

Ilea spread her arms and fell backwards onto the pile of crystals, bits and pieces shattering and flying to the side. She closed her eyes and sighed. The de facto corpse of the hydra wasn't even that uncomfortable to lie on, with all her advancements.

A small impact came from her right, the little Fae who had been watching from a safe distance or from within an entirely different pocket space landed in the crystals. It mimicked the same way Ilea had fallen, though she was sure the being was quite a bit more theatrical.

To her left another impact resounded, a dozen silver threads spreading out as the hammer fell, its gem glowing with red light and magical power. She could feel the slight curse and blood magic emanating from the divine artifact.

"You need a break?" Kyrian asked as he flew closer.

"A few minutes. My mana is low," Ilea said, checking through the messages.

***'ding' 'Your group has defeated [Crystal Hydra of Izverat – lvl 1482]'***

***'ding' 'The Arcane Eternal has reached lvl 624 – Five stat points awarded'***

***'ding' 'The Ashen Titan has reached lvl 621 – Five stat points awarded'***

***'ding' 'The Primordial Arbiter has reached lvl 614 – One stat point awarded'***

***'ding' 'Eternal Huntress [Enhanced] reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 7'***

***'ding' 'Eternal Sight [Enhanced] reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 15'***

***'ding' 'Titan Core [Enhanced] reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 29'***

***'ding' 'Origin of Ash and Embers [Enhanced] reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 14'***

***'ding' 'Authority of Ash and Ember [Enhanced] reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 26'***

***'ding' 'Vision of Ash [Enhanced] reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 12'***

***'ding' 'Primordial Shift [Enhanced] reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 16'***

***'ding' 'Reality Warp [Enhanced] reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 10'***

***'ding' 'Primordial Flesh [Enhanced] reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 23'***

***'ding' 'Azarinth Barrier [Mythic] reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 2'***

*'ding' 'Monster Hunter reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 22'*

*'ding' 'Warhammer Mastery reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 8'*

*'ding' 'Warhammer Mastery reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 9'*

*'ding' 'Crystal Resistance reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 2'*

...

*'ding' 'Crystal Resistance reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 4'*

"I'm telling you the monsters in Kohr are easier to deal with than this Hydra was," Ilea murmured.

Kyrian landed nearby, grabbing a chunk of crystal. "You told me they mainly use void magic, and physical attacks. You're more than used to both. And honestly, they don't sound nearly as intelligent as this creature was. I feel like it might've evolved from a weaker being. Might've even been close to awakening."

"Don't make me feel bad for killing a monster that instantly attacked us. It wasn't close, and I'm not sure if even the Meadow could've changed anything without us moving the creature to its domain," Ilea said.

"It's fine... I just... thought it might've been nice to have a crystal hydra on our side," he said.

Ilea smiled as she sat up. "Don't be ridiculous."

"Why ridiculous? You're sitting next to a Fae and a divine hammer with a questionable level of consciousness," he said, turning his attention to the unmoving artifact.

"Alright, you have a point. Next time we find a crystal hydra we'll try to lure it into the north. Might just take a few weeks but maybe my copies would be enough," she said.

"Why not use your gates?" Kyrian asked.

"Right. That's an option. Well maybe not for that thing, it's absolutely massive. Something smaller though... sure. Maybe. But what's the point? A monster zoo for the Meadow?" she asked. "Seems cruel."

"More cruel than killing them in their lairs?" Kyrian asked.

"Yes, in fact. Way more," Ilea said. "But then I don't know how awakening works and how long something like that would take. Just seems like a more natural progression would make more sense. Maybe we can chuck them into the Descent."

"Then they'd just get eaten by the Elves," Kyrian said.

"Sure. A diplomatic gift. And the Meadow can protect those it believes to be close to their awakening," Ilea suggested. "I guess we can try if it makes sense. Let's ask Aki and Meadow about it." She spread her wings, creating a small cascade of crystals before flying up, the little Fae landing on her shoulder before she teleported and stored her hammer. "To the next dungeon."

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“Why do we still not have a storage item?” Edwin complained as they took another break. The wailing wood owl had been a disappointingly easy kill, though finding it had proven difficult. Weeks of tracking. And still it felt more meaningful than anything he had done in the past six months. It pissed him off.

