

Interlude - Meeting

Zenker yawned as he walked through the Tournament City. It was middle of the day, and it almost seemed like everyone was out and moving about. The amount of people all around him annoyed him, he was never one for crowds. The chaotic nature of the city was what annoyed him the most. People just raised buildings in whatever place they wanted, creating a labyrinth of streets to navigate. On one side there could be a walled off compound made by some middling faction, and across the street a restaurant of some high tiered chef attempting to spread the word about their craft.

At least the four sections of the city had some separation. The place where he was currently in was the North District, which was occupied by the Adventurers Guild and the Wardens predominantly, the strongest mercenary guilds had presence there as well. The Eastern District was occupied by the merchants and crafters of all kinds, some of the other factions that had major presence in other districts had representatives there as well to sell their products or just stuff that they didn't need. The South District was the Sect territory, their district was the only one that had some kind of semblance of order. With the strongest Sects taking up the center of the district and then the others surrounding them. Except the big three, the strongest that had their compounds on top of the cliffs, just like how the Wardens and the Adventurers had theirs on the cliffs above the North District.

Zenker glanced behind him, even from here one could see the sprawling palaces that they had erected, compared to the castles that the Wardens and the Adventurers had, it was clear that they put far more importance on their image. Dragon Heart in the middle, a miniature mountain was raised in the middle of the plateau, in its sides, palaces and sprawling towers were carved out of the yellow rock. But very little of the rock could be seen, great tapestries of colorful cloth were dangling from them, in colors of black, red and gold. Their banners hanging high above any other. Zenshuen and Golden Sky sects had their own palaces on either side, smaller and different in styles. The crazy bird had plated her walls with golden plates, and had mirrors mounted at the top of her towers reflecting the light in all

directions. Zenshuen Sect had their walls painted in white and dark blue of their sect's colors. No less extravagant, with ribbons mounted on tall poles that billowed in the wind. Each of those ribbons probably cost more than a normal person earned in a year.

The Western District belonged to the outcasts, the cultists, the criminals and the freaks that came out of their hiding holes during the Peace. A part of him wanted to eradicate them now, but he knew better. Some of them held great power, and the great criminal guilds stood on the same level as the other great factions.

Zenker shook his head, the amount of wealth that all these factions spent every time the Tournament came around was insane. And yet, prestige mattered to them. It mattered little to him.

He put his thoughts aside and continued walking. He made his way through the streets and headed up the winding path to the plateau above the North District. He approached the Wardens compound and entered. Just his name was enough to grant him access, and have the guards hurry to bow and give him respect. Another thing that he didn't like, but he had stopped trying to dissuade people from doing it a while ago.

He was led through the compound and then beneath the ground. The freshly shaped hallways were already covered in plates with formations etched on them, and recognized most of the effects as he passed through. Finally he was allowed to enter the final room.

It was fairly large, and almost completely bare, aside from the huge hanging ring with a gemstone jammed in the middle that glowed with blue light, a large stone round table and chairs. The others were all already there.

"You are late," Yirrel announced as he made his way inside. "We were going to start without you. You were supposed to be here months ago."

Zenker rolled his eyes and waved a hand as he reached his seat. "I was delayed, I had to check up on a few things."

Yirrel's eyes narrowed at him, but then she sighed and looked around the room at the others. Next to her sat Eratemus in one of his human undead bodies, this one a female, pale skin and long blond hair fell on top of shoulders that wore a simple white tunic. On her other side was her sister, Yerala Annsi, her horns slender and curved upward, reaching high above her

head. Her black hair was pulled back and braided, and her dark blue skin contrasted against her red armor. Dracael sat next to Eratemus, her head leaned on her hand and looking as if she was almost asleep. He was pretty sure that he could see a stain on her shirt.

Next to Yerala on the other side and sitting on Zenker's left was Raela, she glared at Zenker and snapped her beak in annoyance. Out of them, she was the most impatient one by far. Her feathers were a dancing swirl of blue and black color that constantly shifted, her True Body's double wings were folded through the openings in the sides of her chair.

The last person sat on Zenker's right, and was brooding silently as he glared at everyone else. But then again, Sigmund had never been the most talkative one of them.

Yirrel cleared her throat. "Well," she started as she usually did at these gatherings. She was often the one that lead their little gatherings. "We have many things to discuss, any preference on what you to talk about first?"

Before anyone could speak Zenker remembered something and made his voice heard. "Ah, right Yirrel. I got some news for you. I found your missing human."

Yirrel blinked at that. "You did?"

"Wait, what missing human?" Raela asked, her voice clearly annoyed.

"You missed the meeting when we talked about it," Eratemus spoke. Even after all these years, it felt weird to hear him speak through someone else's voice. "The missing Iteration Seven Humans. Only two of them arrived, and not in the arrival zone. We believe that they had been considered too strong to be placed there."

