

Interlude – The Wandering Drake I

Zenker Broketail sat on the corpse of a monster, gathering his breath. It had been a good fight, if a bit long. The final boss of the dungeon had been powerful, its scales nearly impenetrable even by him. It had taken a long time for his skills to deal enough internal damage to take the monster down, and he had spent a ton of his concoctions. Although to be fair, he had used most of them while he was clearing the rest of the dungeon. The Desert Kingdom Dungeon was, as its name implied, a Kingdom. A massive pyramid structure in the desert, reaching high up to the sky and stretching deep beneath the sands. So massive that it was larger than some territories Zenker had encountered. Packed with an entire slew of monsters. Taking the Dungeon down hadn't been easy, but gaining another title had been worth it. Even if he had spent the greater majority of his arsenal in order to do it. That realization made him curse, he would need to call up his laboratory and make more. One never should explore unprepared after all. At least the treasures he found in the dungeon would replenish what he spent of his consumable items. But replenishing his concoctions was going to be a pain, since he wasn't really an alchemist, even though he had the titles. He cheated, he didn't know alchemy he had just been lucky enough to find something that can do things for him. Thankfully, this dungeon had provided him with a treasure trove of ingredients, a couple that he had never encountered before.

He jumped down from the corpse of the **Elder Crocodile King** and looked at it. It was at least three times as tall as he was, and many more times that in length. One of the largest monsters he had ever encountered. Harvesting it would be a pain, and unless he wanted to spend the next few days trying to pry the monster's scales off, he would probably need to go through the mouth in order to get its blood. Powerful monsters always had powerful blood that could be processed for unique effects. But then he remembered that the last time he restocked his arsenal, his alchemical supplies had already been running low. He remembered thinking that he should go and replenish them, but had been too far from anywhere where he could purchase them. The things in the Framework shop wouldn't be of use to him, as he had no powers related to Alchemy, he couldn't refine what was available in the shop into the materials that he needed. And the alchemical elixirs and concoctions available in the shop weren't really useful to him. Thinking about it made him realize that he didn't even remember the last time he had returned to civilization. Hundreds of years at the very least. He looked through his storage, a massive room almost the size of the cavern he was now standing in.

Grimacing at the mess inside, he looked at one corner designated for alchemy related stuff and saw that his supplies were almost nonexistent. He cursed, summoning his laboratory now would only serve to annoy it and have it insult him from being irresponsible, and he did not look forward to that. He was lucky enough that his awakened item did not like talking in his head. Zenker didn't think that he could take that. But his **Alchemical Laboratory** was far too useful for him to break the bond. A treasure that any alchemist would kill for, a fact that it constantly reminded Zenker of as it lamented the fact of being bonded to him.

Still, he could gather the materials and store them, use them once he managed to resupply. Which would mean going back to civilization, and he didn't care for that. Zenker sighed as he tried to think if summoning his laboratory was worth hearing about the lack of resources. It could do

the work without the alchemical supplies, but if he asked it to work without them it would probably spend the entire time it was out trying to annoy Zenker to death.

A shuffling sound made Zenker turn, his entire body becoming alert. He was fairly certain that there was nothing living in the dungeon, so when he saw a shape walking toward him he frowned. Quickly he realized that it was not a monster, or not a living one at least. It was an undead skeleton, of minotaur variant.

It was tall, as all minotaurs were, its horns growing to the side before turning upward. The bones were thick and all white. Zenker hadn't noticed any other undead in the dungeon, but then he realized that it was not part of the dungeon. As it got closer, he noticed that its white bones were not ordinary bones at all. They were the bones of a minotaur that had undergone a True Body change, a change that had probably made the bones extremely durable. And on them Zenker noticed tiny scripts, formation arrays inlaid in the bone with great elegance and skill.

"Well, fuck," Zenker cursed softly as the skeleton made his way to him. Its legs more shuffling than walking and its posture bent, it was dragging a large two headed axe behind it in one hand. As it got near him, he had the chance to study it in greater detail. Everything about the skeleton seemed simple, at a first glance. But taking a closer look would reveal the art made out of the bones, hidden as to appear ordinary. The skeleton stopped in front of Zenker, and its skull tilted, the empty sockets seemingly studying him. And then the scripts on its bones ignited with eerie orange flames, and two bright orbs of the same color filled its sockets. The skeleton's entire stance shifted. It straightened to tower above Zenker, dropped its axe and then crossed its hands in front of its chest.

