lot of other options to deal with this. We either let them build up their power, train and educate their youth to consider us their enemy, the thieves of their ancient power, or we integrate them. Each faction would benefit, and while some of their oldest generation will not like the outcome, they don’t have a choice. Not right now.”

“If they know we’re not going to wipe them out, they could simply refuse,” Sulivhaan said.

“One of them cried when she drank mead,” Ilea said and looked at him. “They’ve not been outside of Io. Most were born there.”

“We can offer them access to teleportation networks. To cities all over Elos. To their old homes,” Claire said. “To education and resources.”

“Pride is not something easily forgotten,” one of the dwarves said.

“Nor are bonds forged in battle, or kindness given freely,” Catelyn said. “They will be visiting cities throughout the Accords, will form adventuring parties, will fight monsters, and build homes. Just like we have. It will take time, but with their current strength, this is the best opportunity that we’ll have. The longer we wait, the more certain future conflicts will become.”

“All our organizations too. Sentinels, Shadows, Divers of the pit, Hallowfort Scavengers, guards, cooks, hunters. They don’t even have to travel to get there,” Ilea said. “I was not treated as an outsider. Not for long. They aren’t united against anyone.”

“We should move quickly then,” Alistair said.

The vote came and went, unanimous this time.

“I suggest a first meeting in Riverwatch,” Aki said.

“Why not here?” Helwart asked. “Or in the Pit. Let them see the technology we have built.”

“Those we have to convince are sure of their technological superiority. Or so I believe. However Riverwatch has many things they have not seen in thousands of years. Including sunlight,” the machine said.

“We’re dwarves. We don’t exactly thrive on it,” one of the other war machines said.

“But you do go out sometimes, even with the storms,” Helwart said, glancing back before he looked to the Executioner. “Machine has a point.”

“We would be honored to host such an event,” Alistair said.

“And the Accords will provide suitable security,” Catelyn said. “We should let them know we don’t have to rely on their creations.”

*Bit of a difference between a few level two hundred guards and an Executioner, Ilea thought but she agreed with the point regardless. “Do they know how extensive your army really is?” she sent to Aki.*

*The Executioner didn’t look her way. “No. According to a series of sources stored within the Sphere, the Guild of the Guard were mainly the ones operating the machines. Few of them controlled more than three at a time. The One without Form had a lot of time to build and extend its reach. Were it not for the constant war with the elves, the numbers would be at least ten times higher.”*

*“The Hunters and Domains really did some work,” Ilea sent and nodded to herself, though she herself had destroyed at least a few thousand of their machines.*

*“Indeed. I have yet to fully comprehend the production capabilities of the Taleen network, but it is extensive to say the least,” Aki sent.*

“Lilith, is it possible for you to deliver the request to meet in Riverwatch?” Catelyn asked.

“Sure,” Ilea said.

“I suggest everyone here participate. Alistair, how long do you need to prepare?” Catelyn said.

“A few days. With help from the Accords and associated factions, faster. Two days I think is suitable,” he answered.

“We will need at least that long to figure out the baselines,” Claire said, rubbing one of her temples.

“The Accords are growing quickly,” Helwart spoke. “The Sentinel and its Taleen army, Hunters, and now the ancient dwarves themselves.”

“Two days,” Catelyn said. “Prepare yourselves and your peoples as you deem suitable. We shall postpone this meeting until after the talks with the Taleen, except anyone wishes to discuss something else right now.”

Nobody raised their voice.

“Then we will see each other in Riverwatch,” she said.

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Nathan sighed as he looked over the valley near Riverwatch, the Sentinel sitting atop one of the larger buildings near the eastern part of the outer wall. The Shadowguard mostly ignored Shadows and Sentinels on the roofs, most of the buildings owned by either anyway. Today looked to be a particularly nice morning, the suns rising over the mountains, most of the valley and the nearby lake still shrouded in the morning gloom.

They had returned from Riverwatch, the threat of the Taleen apparently gone for now. Why that was the case, the Headmaster had yet to share with them, but he assumed it had something to do with Lilith. She had shown up after all. For now he just wanted to enjoy at least half a day off, before Celeste bugged them to get another mission. She just couldn't sit still for more than a few hours, always more monsters to fight, always more places to explore.

He didn't mind much. Well he was annoyed from time to time, but he liked that she pushed them to do more, to fight more. The world was growing larger by the day. He still thought about the war sometimes, the Baralia soldiers attacking his village. The reason he had come here, to Ravenhall. In search of something. Surviving at first, and then perhaps a purpose. Something he could do, to prevent others from experiencing what he had gone through.

He took a bit from his sandwich, though really more to appreciate the taste than for anything else. Ravenhall had the best food after all, and he had to get something while he was here. Food and sleep was growing less important with every few levels, he could tell. He got up earlier, and felt less tired. Ate less and felt more powerful. Nathan looked at his hand and closed his fist, smiling as the suns moved, rays of the second one now starting to mix with the first. A part of the lake started to reflect the light, near gray snow turning a bright white as the day commenced.

He did a double take, looking at the distant forest, squinting his eyes when he saw something strange. *Is that*. He gulped, standing up when he saw several groups of flying Sentinels and Shadows rush into the city, coming from the direction of the teleportation gates outside. One of them split off, letting go of the one that carried them before they rushed over the buildings. It was Celeste, a huge grin on her face as she jumped and landed on the roof he stood on.