"We know what happened to them?" Raela asked. "You didn't think that I should know that?"

"You were in the Thundering Heavens Mountains, I am not going to waste power to get a message to you there," Eratemus added, his monotone clearly making Raela angrier.

She opened her beak to speak, but Yirrel raised her hand. "Please," she said then turned back to Zenker. "And?"

“Well, the story you heard from the other survivor checks out,” Zenker shrugged. “He most definitely slaughtered a large chunk of Earth. And he is a pilferer.”

Yirrel grimaced. “So he is insane? Did you take care of him?”

“Nah,” Zenker shook his head. “He seemed pretty calm actually. Although he does have some unique titles that I haven’t seen before. Like **Hated Foe**, it required the hate of half the world. Which is I guess an achievement in itself, not even the Grey Horde had accomplished that. He also has the **Butcher of Humanity** title.”

“And you left him alive?” Yirrel asked.

Zneker shrugged. “He had no new criminal titles since he came to Infinite Realm. He is however very powerful, but I saw no signs that he would suddenly go on a rampage. I snooped around after I met him, he hasn’t been a saint, but he hadn’t been killing indiscriminately. He took over two sects, and rules them now as a Sect Head.”

Yirrel remained silent as she thought about that for a moment. A slight tap on the table brought Zenker’s attention to the person next to him. Sigmund moved his hands and signed, and Zenker grimaced.

“Very powerful,” Zenker answered his question. “I met him a year ago. He was in the Heavenly Realm then, with a Pilfering Class that he had limited to level eighty nine, and two perfect skills. I have no doubt that he has increased in power since then. He could’ve reached Immortal by now, I feel like Cultivation is his greatest strength. He had done it correctly, at least from what I could see. Multiple named perks. But the most frightening thing was a unique perk that he possessed. It has the power to lower stats of everyone around him, while also increasing his own by half the amount he takes from everyone. He is an army killer, and I think that we will need him for what is to come.”

Zenker turned and met Eratemus’ eyes. “That perk also gives him the ability to cause True Death of everything he kills while it is active.”

“Well fuck,” Raela said. “He is dead then. The moment the High Rankers find out about that, they’ll do everything in their power to kill him.”

“Not if we take him up under our wings,” Zenker told her, using her own race’s term. “I planted the idea that I would be at the tournament, I think that it is possible that he comes and try to find me.”

“And who do you think has the time to teach him?” Dracael glared with half closed eyelids.

“Well, definitely not you,” Zenker snorted in her direction. “I don’t think that he is a sailor material.”

The drake woman grumbled and then leaned her head back on her hand.

“I could do it, if he wants to become an adventurer,” Yerala chimed in.

“I doubt that,” Zenker added. “He is a Sect Head, I don’t see him running around with your little band.”

“Are we sure that we even want to do that?” Raela asked.

“Why wouldn’t we?” Zenker asked. “We don’t kill those who haven’t crossed the line, and he hadn’t done that since he arrived here.”

Yirrel sighed. “I guess that I’m not the one to complain, I took in the other one. Both of them seem to be advancing incredibly fast. The fact that they have history will be an issue, but not something that we need to worry about now. The same for a teacher, we have more pressing things to discuss,” she said as she looked around the room. “Are we in agreement then? We will try to nourish both of them?”

The people around the room shrugged. Despite the appearances, this issue was a minor one.

“Then, we can move on to something more important,” Yirrel said, then turned and met Eratemu’s eyes. “Do you have the new talismans ready?”

Eratemus nodded, then reached into a pocket and pulled out a small piece of round metal. “I do,” he said as he placed it on the table. “The improved version will satisfy all the requirements you had.”

“You have something new?” Zenker asked. The talismans were the way that they decided the winner. So far, each contestant wore one, and the talisman monitored their inner state. Once a contestant was unable to continue, the talisman would flash, announcing to the other contestant that they had won. Usually, the opposing contestant needed to stop before finishing them up. Which was why powerful people like Zenker and Yirrel

were nearby, to stop the fight if it looked like someone was about to die. There had still been deaths in the past, not everything can be stopped fast enough, and not everything could be healed.

“I do,” Eratemus answered then threw the talisman across the table for Zenker to catch. “This version of the talisman will monitor the person’s body and soul, the moment it detects a lethal attack hit the wearer, and it will teleport them directly to the Healer’s clinic outside the Arena. It will do the same if sufficient non-lethal damage is accumulated to prove lethal.”

“Huh,” Zenker said looking the small device over in his hand. That would reduce the deaths a lot this time around. Still, he doubted that it would be perfect. In the end, anyone who entered the arena knew that they could die. The talisman was barely as large as his fingernail. “They are smaller than the last version.”

“That is because they will go beneath the contestant’s skin,” Eratemus said. “It is the only way to make sure that they can work properly.”

“Some people have pretty powerful bodies, that might not like having a foreign matter inside them,” Zenker commented.

