

“What do they plan to do then? Now that their main task is fulfilled?” Trian asked.

The Executioner glanced his way, its green eyes glowing a little brighter. “They are talking about that as we speak. And I believe the Accords should be a part of that conversation.”

“It may mean war with the Domains,” Claire said.

“I don’t think something like that is really possible,” Ilea said. “Not after meeting an Oracle. War with the Monarchs, maybe. Even then I don’t think the different ones will stand together.”

“And yet the danger is not unsubstantial,” Aki said. “I understand your concerns, Claire. Even the One without Form did not consider any direct attacks on the Domains and its defenders as likely to succeed. Being part of the conversation however doesn’t mean participating in an all out war with elven kind. What we need is time. If the Cerithil Hunters act too quickly, they might overextend. If only due to their nature and arrogance.”

“Sounds like some of the previous Guardian is still in there,” Ilea said.

“You have charged in here with them. I include you in that statement, Ilea. The assault on Iz has only resulted in this outcome because you had collected all of the keys and somehow survived the unsurvivable. It would be an unimaginable loss if the Cerithil Hunters attacked a Domain and were killed in the process. They have had no allied factions throughout their fight, and it will be difficult to convince them to accept any. But if they are ever open to such a conversation, it is now. I understand what that means for many humans, dwarves, and even Dark Ones, but I believe it isn’t just worth it, it is a necessity,” Aki spoke.

“Can we talk to them and see where everyone stands?” Catelyn asked. “We cannot speak for all of the Accords but we do have a lot of influence. If we plan to convince the respective Councils and city leaders, we have to know more.”

“I’ll introduce you to Isalthar,” Ilea said.

“It would be a start,” Aki said.

“More and more things to consider,” Claire said, rubbing her most certainly headache free skull. It was likely one of the healthiest skulls and brains around. Full of healing magic.

“Indeed. And I understand that this is a lot to process. However without my own creation and Ilea’s ability to get me into the Sphere we wouldn’t be here at all. These are all great opportunities,” Aki said.

“Of course. If you really have full control of all these machines and facilities, we’ll be able to achieve... I don’t even know where to start these considerations,” Claire said.

“I’m working on it,” Aki said before the machine chuckled. “But yes. The potential is enormous. Speaking of opportunities and potential. There is something else.”

Claire just sighed.

“Don’t act so mysterious, green eyes,” Ilea said, watching the lithe silver killing machine.

“Hypocrite,” Aki said.

“I’m human. Fallible. Weak flesh, and all,” Ilea said and winked.

“Understandable.” The machine winked back. “Enough time invested in humor. Ilea, you know about the core directive, and you tried to remove it. However destroying the Elves was only one of the directives. The other main one was the protection of the Taleen.”

“Doesn’t sound like the One without Form did a particularly good job with either,” Ilea said. “I’ve only met one surviving Taleen dwarf.”

“Well that is the thing. I’d argue it did a better job on that directive, though its interpretation is... questionable. Perhaps malicious, but it’s impossible for me to decipher how the One without Form developed in the past millennia, if it changed at all. It was highly complex, though artificial instead of something more akin to a copy. Perhaps it was the first of its kind... and the last,” Aki spoke.

“A better job?” Catelyn asked.

“Yes. To protect the Taleen, they were taken to a newly built facility deeper below ground than even Iz. Protected... so to say, by the very machines they had created,” Aki explained. “They remain there to this day.”

“Wait... what do you mean?” Ilea asked. “Remain. It’s been thousands of years.”

“And for thousands of years they have lived, built, educated, reproduced, and survived. Within what they came to call the city of Io. Under heavy surveillance and... security of Guardians. They remained protected, the core directive fulfilled to the very end,” the Executioner explained.

“That’s insanity,” Kyrian spoke.

“They wouldn’t have let that happen. The most powerful dwarves and most innovative minds? They would have resisted,” Claire said.

“And resist they did. The core directives prevail over single Taleen deaths. And so they were fought and killed. Those who were considered a danger to the core directives were executed, even if they did not resist at first. I could tell you the specific numbers of deaths, even the names of everyone killed, but I don’t see how that is beneficial in any way. More importantly, there are currently three hundred seventy three thousand five hundred and twenty eight dwarves living in Io. The entirety of the Taleen peoples, minus Gretmoor Valarian, the one now living in Hallowfort. Of course there is a possibility of others having survived outside of the influence of the One without Form, however it tried to fulfill that directive with the same fervor as it did trying to destroy Elven kind,” Aki explained.

Ilea whistled. “Now that’s fucked up.”

“Nearly four hundred thousand people,” Claire murmured.

“Indeed. And another potential ally. Ilea I know you don’t exactly like it but your actions did free an entire peoples. While I suggest the present members of the Accords should talk to the Cerithil Hunters, I think it best for Ilea to go to Io,” Aki said. “You do have a tendency to somehow befriend everyone you find.”

“Not everyone,” Ilea said, crossing her arms.