"Zenker," a voice echoed out of the unmoving skull. A regal tone, Zenker's name spoken as a greeting all by itself.

"Eratemus," Zenker greeted back. "You haven't turned to dust yet I see."

The orange orbs flared, as if to indicate an emotion, but Zenker didn't spend much of his time near skeletons, and so had no idea what it meant. "You are a very hard person to track down, lizard."

"Huh, it is as if there is some reason for that, you sack of bones," Zenker shot back.

The orbs dimmed as they bore into the drake's eyes. "Do you have any idea how much effort it took to find you? I had to send skeletons in every direction we suspected you've gone! And I had to make them strong enough to survive the unclaimed lands! I spent a mountain of treasure, and still it took me almost fifty years to find you! All you had to do was take a Far-link orb with you and this could've been avoided."

Zenker snorted. "Yeah, and then I would have to contend with you assholes calling me every every few years to deal with nuisances. At least this way I knew that you wouldn't try to find me unless it was really important." Zenker said. The orbs changed again and Zenker waved his hand before the possessed skeleton could speak again. "What do you want Eratemus? I left the core for a reason."

The skeleton tilted its massive head and the voice speaking through it sounded again. "You made a promise to the cabal when you joined us, I have come to remind you of it."

Zenker closed his eyes and sighed as he remembered. "Ah. Is it that time again, already?"

“The Seventh Iteration arrived months ago, the next Centennial Tournament will be held in two years time. The Inner Council expects you to be there to preside over the activities and ensure everyone’s safety.”

Zenker cursed himself mentally for ever agreeing to that. But in his defense he had been bored when he joined the secret cabal. Truthfully, he had thought that it was going to be fun, and it allowed him to ignore most of the politics of the core. On the other hand, he didn’t really think that the organization would survive so long. But here they were, and the Inner Council still survived. And most of what the Inner Council did turn out not to be all that fun. Just backroom deals and bribes, with only the occasional head smashing. Boring.

“You don’t really need me Eratemus, I mean Yirrel alone can keep everyone safe,” Zenker told him.

“Aside from you making a promise,” Eratemus’s voice echoed through his mouthpiece. “There are... additional issues.”

“Like what?” Zenker asked.

“The other High Rankers have decided that they want to participate. Separately of course, in their own category.”

“What?” Zenker exclaimed, surprised. “Are they insane? What the hell has the Inner Council been doing you decrepit bag of bones?! I thought that the Inner Council was made to prevent the others from doing stupid shit like that?”

The flaming orbs flared up again. “And we had been doing exactly that for a thousand years, successfully if I might add. We’ve had no major wars since we started working in the shadows.”

“Yeah, we just have a thousand small wars all the time. And you forgot the big one, you know, the one where an entire Iteration was nearly wiped out?”

“That was... a miscalculation,” Eratemus said.

Zenker rolled his eyes. “You do realize that that *miscalculation* is about to jump out of hiding and bite the others in their tails, right?”

“It is being handled, we will not make the same mistake again,” the voice speaking from the skeleton said. The other High Rankers don’t know about that the Third Iteration survived, and the Inner Council had made sure to keep that knowledge from them. They didn’t want to allow that particular slaughter to continue.

Zenker snorted. “We’ll see.”

“It is inconsequential. Your presence at the tournament though, is not. We need you to make sure that their matches don’t turn into a bloodbath. Both among the High Rankers and the audience.”

Zenker shook his head. “They are not stupid enough to start anything at the tournament?”

The skeleton looked at the drake dispassionately, which made Zenker sigh. “Fuck,” Zenker said. “They are that stupid.”

The skeleton remained completely still, and yet the burning orbs in its sockets still managed to convey emotion. “The Grey Horde has shown interest in leaving her hive. Thankfully, she doesn’t plan on participating, but... we can’t risk an incident with her there. Which is why we need you,” Eratemus said. “The rest of us will be present as well.”