Eratemus nodded. “They talismans have formations that protect them from such things, and they draw power remotely. It is unlikely that anything can overcome their defenses before it can trigger the teleportation.”

Zenker hummed in appreciation. Eratemus’ genius never ceased to amaze.

“With that out of the way,” Yirrel spoke again. “How about we move on to more important things?”

No one had an issue with that and she continued. “Eratemus, what is the status of your armies?”

“I’ve moved them underground to the halfway point, the route that they plan to release the attack. I am certain that it is enough,” Eratemus answered.

“Good,” Yirrel nodded then turned to Sigmund. “And the Grey Horde?” Sigmund sighed, then raised his hands and started signing.

“The negotiations are going well. I believe that we can convince her to come to our aid and reinforce Eratemus. She understands the greater threat the same way we do. She does not wish any more needless wars.”

Zenker nearly snorted at that, but he guessed that people could change. “What does she want in return?” Yerala asked. “She doesn’t move without having something to gain.”

“*She wants access to the Abyssal Deep’s last floor,*” Sigmund signed.

Zenker laughed, while others looked around with a wide range of emotions on their faces.

“She is joking, right?” Yerala asked, her sister had a grimace on her face.

“Of course she isn’t,” Raela squawked. “She wants to get a skill book for herself.”

Zenker was perfectly aware of the skill book inside his own inventory, he was yet to use his. Out of the others around the table, only Sigmund, Yirrel, and Raela had used theirs. The others simply kept their own for the future, or perhaps to give to someone for whom it would be more useful. Not all of them could use skills effectively. Regardless, Zenker knew why she wanted that, and how much it would mean for her.

“Fine,” Yirrel said, surprising everyone. “She can have it.”

“Are you sure?” Eratemus asked.

“Of course not, but we will need her if we want to survive. That is a small price to pay.”

Sigmund nodded his head. “*I will let her know,*” Sigmund signed. “*She plans on arriving in a couple of days.*”

“If she agrees, we will need to have her move her armies quickly,” Raela said. “Her as well, she isn’t Eratemus who can reach his armies in an instant.”

“There is no need for that,” Eratemus said and then pulled out a scroll out of his storage. It looked to be made out of some type of monster skin, with what looked like formations written on it and gems mounted in the ends.

“What is that?” Raela asked.

“My new invention,” Eratemus said. “A scroll of Greater Teleportation, I’ve already set its location to be my army. With this she can reach it in an instant.”

Everyone blinked at that.

“That will change things,” Yirrel said. “If we can have teleports that we can take with us, that can travel that distance...”

“No,” Eratemus shook his head. “It won’t replace anything. The materials it requires to make are too much, it is a consumable and will only work once. The gems will consume the material and themselves as a price for the teleport. It is too expensive to be used regularly.”

He threw the scroll at Sigmund who caught it in one hand, then looked it over.

“And you want to give it to the Grey Horde?” Yerala asked. “What if she tries to copy it?”

“She will fail,” Eratemus said with conviction.

“Still,” Raela said, then turned to look at Sigmund. “You should be careful, the Grey Horde is a capricious bitch. We can’t rely on her.”

“I’m sure that Sigmund knows that,” Yerala said with a smile toward the man.

Sigmund didn’t react much, with told Zenker that he was still avoiding her advances. Zenker figured that either she would’ve lost interest or he would’ve succumbed by now, it had been a long time.

“Then we have concluded most of our pressing issues,” Yirrel said. “Zenker, I will need you to get ready to oversee the tournament with me, the Healer will be providing her services but we need to make sure that the contestants have a chance to be healed by her.”

Zenker sighed, but nodded his head. “Of course, I strive to serve.”

Yerala snorted, and Dracael laughed loudly.

Zenker didn’t stoop to their level, instead he ignored them.

“What are we going to do about the Spear of Sorrow?” Eratemus said finally.

Everyone sobered up at that topic.

“She is strong, and she seems to be not only capable, but fair as well. She doesn’t play the games that other High Rankers do,” Raela said.

“She is not the issue,” Dracael yawned. “Her great grandfather is. Do we really want to give the old bastard a way to worm his way into our circle.”

Yirrel looked conflicted. “There is nothing to indicate that the two of them are that close.”

Dracael raised an eyebrow. “Really? You know how Zenshuen works. He adopted her into the main branch, raised her up. Gave her everything. You think that she doesn’t think that she owes him something?”

“We will never know for sure until we at least talk with her,” Yerala added.

“If she is who we think she is,” Eratemus said slowly. “She will understand. And it is not like we will ask her to go against her family.”

Zenker didn’t really have anything to say, so he stayed quiet. The topic didn’t really interest him that much, so he slowly started to tune them out, thinking on how long it was going to be before he could return to his explorations. There was so much out there to see, and he was already getting anxious.

The sooner the tournament ended, the quicker he could get back to what he really loved.