

Chapter 915 Watcher

Aki watched through the eyes of an enhanced Centurion, the modifications allowing him to use the less complex machines to communicate and see directly through them. Less resource intensive than building a Praetorian or anything more complex.

“Yes, sir. A scar right here,” the man said, touching his face. His skin was unblemished, as healthy as could be.

“He always used to have irritation too, on his back, tell the machine, Gerett,” the woman said, pointing at him.

“Right,” he said and took off his shirt, turning around as he tried to point. “Gone! Decades, I’ve had that.” He laughed. “Lilith be praised. I thought I would die there, under that rubble, and here I am now, feeling ten years younger.” He flexed then did a jump, raising his fists before he punched the air.

“Don’t overdo it Gerett,” the woman said, a pleading look on her face.

“What exactly do you mean when you say you feel younger? Can you describe it to me?” Aki asked.

“Well it’s just. Energetic, you know? When you get older. There’s just this feeling. And now, I feel invincible. Know I’m not, but it’s great! Thought about taking one of them classes in the Academy, or becoming an adventurer even,” he said and laughed. “Joking obviously.”

Aki wasn’t sure why the man specified. He seemed perfectly able to do either of those things, granted his current level was low, but training and fighting would lead to results. In a way he was glad the man hadn’t stormed off already to fight monsters, Ilea’s concerns about a mental influence would have to be reevaluated in that case. “Have you had similar thoughts when you were younger? Becoming an adventurer?” Aki asked.

Garett thought on it for a moment, then smiled. “Yeah. Before my twenties. But then, you know,” his voice trailed off, the smile gone from his face. He sighed. “You know. Traveled east once, to see distant family. Were attacked on the road. Nazarks they said.” He shook his head. “It’s not really important. But yeah. Used to want to be an adventurer. Not a mage. A broadsword. Wielded with both hands,” he said and did the motion of a sword swing. “But that’s over. I work at the brewery now. Rewarding too, and much less dangerous.”

Aki nodded and watched them. “Thank you for your time.”

“Of course,” Garett said and slapped the Centurion’s metal arm. “You keep us safe. Anything to help.” he said. “Don’t suppose you drink ale?”

“I do not, but appreciate the gesture,” Aki said. An amusing thought. He supposed with all the different beings of the Accords visiting Riverwatch or even living there now, people just couldn’t be sure anymore as to what someone could or wanted to eat and drink.

Aki said his goodbyes and left. He had interviewed and checked seventeen of the beings healed by Ilea’s True Reconstruction spell, and the stories were similar. Age old back pain that even healers couldn’t help with had vanished. Hair loss, tooth pain, scars, a bad knee, all gone since the attack and subsequent healing. And all the humans past their mid twenties said they felt more energetic,

putting more emphasis on it the older they were. One forty year old barkeep even said he felt like he looked younger, though he wasn't sure if it was just a trick of the light.

"What do you think?" Aki said, a small part of him now present in a Praetorian in the domain of the Meadow.

"After examination, there doesn't seem to be any change the subjects interpret as negative. I should check everyone who is willing, as should the contracted healers and mages, before we finalize any conclusions and move on to further testing," the Meadow replied.

Aki accepted, knowing that healing, let alone something as complex as cosmic energies were nowhere near his expertise. And still, he felt like this magic could help tens of thousands of people. And it could help them now.

He understood the precautions and saw the rationality in it, though in practice, many would be willing to accept certain risks to receive treatment for their often life changing injuries and disabilities. With Ilea's ash copy, she didn't even have to be there personally, nor did he see a problem with asking her for help. He was already preparing warehouses in Morhill to gather first priority recipients, ready to start when they received permission from the Accords.

He knew that once the word would spread, thousands would rush to receive this healing. And he would handle the logistics. With Ilea's power, he assumed she could appear in a warehouse and heal hundreds in the span of a few minutes, perhaps even less, though they would have to test if extended exposure would have a different or more profound impact.

"What if she can really reverse natural aging?" he asked the Meadow.

"The implications would be vast. Lifespan extension from a higher level is already present, though more difficult to achieve. Too difficult for most. However I'm optimistic. With the resources at our disposal, we can give people more opportunities. Overpopulation and an over reliance on this magic may create issues, and even if she wanted to, Ilea lacks the ability to counter heal the aging of millions of citizens, let alone that of a growing population. I believe beings should be incentivized to reach level two hundred to mitigate this possible future problem, but allocating resources to such considerations should be a low priority for the time being," the Meadow sent.