“Fine,” Zenker said finally. He exerted a great amount of effort not to get drawn into petty politics, but that didn’t mean that he could allow chaos to reign in the core. He really did not want

to miss the tournament and have some upstart newly minted High Ranker piss off the Queen of the Triumphant Hive. Zenker still remembered the last time she got pissed off, vividly. She buried an entire territory in her Hive's forces and wiped a mountain off the face of the world. Which then pissed him off, since that mountain had been one of his favorite spots to relax on. He hoped that she wasn't still mad about what he did in retaliation. "I'll be there."

The skeleton's head bowed in gratitude. "It might not be as dull as you think it will be. There had been some other developments."

"Like?" Zenker asked.

"The Seventh Iteration, no human Rankers arrived in the starting zone."

"What? That's impossible," Zenker said.

"But true nonetheless."

"None? There had to have been at least a few Rankers from Earth."

"There were only two," Eratemus said.

Zenker blinked, even more confused. "I thought that you said that there were no human Rankers?"

"None in the starting zone. The two arrived outside of it. It is our belief that they hadn't arrived there because they were too strong for the arrival zone."

"Too strong?" Zenker asked, intrigued.

"One of the humans made his way to Yirrel. She reported that the human was one of only two surviving Rankers. He was powerful, had evolved Class and Cultivation Realm before reaching the Infinite Realm."

"That..." Zenker had never heard of anything like that. No one had ever managed to get that strong on the old worlds. Well, he didn't count himself. Pure skill users were rare on the old worlds, and none had ever gained the same understanding that he had there.

"Apparently, the second human Ranker was even stronger. Their Earth was at war with this second individual and they... killed most of the others."

"Ah, another of the crazy ones?" Zenker asked. Dealing with people like that was... annoying at best of times.

"We do not know yet. We haven't been able to find the second one. But we are keeping our eyes and ears out," Eratemus said.

"Planning on taking them out?"

"No, we'll get eyes and ears on them first and then see if it is necessary at all," Eratemus answered.

Zenker shrugged, it wasn't like it mattered to him much. "So how are the High Rankers reacting to that?"

"They don't know, they are confused and trying to find out why no one from Earth arrived," Eratemus answered.

"Ha," Zenker chuckled. "Whose idea was it not to tell them?"

"Yirrel's of course, she likes watching others scrambling around like children."

Zenker shook his head. Yirrel really was one of his favorite people, when he cared enough to tolerate them. It was too bad that she didn't like exploring as much as he did.

"So, anything else I should know?" Zenker asked.

“Nothing urgent. But the Spear of Sorrow is approaching our levels of power,” Eratemus told him.

Zenker grimaced at that. High Rankers were all powerful, people who had achieved something deeply personal and at the same time great. But there was a large power difference between the different High Rankers. And among their numbers, there were a few like the Grey Horde, who were a far above the rest. The last time the Inner Council met, there were eleven individuals who they privately called Titan Rankers. A category all in itself. The Inner Council had seven members, and all of them were Titan Rankers. The Grey Horde, was one of the other two in the core who were unaffiliated with the council. Three more were in the Empire of the Exiles.

If another was approaching such strength, then the Inner Council needed to act. Not all people were meant to have power. And once someone became powerful enough that they could topple entire armies by themselves, they became a real threat to civilization itself.

“How long?” Zenker asked at last.

“I estimate a couple of decades, if she continues advancing at the current rate,” Eratemus told him.

Well, that wasn't really his concern. He didn't spend a lot of time in the core anyway. The Inner Council would deal with her as it did with everyone else. Make her understand that going on a rampage and uncontrollably slaughtering people would not be allowed. If that was what she intended at all.

They did not enjoy cutting any life short, nor did they impede anyone's rise to power. And they tried to curtail the rest of High Rankers attempts to suppress others, at least as much as they could without revealing the fact that they were meddling. Because they knew what was out there, beyond the territories they had explored. The Inner Council understood that they needed powerful people, but they also knew that they needed people who could be reasoned with. But meddling wasn't Zenker's task in their group. He was the one who explored beyond their borders, others could deal with that.

Zenker shook his head. “I'll head back as soon as I'm done here. It shouldn't take me more than a year to get back to the core.”

“Do try not to get distracted, we will be expecting you at the Citadel,” Eratemus said and then the flames went out. The skeleton became an ordinary minion again. It turned around, picked up its weapon and started shuffling back, probably going back to its master.