He checked their surroundings, making sure no monster was sneaking up on them. They were quite a ways west from the closest human settlement. He covered his eyes, the suns bright and hot despite the canopy of green leaves above. The forest was dense and largely untouched by any civilized creatures, brown bark all around them, bushes and moss below.

Jirayu ignored him and looked away, the man knowing him too well to provide an easy target.

The rest of their team didn't react the same way.

Colt didn't react for once, but the incredibly bulky man was always up for a fight. He knew as much and liked the guy for it. A warrior focused on strength alone, looking at Edwin with the dim eyes of someone who just barely understood the concept of an axe, the ridiculous braided beard slightly coated in dried blood. At least his Intelligence was higher than Lilith's, the man far enough in his development to understand how to use tools.

### ***[Axe Warrior – lvl 168]***

*He's going to need a formal trainer for his next evolutions. And some classes in either blood magic or something as powerful. Otherwise he'll just die in some uncharted dungeon to culminating injuries.*

Edgar didn't comment, the dark skinned alchemist and earth mage crouched near a bush that looked quite similar to all the other bushes Edwin could see in their vicinity. He wondered if the clean shaven head would help Edgar level his Heat Resistance.

The man didn't need his guidance, and both of them knew he was just here for some company. He could easily open his own shop somewhere or join one organization or the other. Edgar simply chose not to. His level didn't matter. In time he would reach the two hundreds, though even now he was not a conventional adventurer in the slightest.

Edwin let go of the large monster corpse and stretched, careful not to touch the venomous claws of the massive owl beast.

“You could just ask your sister,” Sophia spat.

Edwin growled before he grinned at the muscly ice mage. “Where's the fun in that?”

“She gave you that ridiculous rose armor. You didn't whine about that, at least not since we picked you two sad shits up in Stormbreach,” she said, glaring at him with defiant eyes.

### ***[Ice Mage – lvl 160]***

The woman had grown considerably more unpleasant as soon as Jirayu had slipped and mentioned Edwin's real name and his participation in the tournament of the Accords. He wasn't sure yet if Sophia just disliked nobility, Lys Imperials, something about his perceived wealth, his power, or if it was something more personal. She was talented. Had a knack for magical battle, but she tended to be indecisive in the worst of situations. He didn't think it was just a lack of experience either, based on the stories the group had told them. A deep insecurity of some kind.

“Felicia didn’t give him the armor,” Jirayu said, his eyes opening wide when Edwin stared at him.

“Another lie, then. From the Redleaf noble. What a surprise,” Sophia said, her voice laced with malicious joy. She grinned.

“Cut it out, Sophia. You’ll get a bath soon. We should reach the frontier gate before sunset,” Sean said.

Edwin gave the ranger a nod. At first he hadn’t been sure if the ranger had offered to team up because of their high level alone, or if he had felt sorry for them. By now he knew it had been both. Edwin had seen many like him. Somewhat experienced, some qualities as a leader, calm, caring for those he considered close. And utterly without ambitions. Sean lacked the resources and pressure of a noble, his reasons to be an adventurer simply to live an exciting life with plenty of comforts.

A part of him felt envious. Perhaps a life he himself would’ve liked to have at one point. If things had gone differently. If he hadn’t been born into the Redleaf House. If it hadn’t been for his sister. Though he didn’t try to delude himself. It would’ve never been the same. And by now, he didn’t know if he wanted it. The life of an adventurer. It got him out and away from all the things he hated, that at least he could appreciate.

And for the first time since his father died, he didn’t feel like drowning in self pity.

“Who gave it to him?” Edgar asked, him and Jirayu standing a few meters to the side.

“I can carry,” Colt said, looking at the dead monster.

“Half an hour, then we switch again,” Edwin said, stepping to the side to let the large man grab on to the creature. Despite the different size, Edwin remained the strongest in their group. By far. And during their battles, he mostly took on a supporting role, as he had discussed with Sean.

“It was Lilith,” Jirayu said.

“Really?” Sean asked, the man raising his brows.