"I agree, though the impact could be vast. We should have this conversation again when we have more data available," Aki said.

While he continued his four other individual conversations with the Meadow, Aki received a request from one of his Watchers in the west.

A part of his attention shifted, seeing through the machine and perceiving the last ten seconds of its sight.

Dark clouds hung over the mountainous landscape, purple lightning striking down occasionally. His eye rotated, zooming in on the fast moving winged creature flying through the clouds. Audur was on the hunt again. Less than a minute later, he saw the dragon dive down, vanishing behind a set of mountains. He kept his distance, having slowly mapped out what the being considered its domain in the past weeks. They had no plans of aggravating the dragon, but Aki had increased his presence throughout the continent to try and keep an eye on the movements of dangerous beings. His failure to detect the movements of Verleya five days prior made him allocate considerable resources to improve the scouting and detection capabilities of his machines.

One part of his attention shifted to a research facility deep below the sands of the Isanna desert. The massive hall was lit by green magical lamps, courtesy of the One without Form. Engineers from the Pit and Io were present, aided by Aki's machines and dozens of scholars from throughout the Plains and Hallowfort. They all listened to the presentation of a contracted Vampress from the Courts.

Silver tubes and metal pieces were laid out in front of her as she explained each part of the rifle.

"... the propelling enchantments then activate due to the pressure build up generated by the blood infusion inside of the first pellet."

"And the trigger merely acts as a mechanical release?" one of the Taleen engineers suggested.

"Indeed," she confirmed.

Murmurs spread through the crowd, words uttered ranging from simplistic to genius.

"Is there a way to change the design from a blood fueled device to other types of magic, or unattuned mana itself, as with general enchantments?" one of them asked.

"Our affinity led us to develop in this direction. In theory, there should be possible ways to adapt this design specifically, but blood magic is convenient, however I don't have expertise in other types of enchantments," the Vampress stated.

"A wielder would have to measure their input perfectly, or the device may either not work or the pressure would lead to an explosion of magic right in their hands," someone said.

"For experienced mages then? Or the Guardians?" another said.

"The benefits to a traditionally eastern trained mage would be minimal. We should use the knowledge of the Courts, and not try to bend their marvels to our thinking. Blood is perfectly suitable as a source of power. Even untrained and low level beings could inflict heavy damage against monsters in the hundreds without much exertion."

"They could die from overuse," another said. "It isn't safe."

"No weapon is perfectly safe."

The argument broke out as different groups split off and discussed. Aki tried to listen to all of it. The weapons produced by the Courts were advanced and dangerous, but a level two fifty ranger of the Shadow's Hand could compete with someone at a similar level from the Courts, no matter the weaponry in use. Damage output may be higher, but with enchanted armor and magical defenses, the battle would come down to resources, and just like offensive spells required mana, blood weapons required both mana and blood.

The benefits were variety, and the possibility of further advancements. Both the Courts and the Accords would benefit from change and competition. However the main benefit Aki saw in the weapons so far, was the possibility of equipping someone below level fifty, perhaps even below level twenty, with Vampire weapons, before providing high level targets far beyond what the being could otherwise defeat. While the potential lack of danger would be detrimental to growth, the difference in level would still provide an incredible boost.

A well scouted dungeon could turn into a level growth from twenty to a hundred in the span of an afternoon, though of course risks remained. But risks always remained when it came to growing in power.

For his own machines, an implementation of Court weapon technology seemed a little farther away. The Taleen had already build ranged versions of the base model, and sword guardians simply lacked the hands and understanding to wield a Court rifle. Adjusting all that didn't seem resource effective. Simply building more ranged Guardian variants was preferable.

However as an additional ranged option for both Centurion models and base Praetorians, it could prove useful. With how large the latter were, a mass produced enchanted cannon based on Court technology could prove more efficient than adding something Taleen produced. But so far they weren't far enough for even prototypes. It would take time.

A part of Aki's attention shifted, to Ravenhall, and the Headquarters of the Medic Sentinel Corps.

Celeste rushed down the stairs, already hearing shouts from the training hall below.

"Wait for us!" She heard Nathan shout from behind.

Be faster then, suckers, she thought with a grin on her face, teleporting once and right to the open gate of the enchanted stone hall.