Zenker shivered at the sight. He never understood how someone could trade their body for a vial and bones. But it was not his life, hell, he had made strange choices himself as well.

He turned back to the corpse of the monster he had killed and tried to think of the best way to harvest it. He did not enjoy the thought of going back among people, but he also saw the necessity. What separated Zenker from the other High Rankers, what made him a Titan, were his skills and treasures. If he didn't have his awakened item he would've been at a great disadvantage. His stats were unremarkable compared to some of the others. Eratemus himself probably had more than him, and he wasn't one to focus on stats. Compared to Yirrel who was a Classer and had probably the most perks of anyone else in the world, Zenker had only a few. But Zenker's skills coupled with his arsenal of unique treasures he had discovered over his long life made him nearly unstoppable. Stats were a powerful tool in a person's build, but they didn't matter to a Skill user. Skills didn't get stronger because of stats, but based on the skill users' understanding of them.

Zenker had survived the old world with barely any increase in stats, physically he had been the weakest Ranker from his world but he had still been the most powerful, all because he had understanding. Because he could wrap his mind around deeper concepts that were the basis of all skills.

He glanced back at his screens, the fight through the dungeon had improved one of his passive skills, and it had evolved once more. He glanced at the rest of his tier 6 skills, he was yet to decide on the way to focus them. It was not a decision to be made quickly. He didn't keep taking skills, he generally liked to focus on one or two at a time. That allowed him to put all of his mind to the task of evolving it. But focus of a skill was different. What he decided to do now would shape how his skill would manifest in the outside world. A perfect tier 6 skill was in many ways more general and more useful than a tier 7. It could utilize all the forms of its previous evolutions, it was... broad. Narrowing it down and focusing on one effect would make it more powerful, but it would lose the utility. And so Zenker always made great care in how he narrowed his understanding of a skill.

Name	Zenker Broketail
Race	Drake (Darres—Iteration 2)

Titles		
First Kill	Kill the first monster in the Framework run world	5000 essence
Adventurer	Hunted more than 100 monsters	+5 to all stats, 5 000 essence
Hero of Promise	Save more than 10 people with a single action	+5 to all stats, 5 000 essence
One Against Many	Fight against more than 10 opponents and win	+5 to all stats, 5 000 essence
Alchemical Tester	Use more than 10 alchemical concoctions to improve yourself	+2 to intelligence, 500 Essence
Enlightened	First in the world to evolve a skill to tier 6	+10% to base stats, 5% of all bonus stats counted as base stats 100 000 Essence
True Understanding XI	Evolve a skill to tier 6 (Evolved 11 skills to tier 6)	+20 all stats(per tier 6 skill) 100 000 essence (per tier 6 skill)
Alchemical Experiment	Use more than 100 alchemical concoctions to improve yourself	+10 to intelligence, 5000 Essence
Skill Lord	Three skills evolved to tier 6 (11 skills evolved to tier 6)	For every 3 skills evolved to tier 6 gain:

		2% of all bonus stats count as base stats
One Against Horde	Fight against more than 100 opponents and win	+10 to all stats, 10 000 essence
One Man Army	Fight against more than 1000 opponents and win	+40 to all stats, Indomitable, 500 000 Essence
World Explorer	Explored the entirety of the world after the Framework arrived	+150 to all stats, 10 000 Essence, Explorer's Soul
Alchemy Innovator	Craft a unique alchemical elixir	+50 to intelligence, 10 000 Greater Essence
Monster Hunter	Kill 5000 different monster types	+50 to all stats, 50 000 Greater Essence
Hollowed Mountain	First to clear the Hollowed Mountain Dungeon	+2% to all stats, 5000 Greater Essence
Alchemy Master	Crafted 1000 different types of alchemical concoctions.	+20 to intelligence, 2000 Greater Essence
First Skill Master	First to Specialize skill understanding	+10% to all stats, 50 000 Greater Essence
Beyond Understanding VII	Focus and specialize your understanding of a tier 6 skill. (7 skills)	+250 to all stats, 100 000 Greater Essence (per focused skill)
First Immortal Skill Master	First to achieve three tier 7 skills.	+100 to all stats, Aging process halted, 200 000 Greater Essence
The Wandering Drake (Unique)	Reach at least a combined power level of nine tiers. And embody an ideal.	+400 to all stats, 5% of all bonus stats count as base stats, Wandering Instinct 100 000 Greater Essence
Sky Reach	First to clear the Sky Reach Dungeon	+2% to all stats, 50 000 Greater Essence
Alchemical Improvement	Use more than 5000 alchemical concoctions to improve yourself	+50 to intelligence, 5000 Great Essence
Monster Bane	Kill more than 5 000 000 monsters	+200 to all stats, Monstrous Aura, 50 000 Greater Essence
Ember Throne	First to clear the Ember Throne Dungeon	+2% to all stats, 50 000 Greater Essence
Desert Kingdom	First to clear the Desert Kingdom Dungeon	+2% to all stats, 50 000 Greater Essence