Edwin didn’t mind much. Few would believe the story anyway, fewer would give a shit.

“Why would Lilith give you armor?” Sophia asked.

“Why the wide eyes? I thought the goddess of the Accords isn’t to be feared or questioned,” he joked, stepping aside when Colt started dragging the dead beast over the overgrown forest ground.

“We met her before,” Sean said. “It was quite…” He looked up to the leaves. “I’m not sure how I could describe it.”

“She’s crazy,” Edgar said. “Not necessarily in a bad way.”

“How are you connected? How well do you know her?” Sophia asked.

*This seems rather personal. At least for her. Is she interested in Ilea? Or scared?*

“We met a long time ago. She was an adventurer, traveling near Dawntree,” he said. “The armor… I suppose you could call it pity.”

Sophia snorted. “Pity? For a Virilya noble?”

“You don’t know me, Sophia,” Edwin said in a calm voice and walked ahead.

He ignored the few questions the others asked and instead let Jirayu share whatever he felt was reasonable. The man knew some things about Ilea but he certainly didn't have the full story. And Edwin didn't plan on sharing it.

It took them the better part of the day to reach Avaria. There were no roads yet around the new settlement. A gate had been placed here by the Accords, the forest in a sizable area removed before stone and other materials were brought in through the gate. Visible over the outer wall was the burg on the inside, highly defensible and partially enchanted. The venture would've been ridiculous prior to the teleportation network, even just hiring the earth mages required would've cost a small fortune, let alone enchanters.

Yet the settlement stood with two sets of walls, stone houses added, stores and inns set up to accommodate the adventurers, travelers, alchemists, and other craftsmen that were interested in the untouched lands of the west. The settlement was located southwest of Karth, near the Karthian Gulf visible from Dawntree. Little was known about the waters due to the danger of Elven attacks. Edwin had been surprised to see so many interested in actually living in such a settlement. He assumed it had to do with the novelty and perhaps a wish of adventure. It had never been so easy to build a home so far removed from the bustling cities of the Plains, or the old static villages and towns that sprinkled the lands.

And regardless, the pleasantries, culture, and equipment made in Virilya or Ravenhall were merely two teleports away, compared to months of dangerous travel through the monster infested wilderness.

Edwin squinted his eyes against the sun, more trees already cut down around the town. He frowned and hid behind a nearby trunk. "Get down," he whispered.

The others followed suit, watching the city with their own abilities, if they had anything useful.

"What are those things?" Sean asked.

He ground his teeth. "Taleen Guardians."

"Taleen? Aren't they supposed to be down in ancient ruins?" Edgar asked, though he sounded more intrigued than anything else.

"They should be, yes. Be careful, the bladed versions are at level two hundred and they have specific attack patterns, you'll be shred apart if you're unfamiliar," Edwin said.

*Why are they here? Standing atop the walls?*

"What should we do?" Colt asked.

"If the Taleen have somehow returned... to the extent where they have infiltrated the network of the Accords, I don't think there is a lot we can do," Edwin said. *I have to get to Lys. There aren't that many... maybe I can break through and use the gate.* He needed more information but if the Taleen had invaded the town, everyone would already be dead.

"Why are you hiding?" someone said.

Edwin unsheathed one of his swords and looked at the trio of adventurers in affordable leather armor. He eyed them and shook his head, finding them to be below level one hundred. "Taleen Guardians, you should hide too, if you want to survive."

They looked at each other before a female ranger spoke up. "How long have you been out there?"

“A few weeks, why?” Sean said.

“The Guardians are with the Accords,” the woman said. “They’re protecting Avaria. And quite a few other places. It’s been pretty chaotic in the big cities. Much more relaxed here. They hunt, help build and move around stuff. Pretty useful machines if I’m honest.”

The fire mage in their group sighed. “Kind of makes me feel inadequate to be honest. There’s hundreds of them and each is at level two hundred.”

“Some are lower,” the warrior in their group said, a young man wielding a mace and shield.

“Still stronger than me. Have you trained against them? They’re insane,” the mage said.

The warrior gulped. “I have. Don’t remind me.”

“They... train people?” Sean asked.