“There you are,” she said. “Always lost in thought, missing out on everything.”

“What happened? Did you find another interesting monster to fight?” he asked, more bothered by the glimpse of silver he had spotted in the forest. He checked again but there was nothing.

“Aki is back,” she said. “He just visited Riverwatch.”

“I didn’t know he had left,” Nathan said.

“See, you’re missing everything,” the woman grinned. “Well he’s here too. Probably still waiting until the guards and shadows are informed,” she said and looked out towards the forest. “Though it would be funnier if he just moved in with a few hundred machines.”

“What do you mean?” Nathan asked, once again spotting a few glimpses of movement in the forest.

“Want to go check it out? You saw it too just now,” Celeste said, pointing to the thick line of firs.

Nathan could feel a strange energy come over the streets below, guards normally going about their patrols now running, talking in excited voices. Shadows landed on the walls, calling out to the guards stationed there.

She grabbed his arm. “Wings. We’re gonna find him.”

Nathan shook his head but activated his magic anyway, the woman holding on to his arm as they flew up. More people arrived from the direction of the gates, some flying, others jogging.

“To the forest, and don’t start chucking fireballs,” Celeste said, squeezing his arm as she giggled.

He raised his brows before he started towards the trees. *Aki returned. Several hundred? What exactly is happening.* He assumed he would find out soon enough, bringing them down right before the underbrush. Again, he spotted movement.

“Who is in there? Show yourself!” he shouted, not about to enter the dark forest when he could rely on backup from the city out here.

“Come and see,” a strange voice spoke from within.

Nathan glanced at Celeste before he looked back. “No.”

“You’re no fun,” the woman said as she walked forward, rolling her eyes.

“Why would we give up all the advantages we have out here,” Nathan murmured.

“You have always been a cautious one, Nathan,” the voice spoke, closer now.

Nathan heard movement a few meters away when he saw two green eyes shining out from the darkness. Another three sets joined the first one a few seconds later.

“I’m trying not to startle the guard. Though I believe it will happen regardless,” the familiar machine spoke.

He looked at it. *A little different. It’s not the same body. And there are many.* “Careful, Cel, those are Executioners.”

“Yeah, I know. Like the one that nearly killed me. Which means training with them will be particularly efficient,” Celeste said, smiling as she vanished into the forest.

“Pursuers remain more powerful,” the machine said. “And Nathan, do you not recognize your teacher?”

“But you’re not supposed to be more than one,” he said.

“Ilea can make ashen copies of herself. Why should I not be able to control more than one machine?” the Executioner spoke as it walked a little closer.

“More than one... I can see at least five. And there are more moving farther back,” Nathan said.

“Five is a good estimate,” Aki said as he stepped out into the open, the sunlight yet to reach this part of the valley.

Nathan watched as the machine straightened, its eyes towards the walls of Ravenhall.

“They will be a great addition to the city,” the Executioner spoke.

“I thought you were supposed to stay hidden. People might get the wrong idea about the Taleen machines,” Nathan said.

Aki looked his way. “Nathan. I have taken control. I am the Taleen Machines.”

He looked at the ground and back to the city, a part of it now illuminated. He nodded slowly. “I see. Well it’s Ilea we’re talking about.”

“It is,” Aki said.

Nathan crossed his arms, hearing impacts somewhere behind him. He assumed Celeste wasn’t quite able to hold her own. “This means we can do large scale exercises.”

“Indeed. I have several plans laid out already, including sieges,” the machine said.

“That sounds exciting. I have some suggestions too,” Nathan said as he looked up at the Executioner.

The machine glanced down, its eyes glowing bright. “It’s good to be back.”

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Dale listened in silence, a slight smile on his face as he processed the new information shared by Alistair. Not only were they expecting to host the ancient Taleen and the entirety of the Accords within their city, Ilea somehow managed to take over the entirety of their war arsenal. Machines they had fought just a few days prior, now supposedly in control of one of their allies, a new member of the Accords.

He really just wanted to go home and eat some of the stew Abby had made the day before. New spices from the east, much more affordable than they had ever been. Dale hadn’t seen her enjoy cooking so much in years, all thanks to the Accords and their teleportation network. He looked up and nodded, saying a silent thanks to Lilith as the people around him asked agitated questions, talking to each other in hushed voices, the excitement growing.

*She’s probably already fighting the next incomprehensible thing. Who knows, maybe she’ll befriend the elves next.*

“... in addition to the Taleen the machines they have left behind, a group of so called Cerithil Hunters will likely move into the Descent below Hallowfort. Talks are ongoing but I deem this unlikely to fail. They are elves who helped bring an end to the rule of the One without Form, the previous controller of the Taleen machines. Considered cursed, and exiled from their own lands and Domains, these elves have fought to remove the machines that have invaded their lands for thousands of years. The members of the Accords did not vote unanimously, and I understand any concerns you might have,” Alistair spoke.

*There you are. What's next? A dragon?* Dale asked. *I can feel you reading my mind*, he thought and smiled. *One day, I'll get her. Or perhaps I already have and she didn't respond. No. That's not like her. She would appear out of nowhere and laugh, before inviting herself for dinner.*

“Langston,” someone said, all eyes on him when he looked up.

“Apologies,” Dale said.

“I know it's a lot to process. Will you be alright?” one of the officers asked.

*You have no idea. She knows a little Fae she calls Violence*, he thought and nodded. “I'm fine, sir. As you say, sir. A lot to process.”