“Not everyone. Will you assist me anyway? I don’t think it should be the very machines that oppressed them to inform them of their freedom,” Aki spoke.

Ilea sighed. "Sure. I'm dodging every other responsibility after all."

"Any other big reveals?" Train asked, looking at the machine with a smile on his face.

"Nothing that is relevant right now," Aki said. "If you are in agreement with my assessments, we shouldn't waste anymore time. Every minute could mean a major shift in potential outcomes."

"No wonder you're so stressed out if you constantly think about all the potential outcomes," Ilea said before she stretched her arms. "So, Violence, ready to see the hidden city of Io? Or prison I suppose."

*Violence!*

"Well let's hope there isn't much of that there," Ilea said.

"They had quite a lot of freedoms. The One without Form came to the conclusion that total oppression could lead to a total rebellion, which in turn could endanger the core directive," Aki explained.

"I don't suppose the dwarves just accepted all of that for thousands of years," Ilea said.

"No. In this past year there have been eighty six executions and six hundred twenty five prison sentences," Aki answered.

"And you really think it should be me? Not someone like the Meadow? Claire? Catelyn? Sulivhaan?" Ilea asked. "Or even Alyris?"

"You freed them. And you want to see them free. Or am I wrong in those assumptions?" Aki asked.

"No of course I want them to be freed," Ilea said.

"And while you are an important figure in many organizations and structures, you do not see them as a potential asset to exploit. That I believe is why you are the best choice to explain their new circumstances," Aki said.

"Aren't you considering them an asset to exploit? With all these considerations?" Ilea asked.

The Executioner's eyes glowed a little brighter. "If you look at it in a cynical manner. Maybe. My goal is to protect the Accords and its allies. You suggested the name Guardian of Cerith. The Taleen are a part of that, and I believe there is potential for civil war, conflicts of them trying to retake their cities, conflicts with elven kind, conflicts with humanity, and the Accords. None of that would be beneficial to anyone. That is what I believe. And I believe Lilith is the best choice of a first contact with a peoples that has not seen anyone but their own in nearly three thousand years."

Ilea grinned. "Primordial Arbiter and all."

The Baron chuckled.

*Friend!*

"Yeah. Let's hope they don't try to catch and imprison you immediately," she said to the little Fae.

"There shouldn't be anyone there that you can't easily defeat," Kyrian said.

"Right," Trian said. "Otherwise they would've long freed themselves."

"They will ask for their cities and machines back," Claire said.

“And they shall find shelter in what they had once built. However they have proven inadequate to wield this power. I shall remain the Guardian of Iz, if anything to prevent another three thousand years of conflict and imprisonment.”

“I doubt they’ll be happy when they learn about that,” Claire said.

“Better than the One without Form,” Ilea said. “They can do whatever they want now. Why cling to this old power? After all this time?”

“Power is desirable, and they know what the Sphere is, what it controls,” Claire said. “This won’t be easy.”

“No. It won’t. And a large scale conflict might just be inevitable, but I do not wish to slaughter an entire city of thinking beings in a mere preventive motion,” Aki said.

“That’s a lot of responsibility you’re putting on my shoulders,” Ilea said.

*My*

*Shoulder*

“Yes, Violence. You know what I meant,” she murmured.

“I cannot force you, Ilea, nor would I if I could,” Aki said. “But I do believe you are the best choice.”

Ilea interlinked her fingers and cracked them. “Yeah. Alright. I mean it’s not like I haven’t talked to Queens and Empresses before. Plus you’re there if I’m behaving exceptionally offensive. So... is there a gate that leads there?”

“There is. One that has been inactive for a long time,” Aki said. “It is now connected once more to the network.”

“Then let’s go. Can you lead me to the closest gate?” Ilea asked.

“Good luck,” Trian said.

“Yeah you too. The Hunters can be a pain in the ass. Call for me if they attack you for some reason,” she said.

“They won’t,” Kyrian said, his green runes slightly glowing.

“No. They won’t,” Aki confirmed, green eyes glowing in turn.

*Did they just become best friends?* Ilea smiled and left through the opening gates, an Executioner leading her to a nearby teleportation gate.

The platform activated as she closed in.

“The destination is set,” the Executioner said. “Enjoy the city. It’s certainly... something to behold.”

“You’re funny. Who exactly do I talk to once I’m there?” Ilea asked.

“The governmental body is at the very bottom,” Aki said.

“Great. I’ll see you there. Don’t take over the world while I’m away,” she said.

“I will first have to fight and defeat the Meadow,” Aki replied.

“Yeah. Good luck with that,” Ilea said and activated the gate.

The space magic took hold as she deactivated her resistance, the spell somewhat similar to the one their own gates produced. Ilea appeared in a somewhat spacious hall, two dozen silver machines standing near the walls, each one looking her way. Green light shined on from above, the walls, floor, and ceiling made of metal.