“Not just that. You can just request Guardians for pretty much anything. Some requests are denied but they can do quite a lot and it’s very cheap. I’m sure it’s going to be hard to find any monster hunting jobs soon,” their ranger said. “The guilds are apparently negotiating. Plenty of adventurers have offered their complaints. It’s already been difficult for teams at our level to find any reasonably paid work, with the gates around.”

“Exploring the frontier seemed like the best idea,” their mage confirmed.

*The Taleen. How?* Edwin ignored their rambling, his mind racing. There were thousands of the machines. He knew of the extensive teleportation network. Arthur had gone on and on about it in the past. He himself had fought Centurions and had seen Praetorians. “The Accords control the Taleen Guardians?”

The ranger shrugged. “Something like that. Sentinel of Akelion I believe was the name I read on the notice. You can check it out on the town square. A Sentinel Centurion is sometimes there to sort through the requests. I don’t think it can talk though,” the woman said.

Edwin shook his head. The teleportation gates were one thing. *Though if they managed that. It isn’t impossible to imagine that they’d manage to take over the machines too.* His father had many theories on the Taleen, but he always believed there to be more hidden in the depths. The funding he received and the reasons he stated to his allies and benefactors had always been the teleportation network, but Edwin knew his father had hoped for more. Perhaps this was it.

He couldn’t help but grin. *Another failure, old man.* “Can you three walk to the walls. I want to see what happens.”

“You... want to see what happens? Why don’t you go yourself?” the ranger asked.

Edwin sighed. “You’re going back anyway, what’s the harm if what you say is true?” Edwin said.

“The harm is, I don’t like to be told what to do by strangers,” the woman said.

“Just fucking go back to the town,” Sophia said. “He’s twice your level, and I’ve seen him kill for less,” she lied.

Edwin kept looking at the ranger, seeing her gulp before she motioned for her team. He didn’t give Sophia the satisfaction of a glance, instead watching the Guardians atop the walls as the trio of adventurers neared the wall. He saw them move past and towards the gate.

“They’re not attacking,” Sean said.

“Then I guess it’s true,” Sophia said and started towards the settlement.

Edwin saw Colt grab the dead monster, the others moving out in turn. He shook his head ever so slightly. *These people have no idea.* He understood on a rational level that they would remain calm. Few had ever faced one of the machines, fewer knew how many there were. Even he wasn’t sure the estimates he heard were even close to accurate. If the Accords had enough Guardians to spare a few dozen to a settlement like Avaria, then there had to be hundreds of thousands.

He ground his teeth and sheathed his blade in turn. *This is ridiculous.*

Edwin kept his eyes on the machines as they made their way to the gates. They didn’t attack, neither when they came out into the open, nor when they entered the town itself. He ignored the group and went to the square located in front of the burg that towered at the center of Avaria.

He saw the group of Guardians standing around a set of stone tables. There were enchanted boxes and some attendees, though he saw no Centurions in the vicinity.

“Why are there Taleen Guardians here?” he asked the closest of the people there. An older man wearing white robes.

“Didn’t ye hear?” a voice said from behind him. “Yer Accords took over our precious protector.”

He turned and saw a dwarf wearing enchanted armor, two flying machines hovering above his shoulders, strange gloves covering his hands. His face was half covered in a metal mask, dull green light shining from his one eye.

“Would’ve preferred for them to be destroyed,” he said and shrugged. “But can’t have anything. T’least I’m not rottin in a prison anymore. Ye know of our kind?”

“Our kind? What... is...” Edwin said. He blinked his eyes, shaking his head before he turned back to the attendant. “Just tell me what this is about.”

“The Accords have recently acquired two new members. The Sentinel of Akelion, including the Guardians. And the Taleen. It’s all quite recent and we don’t know a lot either. I suggest visiting one of their cities if you want more details,” the man said.

Edwin could vaguely hear the dwarf behind him laughing, someone calling out for him before he left, flying machines in tow. *The Taleen are back as well?*

“Are you alright?” the old man asked. “Should I ask for a healer?”

“No... no healers. I... have to talk... to someone,” he stammered out and left to find Jirayu. *I bet this is her fault.*