Perks	
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Indomitable (Title Perk)	You are immune to all mind altering effects from opponents that are of a lower power level than you.
Rending Claws (Skill Perk)	All attacks with your claws hold a fraction of your My Claws, As Blades skill, attacks will send vibrating edges slightly further than your attacks range. +20% to strength. Range and power of effect depends on strength stat
Chain Movements (Skill Perk)	Your My Art, Wandering Style has no pattern, it explores as you yourself do. A fraction of that power bleeds into your ordinary movements. Anyone observing you will have a hard time reading your movements. +20% to dexterity. Strength of effect depends on dexterity stat.
Piercing Gaze (Skill Perk)	Your My Eyes, See All allow great insight. Once per day, allows you to read full stat screens of any being. +10% to wisdom.
Wandering Instinct (Title Perk)	Traveling aimlessly has a chance of leading you to the secrets of the Infinite Realm.
True Step (Skill perk)	Your My Way, Barred By None allows for sure steps. Once per day, allows you to move to any point no matter the distance instantaneously, as long as you can see the destination. +10% to dexterity.
Reverberating Strikes (Skill Perk)	All strikes with your fists hold a fraction of your My Fists, As Sky Itself and send out a reverberating shockwaves. +10% to strength. Strength of effect depends on strength stat.
Instinct of the Wind (Skill Perk)	Your body holds a fraction of your As Leaf, On the Wind , once per day, any attack that you don't sense coming that would strike you, your body evades on its own. +10% dexterity.
Thorn Scale (Skill Perk)	Your scales are infused with the fraction of power from your My Scales, As Thorns , any attack against you sends back a tiny portion of damage back to the attacker. +20% to endurance. Strength of effect depends on endurance stat.
Monstrous Aura (Title Perk)	You may manifest the Monstrous Aura filling all within your presence with the weight of all the dead monsters you have slain.

Passive Skills	Active Skills
Perfect Unarmed Mastery: My Art, Wandering Style	Perfect Slash: My Claws, As Blades
Perfect Sight: My Eyes, See All	Perfect Sprint: My Way, Barred By None
Perfect Trained Body: My Scales, As Thorns	Perfect Evade: As Leaf, On The Wind
Perfect Weakness Sense	Perfect Strike: My Fists, As Sky Itself
Perfect Memory	Perfect Swipe
Enhanced Hearing >> Echolocation >> Greater Echolocation (4/10)	Perfect Aim

Strength	4762
Dexterity	4654
Vitality	4497
Endurance	4668
Intelligence	4359
Wisdom	4158

He would probably go with **Perfect Weakness Sense**, as it was one of his most useful skills. He turned around looking at the dead bodies in the cavern. The entire pyramid was filled with corpses and he would need to harvest as much of them as possible. He didn't get to reach his level of power by abandoning resources. Still, he did not enjoy the thought of returning to civilization. But at least he would need to restock his supplies before head to the core, he did not want to go there unprepared. He reached into his storage and pulled out a small item, just big enough to fit inside his palm. The **Compass of Desire** was one of his most valuable possessions, one that had led him to a great many of his treasures. Now as he opened it he found the needle spinning in a circle aimlessly. He closed his eyes and focused, thinking on the thing that he desired the most at the moment. It spun around for a bit more and then stopped, pointing in a direction.

Zenker sighed, glancing at the corpse of the big monster in front of him, he could already tell that it was going to be a long day.