Shouts resounded all around as she pushed past a few of the other Sentinels, quickly reaching the front of the circle that had formed around the small battleground. A glance to the left confirmed the rumors they had heard.

Vampires.

Fighters from the Courts all the way in the west. She had thought them just monsters from ancient stories but here they stood, dressed in leather coats and wielding strange silver tools decorated and enchanted to the brim. She could feel their powerful blood magic from where she stood, their high level easily grasped. A quick identify let her know they were all far above her own level, but none were in the three marks. Two of them had blood on their coats, one of them kneeling with a broad wound on his stomach. He refused the Sentinel that offered his magic to take care of the injury.

Silver pellets lay on the ground, reflecting the bright light of the magical lamps set into the stone ceiling. Celeste saw Vienna among the crowd, the Sentinel facing the injured vampire. Her face was covered in blood, her cheek knitting itself back together as she used a hunting knife to cut out silver pellets still stuck in her arm. Her eyes were cold. Focused on the Vampire. Copious amounts of blood leaked from her leg, most of her left thigh entirely gone, but she stood nonetheless.

"Did she win?" Celeste asked, turning to the man on her right. Nathan caught up and pushed past a few of the newer Sentinels.

"She did. Brutal fight," the man said with a smile. He didn't take his eyes off Vienna, his gaze one of admiration, fear, and excitement.

Celeste knew the feeling well.

"The Vampire apparently has at least eighty levels on her," a girl on her left whispered.

That's my girl, Celeste thought, looking at Vienna, one of the most senior Sentinels and already close to the three hundreds. *I wish some of the arcane ones were already at that level. They wouldn't stand a chance.*

"Did he fight already?" Luke asked as he joined the two near the front of the large circle.

Celeste looked around before her eyes went wide. He was there, pacing, behind the line of Sentinels, his eyes focused on one of the Vampires.

Fuck, he looks even bigger than last time, Celeste thought. The man covered in dense ash armor, towering a head above the nearby Sentinels and near twice as broad, his ash clad fingers ending in claws, one of his hands clutching a massive steel maw with dents visible on the weapon. He didn't speak, but just watching him pace made Celeste nervous. She felt an instinct and grinned. *Not now. He's already got prey.*

She had fought him more than once before. The last time, he had damn near killed her.

It had been amazing.

Vienna cut out the last pellet it seemed. She sheathed her knife and received a clean towel. Her short black hair was sleek with blood. She cleaned her face and handed back the towel, then she walked towards the downed vampire and held out her hand.

He grinned, pronounced fangs showing as he looked at her arm. Silence came to the hall before he growled. "You fight well." He grabbed the hand and she pulled him up, the vampire gritting his teeth as he moved.

Cheers came from the watching Sentinels, the four vampires looking around the room. Celeste couldn't tell if they were impressed, scared, or simply having fun.

"As do you," Vienna answered, to more cheers and whistles.

She didn't speak another word and walked back into the crowd, joining to watch who was next without leaving to clean herself any further. She could see, and that was that.

Celeste smiled as she watched her, their eyes meeting for a quick moment. Celeste gave her a nod, not seeing even the hint of a smile in response. Vienna gave off this calculated and cold demeanor. Celeste had been creeped out the first few times they had met and fought, but she knew there was a fire below, compassion and support for her fellow Sentinels like few others. She just didn't show it quite as openly as someone like Nathan or some of the newer ones.

The mountain of a man that now pushed past the watching Sentinels as if they were children was something different. When Vienna was cold and calculated, he was like a furnace. Wild and unhinged when he fought, just barely reigning himself in before he finished his kill.

She had asked him before, how he could do it. Be so brutal and then switch off, when his enemy was beaten.

She knew now, that he only killed monsters.

He didn't speak, stepping into the center of the battleground, his eyes on one of the four vampires.

Celeste assumed it was the highest level one present.

The vampire grinned. Silver hair that reached down his back, perfectly straight. He wore enchanted leather and black steel armor, a leather coat atop. Silver glinted from below the coat, several tools ready to be used against the Sentinel.

“No killing,” A Centurion spoke, green eyes glowing bright as the machine walked past the onlookers. “Spectators, make distance. Anyone below two hundred, find others to protect you. We don’t want a stray spell or pellet to kill someone.”

Celeste moved back with the others, the silver haired vampire remaining at the center.

Opposite him, stood Gael.