“Welcome to Io,” one of the machines said. “Now that you’ve arrived, I’ll be removing the Guardians from the city. The prisoners are being freed as I speak. A few Executioners will remain here, in case my communication is asked for or required.”

“Great. Thanks. I’ll call for you if I need anything,” Ilea said as she watched the large metal gate open up. Dozens of enchantments fizzled out when the steel parted, machines already moving into the room in sync. She spread her wings and flew over them, seeing Praetorians as well as Destroyers moving past, coming from a broad stairwell leading down. She could see dozens of traps within the walls, each one deactivated. The underground corridor was lit by the same green light, another set of metal gates at the end of it all.

According to her marks, she was somewhere in the North. Pretty far east but still quite a way’s off from the Naraza mountain chain and Hallowfort both. One thing was clear however. She was deep underground. Farther maybe than she had ever been.

*And they built a city here?*

She had her mantle and wings active, flying past the hundreds of machines that spilled into the corridor from below. Ilea turned to look at the masses, soon passing two more steel gates, all open now. And finally, she could see it. The light at the end of the corridor. Not green like everything around her but a warm orange. Then red, yellow, blue, and a dozen other colors, all intermingling until she flew out into the open. She slowed down, a Destroyer flying up and past her, then another three.

She was hovering over a circular Descent much like the Centurion facility she had visited with Elfie. Even with her enhanced eyes she could not make out the bottom. Every twenty meters down there was another floor, bustling with color and life. Shops and houses had been built onto the metal railings, magical lights of every color decorating the gaps between buildings. Enchantments flared with magic as they gave life to growing plants, many of them lush with fruits, oranges, blueberries, even something that looked like pineapple. She saw trees growing out towards the central open space of the city, roots clinging to the steel.

Platforms had been added, bridges of every kind of material connecting the layers or simply reaching to the other side. There were flying machines delivering parcels, others moving people. She saw a group of young dwarven kids use hooks to slide down a set of metal wires, sparks flying out around every ten meters. Hundreds were rushing to the center to see the Destroyers and Executioners fly or run up towards the top floor of the city. Ilea could see the confusion in their eyes. Fear, hope, and curiosity. She even saw plenty of dwarves returning to their own business.

*This doesn’t exactly look like a prison,* she thought as she moved her wings, flying downwards. A lot of eyes were on her as she passed the first layer. She waved, some of the younger dwarves mimicking the gesture.

Every layer had buildings reaching from the metal ground to the metal ceiling, tight alleys leaving just enough room for perhaps two dwarves to walk past alongside each other. There were balconies on many of the houses, some close enough to touch the ones on the other side. Enchantments were everywhere, the glow of magic downright overwhelming within Ilea’s dominion, even as she flew

down the center where there were only bridges, wires, and the occasional platform reaching out into the open space.

“Who are you?” someone shouted.

“What are the Guardians doing?” another added but she was already past their level. More shouts came now as the people got over their initial shock of the changes. Some rushed to their houses, others up and towards where the machines were going, more yet went down and tried to follow the winged ashen being going down the center.

Ilea felt like a harbinger of some kind, her wings moving slowly as she descended. A Destroyer flew around her in an effort to avoid a collision. She saw Guardians and Centurions move through the layers as she passed, large metal stairwells occupied entirely by the machines. So far she saw no end to the torrent of Guardians. Hundreds of eyes were on her, some bolder individuals using the wires to follow her down, others using a flying machine or their own magic. The latter were rare.

*Maybe not a skill the One without Form allowed? Or were most higher level dwarves who could fly killed due to the danger they posed to the machine?*

Ilea came face to face with a young dwarf, the dark skinned girl looking at her with deep green eyes whilst sitting on a floating bowl like machine.

“Those are very nice wings,” the Taleen girl said in common.

Ilea smiled. “Thank you. I like the flying machine.”

The girl smiled brightly. “I made it myself!”

“Herin get back here!” someone shouted from the layer above.

“I have to go. See you!” the girl said and floated upwards.

“Sure,” Ilea said with a smile.

*The food smells fucking nice. Strange spices,* she observed on her descent, picking up speed now as she still failed to see the bottom. Ilea noted that the layers were more packed as she got deeper, fewer lights and more buildings, more platforms reaching out towards the center with homes on them as well, many were supported by more structures farther down.

It took her nearly twenty minutes to reach the bottom, in the end flying quite quickly. Still there were machines moving upwards, up until the last few hundred meters where the Guardians seemed to have already vacated the area entirely. There was no big square at the bottom but what she did see was a building that seemed at least partially inspired by the Guild hall Aki had invited the Hunters into back in Iz. A few dozen dwarves were watching her arrive, standing outside or looking out from windows and balconies.

*I guess this is the place,* she thought and landed a few meters away from the closest group, her wings dissolving as she waved. “Hey. Nice to meet you all.”

*Violence!* the Baron greeted, the Fae now sitting on her shoulder.

“No. No violence,” she said and flicked the little creature’s skull.